The Tragic Motif in Isidore Okpewho's: *The Last Duty*

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Abstract

This paper examines the "Tragic Motif in Isidore Okpewh's *The Last Duty*". It examines individual characters in the novel as demonstration of tragedy by analyzing the emotional and social conflicts that lead to such tragic situation. This research also unravels how tragic motif in the society can lead to the destruction of man and the society as presented in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. This paper adopts formalism theory by Viktor Shklovsky (1915). Formalism deals with the structures of texts. This theory is appropriate as the paper focuses on the characters in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. This paper concludes that man in his quest for personal gain neglects potent options and have to pay for every of his actions and inactions.

Keywords: Tragedy, motif, novel, Formalism, Okpewho's the Last Duty

Introduction

Human history stands apt as an examiner between man and his fellow man, and between man and the society where man is domiciled in the reaction of man to himself, to one another, to his society and to the nature of his awareness to his total environment creates a new culture, history, ideology, existence, thought, feeling and a new wave of life. Catharine A. Mackinnon in *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, observes that "… knowledge is neither a copy nor a miscopy of reality, neither representative nor misrepresentative as the scientific model would have it, but a response to living in it" (98). What this means is that man's struggle for the production of a social change is endless, as he continues the struggle for his own form of social order. This is the reality that permeates human history. African novelists recreate the social issues existing in their society that agitate human mind through their fictional texts. The society therefore becomes an extension of the man's plight, as he grapples to define his identity and his tragic motif.

The term 'tragedy' brings to mind Aristotle, and his classic work *Poetics*. Tragedy is a concept or form of drama or prose in which events or activities of human characters end

in a sad note. This concept was first defined by one of the famous Greek philosophers Aristotle.

According to him, tragedy is:

> The imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself, in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought separately in the parts of the work, in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, where with to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions (1449).

Tragedy has since its definition by Aristotle undergone certain stages of moderation, from "Classic" when this definition is made to "modern," and to contemporary" which is the present era. The classic period of tragedy preserves three unities: "One, Unity of time; two, unity of place (setting); three, unity of plot (story). The classic tragedy defines a tragic plot as "one with a royal character losing through his own pride, a mighty prize."(96). In modern and contemporary period, tragedy redefines the genre, with ordinary protagonists, realistic timeliness and settings, and multiple plots.

Northrop Frye defines tragedy as "The frightening of the balance" (3). The balance here means the order of nature that the hero has disturbed. Arthur Miller, one of the advocates of modern conception of tragedy only retains "catastrophic ending" in his argument of tragedy. Amar Guendouzi quoting Miller argues that:

> The common man can pretend to a tragic status and his story can provide materials for tragedy, provided that his story engages issues of importance such as the sense of personal dignity, the survival of the race or the relationships of man of God… this variation ought to be understood against Aristotle's rise and fall pattern. For in modern societies where the political system are democratic, kings and princes no longer raise our passion, and the low man's misery and loss and as tearing as the fall of kings was for the Greeks (1-2).

Miller's view is that the last appeal of tragedy is due to people's need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen themselves for life. In his essay "The tragedy of the common man" (198). Miller argues that:

> Aristotle sees a tragic hero as the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and

> depravity, but rather to some error, a man who enjoys prosperity and high reputation, like Oedipus and Thyestes, and other members of families like theirs (73).

What this mean is that the tragic hero in classical tragedies is a mythical figure who is neither too good nor too bad. The tragic hero's fall is made intelligible through an "error," which in Greek is called "hubris", which is the consequence of a "tragic flaw", called in Greek "hamartia", thus, most protagonists in Greek tragedies poses these errors and flaws.

The tragic heroes are the very high standing people, but are betrayed by their own weakness. Their decadence is called "nemesis".

Miller's interest in the social issues of the society and how it affects the psychology of the individual is redefined in his concept of tragedy from the perspective of Aristotle. For Aristotle, tragedy must be centred on man of noble background and it must be serious and elevated in language. In the perspective of Miller, tragedy is not only the physical hurt that a man experiences; it is both psychological and traumatic. Thus, man, even society itself, is culturally affected by factors beyond the physical which evolve from the internal contradictions of forces within the society. He (Mille) therefore does not consider the nobility of man as a determinant for the experience of tragedy. According to him, the social structure of society is a driving force for tragic experience.

William Shakespeare's opinion of tragedy according to him is seen in the problems itself. As to the classical unities, Shakespeare adheres twice, and neither time in a tragedy. Through the mouths of his characters, Shakespeare adheres twice, and neither time in a tragedy. Through the mouths of his characters, Shakespeare, like Aristotle, puts himself on both sides of the central question of tragic destiny-that of freedom and necessity. Aristotle says that a tragic destiny is precipitated by the hero's tragic fault, his error or frailty (hamartia), he also calls this turn of events a change of fortune. Shakespeare's Cassius in *Julius Caesar* says: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves" (34). But in *Hamlet*, in a comment on the nature of hamartia, is a fatalist when he broods on the "mole of nature", the "one defect" that some men are born with, "wherein they are not guilty", and that brings them to disaster (4).

Diverse scholars have written their views on Isiodore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* as it concerns tragic motif in the novel.
Isiodore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* has attracted the attention of scholars one of such is the apt opinion of Emmanuel Obiechina, who states that the novel is a "profound exploration

of the internal conflicts within and among the characters which supply and even greater tension" (270). He sees the characters' individual actions and the interplay between the characters as that which heighten the thematic effect of war. Emphasis on characters and characterization appear to be the driving element of the plot.

Nwachukwu-Agbada, et al observes that *The Last Duty* is a "record of a pattern of experiences of the people who lived in a particular border area of Nigeria during the civil war" (328). These scholars subject the novel essentially on the characters and how their experiences of conflict and war are shaped within a historical context rather than that shaped on a large scale. The experiences are perceived by the individual who struggles to survive the callousness of the society.

In another respect, Emenyonu and Oguzie state that *The Last Duty* explores the psychological damage that any war does to the minds of people, high or low"(183). The outright condemnatory tone of the scholars suggests total rejection of war. War robs people of their human consciousness and brings out the consciousness of bestiality in their lives. Though, in the midst of war as they further states, some individuals would manage to keep their heads above the water of corruption, violence and degradation while maintaining considerable honour and fair play.

In Bayo Ogunjimi's view, Okpe, "who is able to feel the pulses of his, age, and prepares (his people's) soul … for a humane futuristic socio-culture" (531). He views the text as the author's depiction of the horror of war so as to prepare his people against such occurrence. To Ogunjumi, the graphic description of the devastating effects of war is the author's shaping of his people's self-consciousness geared at avoiding such horrific experience of war which will result to tragic ending.

The novel is appraised for its projection of the inter-ethnic crossfire and struggle for survival of his people. This inter-ethnic crossfire is triggered by the action of colonials. The characters' actions are all geared towards maintaining their self-consciousness and by such stance, heighten the dialectics of the narrative.

Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* is heavily influenced by self and societal conflicts which result into the tragic circumstance in the novels.

African critics and scholars over the years have not given rapt and critical attention to the tragic motif, which contributed to the tragic circumstances in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. It is this gap that motivated this paper.

The aim of this paper is to show the high level conflict and crisis that arise when characters' tragic motif are not identified earlier in the society, as projected in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. This aim therefore interrogate how characters' tragic motif can be identified earlier in the society before it fully develop and overshadow the characters' activities in the society.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Formalism theory by Viktor Shklovsky (1915) as its theoretical framework.

Formalism is a branch of literary theory and criticism which deals with the structures of text. It means that external agents outside of the text are not taken into consideration. All the things about culture, politics, and the author's intent or societal influences are excluded from formalism.

The focus in formalism is only on the text and the contents within the text such as grammar, syntax, signs, literary tropes, etc. Formalism also brings attention to structural tendencies within a text or across texts such as genre and categories. Formalism is based on an analysis of a text rather than a discussion on issues more distant to the text.

So Formalism is based on the technical purity of a text. Formalism is divided into two branches Russian Formalism and New Criticism. Formalism also argued that a text is an autonomous entity liberated from the intention of the author,

A text according to Formalism is a thing on its own without the need of external agents. As the name suggests. Formalism is a scientific, technical mode of understanding texts which expects a greater degree of mental intelligence instead of emotional intelligence from the readers. The word 'formalism' has derived from the word 'form'. The 'ism' is a belief or an approach of looking at things. So. 'Formalism' is the approach of looking at things strictly adhering to their forms.

Formalism is an object-centered theory of critical approach to literature. It focuses only on the work itself and completely ignores the author of the work, time and background information of the work, and the audiences' feeling or perception about the work.

Formalism asserts that formal properties are the only things that matter about literature.

Formalist Criticism analyzes the form of a literary work to discover its true meaning (not what the audiences think but what the text says). Formalism holds that true meaning can

be determined only by analyzing the literary elements of the text and by understanding how these elements work together to form up a cohesive whole.

Formalist critics examine a text regardless of its time period, social/political/religious setting, and author's background. They believe that true meaning of the text lies only in the text. Other issues create a false impression of the text and thus jeopardize the audiences' interpretation. So the formalist critics believe that a text should not be interpreted based on a reader's response to it (affective fallacy), the author's stated or _ inferred intention (intentional fallacy), author's life (biographical fallacy), and historical/religious/social contexts (contextual fallacies). According to formalism, these fallacies are the subjective biases and a text should be analyzed objectively to determine its true meaning.

In literary criticism, Formalism refers to a style of inquiry that focuses, almost exclusively, on features of the literary text itself, to the exclusion of biographical, historical, or intellectual contexts. The name "Formalism" derives from one of the central tenets of Formalist thought: That the form of a work of literature is inherently a part of its content, and that the attempt to separate the two is fallacious. By focusing on literary form and excluding superfluous contexts, Formalists believed that it would be possible to trace the evolution and development of literary forms, and thus, literature itself.

In simple terms, Formalists believed that the focus of literary studies should be the text itself, and not the author's life or social class. Art is produced according to certain sets of rules and with its own internal logic. New forms of art represent a break with past forms and an introduction of new rules and logic. The goal of the critic is to examine this feature of art. In the case of literature, the object of reflection is the text's "literariness," that which makes it a work of art and not a piece of journalism. This attention to the details of the literary text was an attempt on the part of literature to turn its discipline into a science.

There is no one school of Formalism, and the term groups together a number of different approaches to literature, many of which seriously diverge from one another. Formalism, in the broadest sense, was the dominant mode of academic literary study in the United States and United Kingdom from the end of the Second World War through the 1970s, and particularly the Formalism of the "New Critics," including, among others, I.A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom, C.P. Snow, and T.S. Eliot. On the European continent, Formalism emerged primarily out of the Slavic intellectual circles of Prague and Moscow, and particularly out of the work of Roman Jakobson , Boris Eichenbaum, and Viktor Shklovsky. Although the theories of Russian Formalism and New Criticism are similar in a number of respects, the two schools largely developed in isolation from one another, and should not

be conflated or considered identical. In reality, even many of the theories proposed by critics working within their respective schools often diverged from one another.

Beginning in the late 1970s, Formalism began to fall out of favor in the scholarly community. A number of new approaches, which often emphasized the political importance of literary texts, began to dominate the field. Theorists became suspicious of the idea that a literary work could be separated from its origins or uses, or from the background of political and social contexts. For a number of decades following the early 1970s, the word "Formalism" took on a negative, almost pejorative connotation, denoting works of literary criticism that were so absorbed in meticulous reading as to have no larger cultural relevance.

The Tragic Motif in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*

The war provoked the tragic catastrophe witnessed in the novel and is advanced by human deceit, cunning, treachery and callousness. Toje believes that to keep his place and maintain his position is to keep his impotency a top secret, though, he is "bothered that he cannot even enjoy the customary subconscious ritual of an early morning erection "(23). He believes that the beauty of Aku would help restore his declining manhood. His frame of mind is that the recovery of his manhood will lead to the recovery of his pride of place. His self-awareness and assumption prompted his action to trump up charges against Oshevire, which lead to his (Oshevire's) arrest and detention at Iddu. Toje uses the opportunity to achieve his sexual desire, but failed. His failure is the source that triggered the tragic instinct in the activities of Toje, Aku, Odibo, and therefore, arouse Oshevire's tragic end.

The Urukpe chief (Toje), worried over his flabbiness, caused by either age or ailment, questions how he can reconcile himself as a person, and his title as a chief, "…… how can a man reconcile himself to that title when it seems very clear to him that he no longer possesses, has completely lost-strange as it may sound to a normal mind- that power which gives the title its very definition?" (24).

His attempts to use the helpless to get his sexual prowess resuscitated fails. At the height of his failure to consummate his love making with Aku, Odibo, his servant, and cripple, described by him (Toje) as a "useless mass of body" (8) and a "dumb fool" (9) consummates the sexual encounter for him. His (Toje's) discovery of this, angers him, and triggers the action that leads to the gragedy that destroy Toje, Odibo, and late Oshevire and Aku.

Toje's hatred for Oshevire, a fellow rubber farme, and his flirtatious relationship with Aku are responsible for the tragedy that unfolds in the novel, and the tragedy that destroys

Oshevire, his marriage, and his family. Nwachukwu-Agbada describes Aku as the "femme fatale" (39) of the novel. The events in the novel relate to her and to her condition. Her action or inaction shattered the hopes of Oshevire and causes the deaths of Toje, and Odibo. Odibo's deflation of Toji's ego sexually contributes to the achievement of the cripple's self-aggrandizement, attainment of his individualism, recovery of his identity and his manners. Odibo's sexual achievement aggravates Toje's anger, he (Toje) regrets his present sexual predicament, and sees their actions as a mockery on his personality, for his two dependants to predicament, and sees their actions as a mockery on his personality, for his two dependants to deceive and ridicule him over his virility. Angered and frustrated, he remarks:

> A woman who has been confined to her house for so many months, suddenly picking up the courage to stray from prison so soon after a rebel attack, when she should know that for her this is a most dangerous period. And then he had the nerve t go to her house on his own initiative, without waiting to be sent thee by me. I call that the panicky stuttering of a guilty bastard caught unawares. I must know the root of all these. To be so cheaply fooled is the last thing I would bring myself to accept. To be so cheaply fooled and thwarted by two creatures who depend on me for their very lives…. (209-210).

This raises the tempo to its crescendo. He charges menacingly, and calls Odibo a 'lair' and a 'brute,' and addresses Aku as 'a slut,' and 'a worthless harlot' (212). Aku's plea to Odibo to spend the night with her is as a result of her notice of his (Odibo's) manly features. This creates opportunity for Odibo to satisfy her (Aku's) sexual urge that is aroused by Toje. The sexual relationship emphasizes someone's weakness and another's meekness, reversed or utilized for the purposes of embarrassing or puzzling other characters, and set the stage for the tragic end of some major characters.

Toje hacking open Odibo's door with his cutlass shows clearly the gravity of his anger. Cutting Odibo twice on the back and another "deep one on the chest" (217) and Odibo hitting off Toje's machete and using it on him is the climax of events, and a pointer to the tragedy in the novel.

Eseoghene, the madman, foreshadows Oshevire's tragic demise. It is symbolic that Eseoghene is the last that Oshevire passes while the military arrests and takes him to Iddu. He is the first man that Oshevire also meets on his way back to Urukpe after three years. When Oshevire ask Eseoghene if he is still around, Eseoghene retorted "Are you still around yourself? You should be a dead man. You are better dead than alive" (226).

Oshevire wants to know why the mad man makes such a remark, the madman adds that "my only regret is that I did not get my own share of the spoils, ha ha ha! (226). This encounter keeps Oshervire agitated and tension-soaked. He (Oshevire) becomes anxious to know the plight of his family from Esiri, but is advised by Esiri to "go home and rest yourself" (226). He is not satisfied with Esiri's response. He becomes more agitated, demands to know the plight and condition of his wife and child, but, Esiri advises him to "go home first" (227).

Oshevire's tragic motif is motivated by his convincing belief that any honest man in Urukpe knows that "the dishonor brought upon my wife-on my household-was totally unjust" (237). He feels that his family has been smeared on. "The smear is there, clear in the air as a hangman's rope, the noose through which the head must pass" (237), such that "Our days are haunted by an indelible shame" (237). He wonders the type of life he will be living when every single day of his life "every finger, every sneer and every mockery is directed at you?" (228). He lacks the courage to ask his wife of her own version of what happened in his absence. He remarks "the story may be too much for me to bear" (228). Oshevire is not frustrated and disappointed by the fact of Aku's "unworthy use by two men" (238) or "the predicament that she found herself in, "(238) but his fear is that there is "a strong likelihood that… she is bearing within her bosom the seed of such vile communion" (238) he therefore decides not to be alive to face such shame "what man would choose to be alive to face every day the ill-conceived fruit of shame" (238), and retorts "NO… NO… (238). It is this sorrowful experience that prompts Oshevire's decision to end his life. He leads his wife and son out of the house that night, and sets the house ablaze so that history will remember that an innocent man who could not bear the sneer brought to his family once liver thee and he flee Urukpe with his family.

On their way through the bush path, Oshevire ignores the command of the soldiers to stop. His violation of the soldiers command buttresses Oshevire's tragic intention and motif. His wife ends up on he knees from the soldier's bullets, leaving the innocent boy Oghenvo bewildered over what is going-on with the adults in the world around him as he (Oghenovo) narrates:

> The man from the bush walks up to us, pointing a gun at my mother and myself, I hold tight to my mother, because I am afraid, suddenly I hear the sound of gunshots from the direction of the other voice, Kr-r-r-r, Kr-r-r-r, two times, and them the sound of something dropping. Mukoro! My mother screams again, then she lets go of me and drops on her knees and

> covers her face with her hands and begins to cry. I look up at the soldier I am afraid of him… (242-243).

The innocent and intelligent Oghenove observes everything about him with an unusual keenness and passion. The way his mind works, the way he sees others and the manner he reacts to what he observes or what is said to him is childlike and unspotted. He does not understand everything he beholds with his eyes, that he observes them is a mark of intelligence. An example is when he makes a dummy gun simply by seeing the soldier's gun. His fate is the typical circumstance which faces a little child in unusual times and in a period of uncertainty. His use of language under language as depiction of character buttresses Oghenovo as a little boy whose thought pattern is uncertain and unorderly. This is compounded by a not-too-reliable punctuation system, where capital letters would have been the accepted norm, Oghenovo uses initial lower case letter for his first person singular pronoun "I" instead of using it as capital 'I'. The use of the small letter 'i' to refer to himself shows that he (Oghenovo) is a small boy. It depicts not just his size, but also his level of awareness, his pitch as well as his social status.

Conclusion

Humanity, in search for personal aggrandizement and solution to personal and social gains neglect potent options. Thinking at this point in time seems to be myopic, either out of sheer ignorance or outright exaggerated self-worth that blinds them and makes it difficult for them to see and think in the positive direction. Human beings especially those in position of power think that other beings are made only to serve their needs and wants without reciprocity. This turns out to be their greatest undoing. Humanity is under obligation to think and rethink over their attitude towards the other human beings. Toje in ***The Last Duty*** failed to understand that age and activities can make man impotent. His struggle to restore his manhood made him trump Oshevire to have chance over the wife, and at last pays for it.

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