

Racism and Identity in Onwueme's Riot in Heaven

Onyeka F. Iwuchukwu

National Open University Nigeria

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Onyeka Iwuchukwu,
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Abstract: In her article "Racism and Identity in Onwueme's *Riot in Heaven*" Onyeka Iwuchukwu explores Tess Osonye Onwueme's acclaimed play in the context of the Black diaspora in the U.S. Iwuchukwu posits that because of Onwueme's exploration of the theater of the absurd in the play, audience's attention is directed to the illogical presentation of dialogue and action. However, the technique with textual properties suggesting unmotivated and meaningless references in fact carries profound meaning. Further, the said "absurd" presentation and narration results in a strong ideological and political message akin to the practice of *littérature engagée*. Iwuchukwu's analysis of *Riot in Heaven* is an attempt to illuminate Onwueme's projection against the condition of racial discrimination resulting in Blacks' self-effacing complexes of inferiority. Iwuchukwu reads Onwueme's play as a call for change in the attitudes and practices of US-American Blacks and agrees with the playwright's intention to encourage Blacks to re-discover their culture and origins in order to displace the said reign of inferiority.

Onyeka IWUCHUKWU

Racism and Identity in Onwueme's *Riot in Heaven*

A question that comes naturally to many lips is why should a particular race claim superiority over another race? Why is there still human rights abuse in the world despite the professed campaign for the elimination of human right abuse and racism? This inquiry is no less a scholarly pre-occupation given the fact that most countries profess adherence to the United Nations charters on abuse especially. What do these countries actually mean when they speak of Human Rights? Are they referring to the natural and universal equality among all people irrespective of class, race, gender, or country of origin? It appears that in terms of universal profession of human rights and condemnation of racism, theory differs from practice as the former is abused by the state and individuals while the latter dictates the terms of relations between Africa/Black and the West/White.

Human Rights — as the name implies — is simply the liberty of every human being to live and exist freely as a human being on earth. It hinges on the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (United Nations, "Preamble" <<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>>). Unfortunately, different forms of human rights abuse arise from a feeling of superiority by the perpetrators who regard their victims as inferior human beings. This claim of superiority of an individual or group over another — whether overt or covert, explicit or implicit — occurs on various levels including social status or class, race, or color and manifests itself in prejudice, intolerance, and segregation resulting in maltreatment, oppression, subjugation, and the dehumanization of the person or group of the perceived inferior status. I list here selected definitions of the complex matter of racial discrimination: according to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* racism is "the unfair treatment of people who belong to a difference race; violent behavior towards them ... the belief that some races of people are better than others (1195) and in "Draft Article 7" of *International Human Rights Conventions and Other Legal Instruments* "racial discrimination" is defined as "any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life" ("Draft Article 7" <<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/wghrefa7.htm>>). I argue that matters of race and racial discrimination is prevalent in White cultures in particular with regard to Blacks and where "race is a major ... determinant of their human worth ... had reduced them to beast of burden conferred an outsider status on them ... confined most of them to lower class" (Emenyi 143).

Following the above brief preamble about racial discrimination as the background of my discussion, in the article at hand I explore issues of race and identity in Osonye Tess Onwueme's 1986 play *Riot in Heaven* as a literary text that expresses at the same time the playwright's ideological and political stance in the context of *littérature engagée*. Onwueme explores the theme of racism, identity crisis, and a celebration of the resilience and courage in the context of what Yesufu Abdul R. writes about Onwueme's intellectual and ideological precursors Christopher Okigbo's and Edward Brathwaite's "quintessential [examination of] inner self, motivations and groping towards a better understanding and resolution of his seemingly personal dilemma" (235). Black African writers reflect on the theme of racism in their works, for example in such works as in Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*, Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child*, Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and many others. In these narratives, their writers depict the devastating impact of racism on Africans and various themes are explored from different perspectives ranging from the disintegration of society to the disintegration of the individual. In some of these works there are stories and the narration of forms of resistance by the African characters, but usually they are overwhelmed by the power of discrimination and the impact of imperialism and its concomitant abrogation of humanity. With *Riot in Heaven* Onwueme joins these writers in the explication of the theme of racism, but imbues her characters with the ability to flounder and falter aimlessly at the onset as they suffer from crises on identity formation and locates her narrative between Africa and the situation of US-American Blacks. As the realization of their true selves dawns

on them, Onwueme's protagonists fight for their rightful position in the world because "the space belongs to all" (34). Thus, Onwueme insists that victims of racial discrimination could actually break the yoke of racism and she rejects the passive posture of early African writers who depict the disillusionment of the victims and their failure of struggle against racism. The main protagonists of the play, Traveler X and Sojourner Nkrumah fight to "get into Heaven at all costs so that their people too will begin to have a choice and a representation among the tribal saints of heaven, thus they struggle to create the path for their race to enter heaven" (2). Here, the idea is to reinforce the Christian doctrine which claims that heaven belongs to all irrespective of class or race. Onwueme is using heaven as an overarching symbol for the world and thus suggests that all human beings are created equal and that no race should accept an inferior or subordinate position. Onwueme's message is that the discrimination against Blacks can be encountered successfully only if they "appreciate one another, their culture and anything black especially the progressive ones. Blacks must condemn totally all forms of racial discrimination, must be confident of themselves at all times because a condemnation of self is a rejection of one's culture and race and that gives room to all kinds of abuse and humiliation" (Worugji 339; on the parallel matter of gender discrimination in African cultures, see, e.g., Olatunji <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss1/9>>).

Theoretically, US-American society is built on principles of equality, fairness, and a high degree of respect for human rights. However, in practice racial discrimination reigns: "Whites are viewed as the mainstream players in the middle of the spectrum, while Asian Americans and Blacks are marginalized on the ends. The resulting message to society is that White culture [is] the majority culture as well as the favored culture. White is normal. Whiteness is desirable" (Da 311). In Onwueme's symbolic heaven (i.e., the U.S.) the characters Stanley Livingstone and Jefferson Lugard represent the Whites who tell Black Traveler X that he is barred from entry to Heaven on the account of the color of his skin. Blacks, they insist, are aliens so they need entry permits and visas before they will be allowed into Heaven which, for Livingstone and Lugard is a White heaven and at the same time we can read it as the "place of opportunity" so successfully constructed for the mythology of US-America. Traveler X insists that heaven is a place for all, but his insistence earns only beatings by the Whites. Heaven in Onwueme's play represents the Western world where liberty is professed but not practiced and her narration shows that the liberty and freedom for everyone in the world irrespective of race being professed is a hoax because in practice people are marginalized and even brutalized on the account of the color of their skin — and, added to this overall picture and reality in the play the significance of the Black Traveler's namelessness.

The characters in the play consist the living and the dead drawn from the personalities of prominent Black Africans and African Americans, as well as fictional creations. The Blacks are among those who fought for the freedom of the Blacks, but the battle is not yet won as Blacks are still in bondage and Onwueme argues for action that would get Africans in general and African Americans in particular into the mainstream of society. She cautions that this may not be easy as Whites are not willing to relinquish power or concede superiority to any other race. However with determination, resistance, and insistence, Blacks could triumph even if, like in the play, the struggle culminates in a riot in "heaven." The task for the audience of this play is how to piece a meaningful story together from the fragmentation of the action of the structure of the play in which little attention is paid to the concept of plot. This fragmentation of the play reflects the disintegration of the protagonist's inner self as a result of his contact with the West and subsequent alienation from his roots. The consequence is so devastating that he is unsure of his identity and so could not even tell his name. He is torn between two worlds and suffers from an identity crisis: "Sweat pours down from the Traveler X, brow as he struggles along this pathway, armed and encumbered with his lifetime belongings — an African drum, a trumpet ... Flood lights, flashing and blinking in front of the man amidst tumultuous shouts. Sirens from an ambulance, rap music from a jute box, church choir, competing with the drums now being subdued by the multiple voices dislocating the traveler who now staggers, stupefied and groping amidst the darkness and the light, flashing, gazing, blinking or closing their eyes until traveler X is completely mesmerized" (16).

The above incident captures the crisis he experiences in his sojourn to the Western world. He is not certain whether to align himself with rap music or a church choir or with drums which signify his African background: dualities tear him apart as reflected in his shifting balance between delusion and

disillusionment. He alternates between despondency and courage which reflect the contradictory energies which drive him on his journey as he aspires desperately to understand and realize his identity. The success of this venture would enable him to discover his basic human needs and enjoy life to its fullest. Onwueme uses these conflicting drives to highlight and satirize the human appetite for love, power, money, and glory which have aided the perpetration of racism as seen in the actions of Lugard and Livingstone. Their treatment of Traveler X reflects the physical and psychological abuse of Blacks in diaspora that prompts Traveler X's desperate plea: "God please ... change my fate ... I have the marks ... too brown ... I mean, dark. Jah, don't you see, they are fated? Nobody wants me except to serve them with these hands. God I am tired of serving others. Jah, I want to be served. Jah give me a new hand ... a brighter hand ... God I need new lips ... Too thick ... they say. Make them thinner ... Lord give me blue eyes" (20). As I mention above, "give me blue eyes" refers to the desire to be White, the colonized Black's submission to the colonizer.

When this plea fails, the protagonist becomes derelict exhibiting signs of permanent psychological distress and even mental instability. His precarious situation is heightened further as Livingstone tells him that "some are born to lose ... like you ... And some are born to win ... it is birth right. Too bad, you chose the wrong color ... you've got the wrong card. And black is too dense a color" (40). He shows utmost disregard for the Blacks who, he insists, were never in the dream as Traveler X inquires: "so I was never in the picture" (40). However, Traveler X is encouraged by Jah Orisha who offers useful insights to him on his search for his identity that takes him to heaven. Orisha represents god and he — it is a "he" — reminds Traveler X of his past and says that he does not create the world to destroy it. Accordingly, human beings in their inordinate greed and quest for power upturned the world. The implication here is that god actually created all human beings to be equal so the oppressed should cry out and fight for their right.

The journey to heaven is used as a trope on which Onwueme hinges a revolt against racism. The mode of the play, the peculiarities of the characters, the setting, and the linkages between the characters suggest the importance of the trope. God is the Ultimate Being and has power over the earth so the protagonist, in electing to get into heaven, is going there to present his case and maybe obtain the authentication of his identity as genuine and proper in its own right. This is expected to imbue him with the courage to defend his race and contribute to its liberation from racial oppression. It is from this angle and perspective that Onwueme is able to delineate the struggle for survival of Blacks in the Western world where he needs entry permits, visas, and green cards to be legitimate and even when he gets these, he is told that the space is reserved for Whites only. Onwueme uses heaven as a symbol also to present the treatment of Blacks by Whites by depicting the quest for power and position as either vice or virtue. Lord Jefferson and Lugard are there to oppress Blacks and deny them entry into heaven while Traveler X and Sojourner Nkurumah are there to take their rightful places in heaven for themselves and their race. Traveler X admits that he lost his path and that he is in a place where he labeled an "outsider" and longs to be home surrounded with the family and love (19). However, when he realizes this he sets out on the quest for his identity and does not return home and responds to Orisha who prods him through questions which offer him useful insights into the position of Blacks. Through their dialogue, we learn that Blacks lost their name and culture: this is an allusion to the early contact between the West and Africa and the subsequent slave trade. One of horrendous results of the slave trade has been that Blacks were stripped of their identity as Black Africans while were not accepted in to White society the and in many instances not even today. Onwueme presents the fragmentation and restoration of the psyche of Blacks in the diaspora in a unique dramatic technique, namely with seemingly pointless or meaningless utterances, symbols, and with uncoordinated and illogical dialogues and actions which characterize the theater of the absurd. The plot is not only episodic, but is replete with illogical actions and near-meaningless dialogue. However, in this seemingly incoherent action lies a revelation of an emotional resilience that is borne out of a restless search for harmony in the world. The mythic characters, although "living dead" emerge as real human beings who engage in a quest for individual survival through a conscious and determined attempt to attain emotional balance in a hostile world. Onwueme anticipates the problems her audience would encounter and takes time to offer some explanations at the beginning of the play and also in stage directions. Thus, the picture that emerges is that of a great preparation for and engagement in a life journey undertaken in order to recover the fragments of a person and his culture

in spite of the racial discrimination that stares him in the face wherever he goes. This journey of self-recovery starts with the quest for self-identity discernable in the dialogue between Traveler X and Orisha:

Jah Orisha: (roaring like thunder) who are you, what is your name
The Traveler: (trembling) Ehm ... em ... em ... "X"
Jah Orish: Your name "X"? ...
The Traveler: (thinking, trying to recall) Don't know ... Don't remember ... r ... Hmn ... I'm trying ... trying to find it ...
Jah Orisha: Trying to find what? Your name?
The Traveler: Yea ... yea ... I've ... I've been trying to find it ... to hold it ... mighty one. I found it once ... Twice ...
No! Then a third ... and ...
Jah Orisha: (impatiently) And then what happened?
The Traveler: I ... I ... I lost it ...
Jah Orisha: How? Your name lost, and found? Found, and lost again? (Silence)
The Traveler: I don't remember... (17-18)

The need for self-discovery is obvious because he lives in a country where he is discriminated against on account of the color of his skin and he is no longer sure of his identity. The inference here is that Blacks in Diaspora have no names as they are lost to their roots and identities. This is a vital instrument in self-recovery and identity formation and the recovery of identity as in the case of Traveler X Sojourner Nkrumah asserts that "we must not forget the art of naming always. We must not forget to name where we've been. To name where we are coming from that we may know where we are going. The power is in naming" (63). This confirms Mary Modupe Kolawole's suggestion that "self-naming is very central to the African worldview [where] naming almost assumes a sacred status" (26). Ultimately — before the end of the play — Traveler X realizes himself as a human being and decides to confront and reverse the trend with a resolve to fight and finally gains entrance into Heaven.

One of the fundamental issues raised in the play is the enslavement of Africans taken to the Western world "to pick cottons ... farm fields stolen from Indians who were slaughtered. Massacred for compost manure to grow ... capitalism" (79). Africans are also blamed for their role in the slave trade: they were gullible and with their large hearts gave all and took none until they were all taken (24). They therefore allowed their lands and people to be plundered and taken away by foreigners. Orihsa expects them to fight for their rights and reclaim what was taken because "even a hen shouts her protests and chases after the hawk that comes to steal her young" (31). This reinforces the existential philosophy which view, in part, that human condition on earth is a consequence of human's action or inaction: god did not predestine suffering and a position of inferiority on Africans so they should revolt against all forms of oppression but for this fight to be effective they must learn from the past to avert its mistakes and build on its gains. In *Riot in Heaven* Onwueme focuses on the individual with the belief that in some cases the oppressed find themselves in such depraved situations because of their inability to take appropriate actions which would uplift their lives. Therefore, they accept their situation with submissively as a natural condition and in this Onwueme puts forward a call to Blacks to better their own situation: they can only fight an oppressor if they are aware of the oppression, aware of their identities, their rights and their innate ability to claim their rights. In some ways, Onwueme blames Blacks for the dehumanizing treatment they receive from Whites because at one point Blacks mortgaged their fate and submitted to White superiority and Black inferiority.

The protagonist in a foreign land is seen as an outsider destined to serve others and he feels like "a motherless child." This is contrasted with his expectations of successful and prosperous life, his hopes are dashed as he gets in contact with Whites and feels the venomous sting of racism: he realizes that he is "locked out in the cold without family, without love" (19). While leaving his continent, he was excited and expects to be treated as an equal since all men are said to have been created by the same god and he feels that no one has the right to discriminate against or oppress another person. But the reverse is the case as he claims to have been struggling, to no avail, through time and space to liberate his people from the shackles of oppression. The task of leading his people to the Promised Land becomes arduous and fruitless, but he is undaunted especially with inspiration and prodding from Orisha. He sees himself as the Biblical Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt to

the Promised Land, but he does not have the charisma of Moses. He is not sure of who he is because he has been different persons in the past as he struggled to liberate his people.

Even with the coming of independence for Black nations, the feelings of inferiority still persists (on this see, e.g., King-Aribisala 295). Traveler X believes that he had an identity which was destroyed, but unfortunately he does not know why or how it was destroyed but is determined to restore it. Orisha reminds him that the road to freedom is dangerous and the passage to heaven is guarded, stormy, risky, and treacherous and that the stakes are high. However, he encourages him to reclaim his name and place, but must be prepared to make some sacrifices as he must go through a rite of passage. No one else can do it for him because there is no promise of giving back what was taken (21). Elechi Amadi explains that the rite of passage is an initiation ceremony that exalts an individual or a group into another level of growth and maturity in traditional African society (120). It is only after such rites that the individual can confidently claim to be a bona fide member of the group and be courageous to undertake tedious tasks. Traveler X therefore needs this rite of passage as a process of self rediscovery. In the Western world he is alienated, but this rite reunites him with his roots and boosts his resolve and confidence for the struggle ahead.

Traveler X laments his plight to no one in particular and in his confused and desperate state meets Sojourner Nkrumah, a woman, who encourages him and they resolve to assert themselves and enter heaven. Their resolution is based on the realization that their ultimate goal is to liberate their people through the acquisition of their own space in heaven. They agree to work together and launch a revolt against the keeper of Heaven's gate. The gate is again barred by Livingstone and Lugard and this leads to a violent clash — that is, a riot — between the representatives of the races. In the encounter, Traveler X is hedged in between Livingstone and Lugard as both shoot at him from both sides. He is arrested. Nkrumah fights on, but is also overpowered and bound in chains. The prisoners are moved to the gate of hell where they are held captive. Their captors sing "Onward Christian soldiers" while the captives counter with another tune that reflects their resolve to succeed: "We shall overcome, We shall overcome someday ... Deep in my heart I do believe, We shall overcome someday (82).

At this stage, the stance of the Blacks is no longer that of despair and disillusionment, but that of inspiration and boldness which strengthens them to grapple with the ordeals they must overcome in order to authenticate their identities and realize their goals. Traveler X expresses his frustration, but accepts to face and overcome the inevitable. This realization acts as an impetus for him to continue his quest, battle with the obstacles that stand between him and his goal, and eventually enters heaven with Nkrumah. His entrance into heaven comprises a long and arduous journey that is continuously thwarted by forces larger than him. His determination, his tedious progress is objectified in the image of the dilapidated wagon, symbolic of the self-fragmentation of the protagonist. I read this as Onwueme's purpose to demonstrate incipient desire for change and the attainment of greater boldness and determination to accomplish change in society. This is presented again in a daring artistic style of the theater of the absurd as they take over the Freedom Wagon from their erstwhile captors, crash into heaven, and take over Heaven's gate. The Blacks are now in charge in heaven and the capture of the Freedom Wagon symbolizes their freedom from racial oppression and segregation.

Apart from the narration of identity crisis, the product of racism, and other issues like global politics, history, wars, the power play among super powers, slavery, freedom, and many others are raised in the play although not explored fully. Instead, these are mentioned in some of the gibberish-like and uncoordinated dialogues which abound in the play. Diction is simple, but because most of the time they are presented in phrases, the central idea in the play seems obscure. Onwueme makes use of slangs, pun, vernacular, transliterations, and translations freely as the need arises. Nevertheless, the main thrust of the play is equality and justice for all irrespective of race or social class. All the characters are living-dead and are travelers at the crossroads. There is no effort by Onwueme to explore the characters fully and this is understandable given the mode of the theater of the absurd of the play. In fact, I read the narration of the living-dead as neither living or dead because some of the characters are not individuals since they are ageless and timeless. For instance, "The Unseen" is described thus: "Communal Voices. They are the Living and the Dead peoples of African descent. Ever present, they keep coming and going. Sometimes they become the "drum voices" breaking into multiphonal tongues and polyphonic rhythms-solo, the chorus. In spite of their many transitions, living and dying, they remain ever present in voice and body, returning in different forms, in their eternal

process of changing and becoming" (1). Thus it is difficult to imbue such characters with physical, psychological, and emotional attributes. The setting of the play as presented in the preface is "at the crossroads of Earth, Heaven and Hell. Each road has its own route/exit. Hell is Zero Route. Earth is Route XYZ with the inscription 'promises no safety' proceed at your own risk" (2). The unrealistic nature of the setting is obvious because it is impossible for any human to identify the crossroads of earth, heaven, and hell in this world. There is no coherent plot line but what is discernable from the action and the explanations offered in the play, in the preface, and in some stage directions one can say that the play is the objective to alter the present situation of Blacks.

In conclusion, racism is a concept and practice of discrimination whereby a particular race assumes a position of superiority when treating the other race as inferior or less human: while this may be understood as common place, it remains a fact that the most often practice of racism is White superiority where Blackness determines "inferiority" and where the darker the skin, the greater the level of "inferiority" and some members of the "inferior race" aspire to attain the position of superiority at all cost. For instance, pop star Michael Jackson underwent cosmetic surgery to alter his face and there is a custom among many US-American Blacks to straighten their curly hair: such practices would be deemed inappropriate and destructive in the opinion of Onwueme as expressed in *Riot in Heaven*. The greatest effect of racism is the self-erosion, low self esteem, and identity crisis for the victims. *Riot in Heaven* projects the fragmented identities of Africans in the diaspora arising from racism by chronicling racial consciousness that takes the protagonist on a systematic and ritualized search for his identity, leading to a journey of self discovery, self-recovery, and self-assertion. The play suggests that the Western world as a capitalist and class-conscious society discriminates against the Blacks while at the same time Onwueme projects Blacks as a strong, proud race that is determined to fight for its freedom against all odds. However, Onwueme condemns the desperation of Blacks' attitude in the West that leads to an acceptance of an inferior position which means that racism still exists in the world because the victims accept their fate as natural. In sum, *Riot in Heaven* is both an important literary text and a text that represents one of the best texts written as *littérature engagée* in Black African literature.

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Author's profile: Onyeka Iwuchukwu teaches drama at National Open University (Nigeria). In addition to numerous articles, Iwuchukwu's book publications include *Elements of Drama* (2008), *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* (2010) and *Introduction to Prose Fiction* (2011). Iwuchukwu is also author with several plays such as *Sons for My Son* (1990), *Into the World* (1990), *Like Father Like Son* (1994), *Regal Dance* (1994), and *Whose Fault* (1994). E-mail: <oiwuchukwu@nou.edu.ng>