



Folkism as Narrative Imperative in Cheluchi Onyemelukwe – Onuobia’s the Son of the House

Elizabeth O. Ben-Iheanacho, PhD

Research and Documentation Department,
National Council for Arts and Culture,
Abuja, Nigeria
elizabeth.beniheanacho@gmail.com
08037262808

Abstract

This discourse is an attempt at cross-generic concept borrowing and application. It aims to show and explore the stylistic interface between the associated aesthetics of drama in building the narrative architecture of a novel. The discourse recognizes folkism as a dramaturgy-specific concept formulated in the search for an authentic, African form of drama/theatre experience. Our discourse here adapts the concept as an interdisciplinary aesthetic to Onyemelukwe-Onuobia’s debut novel, *The Son of The House*. Such application across genres will necessarily evaluate the successes and problematics of the creative collage in accordance with the laws of folkism as may be relevant to the content analysis of the novel. The discourse highlights the features of folkism within the re-contextualized prose narrative form not only as a form of structural discourse but as an exercise in reader-focused analysis.

Keywords: Folkism, Aesthetics, Narrative, imperative, Motherism

Introduction

Folkism is defined as the ideological imperative that arises from and describes the conviction that customs and beliefs as practised in the past are still exercising an influence on the behavioural tendencies, laws and social relationships of every community. (Abe, n.pg) As a literary concept, it was formulated by the playwright and theorist, Sam Ukala, as a response to the need for a theatre that is relevant to the African essence and performance conventions within orature that is rooted in indigenous, traditional and cultural experiences associated with folks; the people (Eregare n.pg). Folkism within dramaturgy is “the tendency to base literary plays on the history, culture and concerns of the folk (the “people” in general) and to compose them in accordance with the aesthetics and conventions for composing and performing African folktales.” (Ukala 11-38). Some of the features of folkism include: Narrator, Storytelling, Proverbs and adage, myth and superstition, historical beliefs and cultural values.

The focus of this study is to establish elements of folklore in the text, relying on content analysis to bring to the fore, the narrative aesthetics of Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *the Son of the House*. The intention is to show how folkloric aesthetic preoccupations are used to manipulate patterns and convey meaning in such a way that the audience (reader, in our case), becomes part of the storytelling process and narrative construction.

Ukala formulated eight Laws of Folkism as dramatic aesthetics that enable the transition from folktale to literary text. These are:

- 1) The Law of Opening serves the attention-calling purpose. It is a form of arresting action that not only arouses the interest of the audience but involves them in the unfolding of the narrative. It is exemplified by the traditional "Story, Story" formulae to which the involved audience echoes "Story."
- 2) The Law of Joint Performance (between actors and audience) implies the participatory nature of the African folklore convention. As a theatre device, it involves the audience by placing rehearsed actors within the audience from where they interject into the action happening on stage thus expanding viewpoints and interpretation options. For the purposes of this discourse, this building block will be adapted to the multiple narrator option adopted in *The Son of the House*. Onyemelukwe-Onuobia leans heavily on presenting the story through the viewpoints of the different narrators and by asking probing questions not only to reveal internal contradictions but also for the reader to note and seek answers along with the characters. Thus, the reader is an involved observer who is guided by witnessing the revealed consciousness of the narrators, into making a final judgment on the actions of the characters as they seek to resolve the central conflict of the narrative.
- 3) The Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility allows the narrator and actors the freedom to interpret the script as they would.
- 4) The Law of Judgment
- 5) The Law of Protest against Suspense
- 6) The Law of Expression of Emotions
- 7) The Law of Ego Projection

These four laws (3-7) deal with audience feedback based on what they have been able to get out of their encounter with the play and live performance. In traditional folktale conventions, the audience gives instant judgment on whether they like the play or not through verbal and non-verbal means of communication. By virtue of the mechanics of reading being central to the revelation of meaning in prose fiction, the Law of Judgment is deferred till the end of the story. It takes the form of critical evaluation and critique of the building blocks deployed by the author in the architectural design of the narrative. This law will be utilized in evaluating theme and central conflict



resolutions in *The Son of the House*, Other elements of folkloric aesthetics used in the narrative will also be assessed for their contributions to stylistic construct. The question of audience which is the nucleus of oral performances and drama will be mutated into answering the question that is at the heart of this cross-generic endeavour which is: *Who/What Constitutes the Audience of Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's the Son of the House?*

- 8) The Law of Closing which demands a reflection on the performance. In dramaturgy, it is the narrator's closing remarks that traditionally bring the performance to a close. The remark usually demands a reflection on the kernel of the story: lessons learned, style of delivery, moral of the tale, and the dialectics of theme realization, etc. This law is relevant not only to the content analysis of the novel but to the continuing review of the contributions of the author to the development of Nigerian literary aesthetics.

Review of the Son of the House

The novel is the story of two abducted women, Julie and Nwabulu, from two disparate backgrounds and separated by class and power; who decide to tell each other the story of their lives to pass the time while waiting to be ransomed and rescued by their loved ones. In the course of their shared narration, they discover that their lives cross at the sensitive trauma site that each has been carrying for years. For Nwabulu, it is the answer to unravelling the whereabouts of the child she had in her teens while serving as a housemaid to the rich. For Julie, story swapping becomes a vehicle to confront herself and her many subterfuges as both women are confronted with the question: Who owns the child?

Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *the Son of the House* commanded literary attention when it won Nigeria's most prestigious literary prize, the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Literature Prize for 2021. Most reviewers channelled energy on its deployment of developmental feminism in the narrative (Ikheloa, n.d. pg) This discourse enhances critical attention to the text using an inter-generic approach. It aims to highlight how folklore enhances literary aesthetics in the narrative style of the author. It will also show how folkloric aesthetics is used to communicate conflict and cultural injustice in traditional ownership rights among Igbos. By so doing, this analysis expands perspectives on the impact of tradition and culture as resource materials for contemporary conflicts as well as in building the narrative structure of the book.

Folkism and Structure in *The Son of the House*

Folkism operates in the form of creolized aesthetics in the novel, appearing as “another version of storytelling which is both universal and culturally specific, both cosmopolitan and vernacular” (Uimonen, 29-60) and which allows for cross generic referencing codes, and varieties that broaden the parameters of literary production using folkloric elements. Transposed in the production politics of prose fiction, folkism can be seen in the structure of the novel. Showcased in formal pillars of the unequal cast, the novel is divided into four parts: Prologue (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia, 7-12). Part One ‘subtitled Nwabulu’ (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia 15-122), Part Two ‘subtitled Julie’ (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia 125-183). Part Three ‘subtitled In the Hold, 2011 and unequally divided between Nwabulu and Julie’ (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia, 187-281).

1) *Prologue as Opening Action*

“We must do something to pass the time, I thought. Two women in a room, hands and feet tied.” (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia, 7)

This opening sentence of the book serves as its arresting action, the curtain raiser, the beckoning. It is a call to do something, a call to action that is immediately eclipsed because the characters are immobilized; their limbs being tied. This makes them incapable of any activity that is limbs dependent. But they are not gagged in their captivity; their voices are free to tell their story. Therefore, the action of their story is lived vicariously. This also serves to invite the reader as the secondary witness/audience/observer; the primary recipients being the women, one of the other’s narratives.

“Our mouths were free so we could talk and we needed to pass the time...there is nothing like a good story to help pass the time” (9).

The prologue further establishes the multiple narrators and their different viewpoints in their storytelling to the reader/observer. Importantly, it falls in line with the dynamics of traditional storytelling which is usually at a time of leisure when the hard tasks of the day have been accomplished and everyone has time on their hands to engage with. Further, that the narrators are women can be seen as a throwback to the traditional role of women as chroniclers of community lore. Derogatory street talk would say that women are famed for gossip and gist swapping at idle moments; all of which come into play in the kidnapper’s den. Within the ideology of literary canon formation, Lutz (249-266) has observed that traditional



storytelling and its modern “novel writing, originally dominated by women, was once considered low-prestige cultural item.”

Finally, and in line with chromaticism and design in African oral literature, the prologue introduces the moral fibre of the narrative. When the criminality of modern kidnapping is linked to youth unemployment and greed, this is promptly rejected by the narrator with the vain assertion: “I have never been hungry enough to threaten anyone with a gun; to threaten to take away lives because mine was unbearable. I wonder what that felt like.” (10) The exploding of this conceited disclaimer was just storytelling away even as it introduces one of the themes of the book which is: What people do when they are hungry enough.

11) ***The Question of Audience and its Narrative Problematics***

The centrality of the audience and its participatory involvement in the performance ideology of oral literature and folkism creates a major problem in adapting the concept to prose fiction. The issue is not merely on the impossibility of an immediate audience feedback mechanism which is dramaturgy-enabled and specific, it is related to the identification of who constitutes the audience of the narrative in *The Son of the House*. This lack of distinction in turn creates narrative disjoints which are discussed in the following three categories:

a) **Nwabulu and Julie as Primary Audience**

These are the two female kidnap victims who tell each other their life stories to pass the time while waiting to be ransomed and rescued by their loved ones. They are the first hearers and receivers of each other’s stories. However, the novel suffers structural disconnect in the way incidents are narrated and commented upon as they are unfolded by the narrators.

To exemplify: Part Three (In the Hold 2011) is a follow-up to the stories the women had exchanged in the preceding portions and chronologically, a return to the narrative time established by the prologue. When Nwabulu takes back the narration from Julie, instead of reacting to the revealed truth of the whereabouts of her child if she was the principal audience for Julie’s story, the section opens with a vista of Nwabulu as Madam of her own house, established fashion entrepreneur and enmeshed in an unlikely friendship with Julie, a woman way above her station in life and far older than her; a friendship that saw them experimenting with story swapping in

captivity. Her lamentation about her convictions about the death of her love child, Ezinwa, on pages 204 to 205 is out of place for a contrary fact that Julie had established (to the reader?) in Part Two. The narrative absurdity of repudiating a story already told the reader on pages 125 to 183 with the casual notation that “My honesty could not extend to how I got Afam. So, I tactfully took a break.” (266) is taking Julie’s subterfuge to a new level. It could also be said to be evidence of authorial afterthought.

The impact of such a disjoint on the narrative technique employed by Onyemelukwe-Onuobia is that it leaves the reader with the impression that so many pages were wasted after the story had been told. On the part of characterization, the inconsonance in audience identification has two otherwise very smart, hard-nosed, hands-on women skirting around the truth, playing dumb. The many clues casually dropped by Julie, such as the mention of Nwokenta, Nwabulu’s village, and obtaining a child from Mama Nathan, that Nwabulu as the primary recipient of the story fails to follow up on create a major narrative flaw. The *Son of the House* reads like a story with many cliffhangers such that the climax comes off as an anti-climax, the resolution through deus ex machina.

b) The Reader/Observer Participant as Audience

The reader is the holder of the medicine pot of every information the writer pens down. The reader is also the keeper of secrets the characters in the narrative may be unaware of. As the writer’s audience, the reader juggles their “truths”, and evaluates them against the actions and inactions of the characters to form a critical opinion on the book, the characters and the author’s creative competence. To this extent, anyone with an interest in interacting with prose fiction is the writer’s audience in *The Son of the House*. Such a reader is a secondary receiver of the story given the narrative aesthetics deployed by the author. Consequently, the reader/observer is in a position to evaluate and make critical judgments on the unfolding events, just as the audience of traditional performances do.

c) As a finished cultural product, *The Son of the House* is an item for public consumption by a paying audience that constitutes the third-level audience. Ikheloa (n.pg.) noted that the audience comprises mostly Western readers and critics, the conscious awareness of whose superintending presence has cost contemporary African



writers credibility and integrity in their narratives which have been compromised by the need to translate and italicize indigenous thoughts, motifs and words, Though he distances Onyemelukwe-Onuobia from “compromised” writers, her in line explanation of words, phrases and localized idiosyncrasies is a form of obeisance to the reading comfort of not only the West but to non-Igbo readers:

”Amosu,” she would call me, a witch.” (15)

“I made myself Milo, scooping large spoons of Peak milk into my mug. I took a sip of my tea – *as we call every drink made from hot water around here* – and put some slices of bread on a plate... (188, my emphasis.)

Folklore as Resource Material in the Son of the House

Contemporary African Literature has been said to owe a debt to traditional performances and oral narratives as these are subject to creative adaptation and codification as mediated by Western technology (Okpewho, n.pg.; Hamilton, n.pg.). Folk beliefs, forms of expression, social conventions and philosophical dispositions often form the fulcrum for conflicts with modern society which the author/playwright/poet seeks to resolve. Within the Igbo worldview that serves as a creative locale for *The Son of the House*. Two such citizenship charters will be examined.

a) ***The Philosophy of Afamefena (May my name not be lost)/Obiechina (May the family compound never, ever end)***

Of these two names, the first is usually bestowed on the first son while the second is often a surname in Igbo naming codes. Both capture the patriarchal dynamics of lineage perpetuation and transmission in the Igbo worldview. Legacy is a male factor for all Igbos irrespective of status, class, freeborn or outcast. “Only sons could carry the family name, could make sure that the name of the family did not get lost.” (141) It is not enough, however, to be born a man; suck a carrier of ancestral heritage must be cast in a mould to fulfil social expectations for his role. The first character named Afamefuna in the text, Julie’s brother, failed to meet these expectations.

Suffering post-Biafran civil war trauma, psychologically incapacitated and unable to dig himself out of his harrowing war memories, “He was like a boat set adrift on the Ngene River with no one to row it.” (140) Afam kept drifting until he died a most ignoble death: unmarried, unemployed, a veritable efulefu (worthless fellow); leaving the responsibility of lineage extension to

his younger brother and even Julie’ a role that through the years, she was persuaded she was better suited for: “I would make a better son of the house, I sometimes thought.” (143)

Afam’s death signaled the watershed of desperation for Julie who becomes a second wife to a man who, despite his other indices of Igbo masculine success, was on the verge of his family name going extinct because his wife had failed to birth a son. An unremitting desire to not only migrate to the planet of married women but to produce the much-desired heir saw her naming her obtained-by-subterfuge son Afamefuna. Beyond the sentimentality of immortalizing her brother, this nomenclature, Mama Afamefuna, also served to announce Julie as the carrier of family virtues in a form of role reversal.

As a descriptive normative, the phrase “the son of the house” encapsulates the Igbo philosophy of Afamefuna. It is used for four different persons in the book: Urenna (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia 51), Nwabulu’s teenage lover and uninterested biological father of son; Ezinwa (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia 110), Nwabulu’s love child and carrier of Nathan’s lineage following the form of levirate marriage she was forced into, Julie (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia 143) in self-visioning in place of her brother as a form of role subversion, and finally, used for Afam (153), the inheritor of the Obiechina compound obtained by maternal fraud. One of the central conflicts of the novel, therefore, is: who is the authentic carrier of the Afamefuna concept and for which lineage does this child sound its name?

b) *The anathema of Ime nkpuke*

“I had done the worst thing an unmarried girl in Nwokenka could do. I had opened my legs to a man and announced it boldly and foolishly with a pregnant belly... I lacked chastity... I would be unable to marry a young man from a good family... I would bring a bastard in the world (sic)... If it is a boy, he would have no automatic inheritance of land... Better it was a girl, for she would marry and hope that someday people forgot how she came into the world.” (88)

The idea of pregnancy outside wedlock is anathema to traditional Igbo society. Conversely, as part of its cultural profiling of the rights of a child, Igbos hold that no child is a bastard. Hence, customary steps are taken to document and mainstream the child that results from sexual misadventure on the part of the mother. “The best opportunity for a woman such as I had become was to marry an old man as his second or third wife... This way, a



child would have a name and some protection from the ignominy of being a bastard.” (89)

Other forms of folk law and traditional convention to graft a child of unspecified parentage into a new lineage and community acceptance is through different forms of levirate marriage, ranging from persuading a daughter to remain within the family and not marry in order to bear children in the name of the family (Yerima n.pg.). The family could also marry a wife who would then bear a son to carry on the family name. Or, in an extreme case of “male disappearance” from a lineage, a wife can be married in the name of a dead son. She then would be persuaded to bear children in the name of the dead man so that his lineage and his name do not go extinct, the compound swallowed up. It was Nwabulu’s unwillingness to subscribe to this traditional mainstreaming protocol in documenting her child born to an unknown father that triggered the central conflict of the text. It foregrounds the question: Who owns the child?

A Twist to Child Ownership and Motherhood Question

In *the Son of the House*, Onyemelukwe-Onuobia celebrates Acholonu’s motherist importance of motherhood to the African woman’s sense of identity, cultural value and social relevance, with a twist. By centralising the ownership of the child, the ability to bear and birth is touted as the singular determinant of a woman’s wholeness within the African value spectrum, she challenges patriarchal rights to the child.

Traditionally, the child is at the heart of self-definition and power control. Thus, the “ownership” of the child becomes a site for hegemonic masculinity and control. The two women in the book experience womanhood, motherhood and child ownership differently. For Nwabulu, fecundity brings ruin, disaster and disenfranchisement on her rights over her child while being fertility challenged and without a child of her own brings out the manipulative instincts in Julie that drive her towards motherhood by ownership. Ironically, she who in reality was barren, becomes the owner of a child. Both, however, pose the question to the reader: Who owns the child? Or as Julie puts it: “What is a mother, really?” (227)

In answering herself, she says: “Yes, it was true that I suffered no labour pains, no recovery from caesarean section. But that was not all that made a mother.” (288). Buttressing her argument, she added

“Mrs Julie Obiechina, I thought now. I was his mother... I raised him. Taught him his address, taught him his alphabet. Potty trained him, kissed him, kissed him goodnight. Steadied

him when he tried to be himself in his teenage years. Was planning to help raise grandchildren he would give me. Me, not any other woman.” (273/4)

Faced with the dilemma of redefining and disclaiming her motherhood rights in the face of the reality that the forces of life had orchestrated an uncommon shift in the Nature versus Nurture design, Nwabulu acknowledges:

“Instead, this woman had raised my son. He was probably a big success, thanks to her and her husband. What would I have given him at that time? Who was to say that if Mama Nathan had not died, I would have laid eyes on him again? Or that if Obiageli had returned him to Mama Nathan’s family, they would have let me have him?” (277)

In their submissions to the motherhood debate, both women see themselves as the primary owners of the child. Both recognize that the fathers were mere role players: Urenna, the biological but uninterested sperm donor, and Chief Eugene Obiechina, the deceived, unintended father who would have promptly disowned the child once his wife’s subterfuge was uncovered.

Finally, by sharing the harrowing experience of child theft by the victim and the perpetrator, Onyemelukwe-Onubia passes comments on the possibilities of universal sisterhood, thus exploding one of the most popular patriarchal myths that women are their own worst enemies. When the truth dawns, Nwabulu “...stared at her, seeing not the polished woman who had walked into my shop a mere three months ago, but a child thief, a haggard, old-looking woman.” However, her hostility and aggression dissipate as she evaluates Julie’s nurturing competence and social assets bequeathed her son. Soon, resentment melts into the restoration of the Fellowship of Sisterhood and a prayer for Julie’s survival at the realisation that in the end, all women were victims trying to survive in a harsh world.

“No, it was not only Ezinwa that made me pray she would live. It was Julie herself. We had shared a bond not easily broken. Two women doing their best in their world (281).

The Law of Closing/Conclusion

In line with the 8th law of Ukala’s folkism, pages 273 to 281 shared between Julie and Nwabulu serve to draw out the reader’s judgment on the story that has been served. Both narrators could be said to be addressing the court of the reader. While Julie pleads for understanding to vindicate her, Nwabulu grows from righteous



indignation to mature evaluation of the pressures and decisions taken. Hence her voice is the one that conveys the moral authority of the tale, the narrator with the final say to the audience.

Being the most injured and the receiver of her offender's confession, she is best qualified to pass judgment and chart the way forward, not only for herself but for her fellow woman and co-mother of their shared son of the house.

Works Cited

Abe, Sefunmi Grace "Aesthetics of Folkism: A Critical Analysis of Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku and Orisa Ibeji*" September 2018. <http://repository.fuoye.edu.ng/bitstream/123456789/1487/1/AESTETHICS%20OF%20FOLKISM%20A%20CRITICAL%20ANALYSIS%20OF%20AHMED%20YERIMA%E2%80%99S.pdf>

Acholonu, Catherine. "Motherism – An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism. Owerri: Afro Publications. 1995

Eregare, Emmanuel A. "Folkism and Modern Nigerian Theatres: A study of Sam Ukala's Ireli War. EJOTMAS: Epoma Journal of Theatre Art and Media Art. Vol 6, No 1-2., 2017. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ejotmas/article/view/163537>

Hamilton, G. "Oral Narrative in African Oral Literature" Sokoto: Sokoto State Press, 1985

Ikheloa, Ikhide "Book Review Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House*" October 18, 2019. <https://brittlepaper.com/2019/10/book-review-cheluchi-onyemelukwe-onuobias-the-son-of-the-house-ikhide-ikheloa/>

Lutz, Catherine. "The gender of Theory" in *Women Writing Culture*, ed, Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, Berkely CA: University of California Press 1995, Pp 249-266.

Okpewho, Isidore. "Myth in Africa". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982

Onyemelukwe-Onuobia, Cheluchi. "The Son of the House Lagos. Parrésia Publishers Ltd 2019.



Uimonen, P. “Invoking Flora Nwapa: Nigerian Women Writers, Feminity and spirituality in world literature. Stockhlme: stockholme University Press. 2020. Pp. 29-60.

Ukala, S. “Folkism: Toward the National Aesthetic Principle in Dramaturgy, A Monthly International Literary Journal of Writer’s Resort, 79, 11-38

Yerima, Ahmed. “Akuabata: Drama” Ibadan. Kraft Books LTD. 2008