

**THE CHALLENGES TO DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF
OUTCASTS IN NIGERIA: THE CASE OF AHMED YERIMA'S
*OTAELO***

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the outcast challenges in Ahmed Yerima's *Otaelo*. It is a well-known fact that the outcasts face a lot of challenges in their society. This study, therefore, focuses on how the Osu-caste is marginalised and discriminated against, and how these abnormalities cause friction and division among members of the society. The Osu-caste victim experiences psychological trauma because of the ill-treatment he gets from his people. As a literary study, this work employed an analytical approach in discussing the text under consideration. This paper reviews through text that the dominance of the freeborn castes triggers the resistance of the Osu-caste. The study is significant in its proposition because it is anchored on the cultural erasure of the Osu-caste in Igbo society. Advocating against the caste system, therefore, promotes equality, justice, and human rights for those involved, regardless of their birth background.

KEYWORDS: Osu-caste, Psychological Trauma, and Cultural Erasure.

INTRODUCTION

Being an outcast in Nigeria is historically associated with societal norms and traditional beliefs, especially within certain ethnic groups like the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria. An outcaste, often referred to as "Osu" among the Igbos, is a person who is considered ritually polluted or a taboo due to lineage, association with certain deities, or past transgressions against societal norms. Hechter and Opp (2001) affirm that norms are incorporated within the individuals, so that there is conformity without external rewards or punishments, or they may be enforced by positive or negative sanctions. These norms encompass traditional and social expectations that shape

lives and society, and going against the norms can attract rejection, criticism, ostracism, and depression.

Outcaste status is deeply entrenched in religious and cultural practices, where individuals or entire families are subjected to discrimination and regarded as inferior. As a result, their social interactions and access to opportunities are severely restricted. Most times, they are ostracised and relegated to the fringes of the society to which they belong. Williams (2001) describes ostracism as a form of social death. Outcasts are typically marginalised from participating in any activity in their community or sometimes taken away from their community. Bargh (2017) posits that ostracism is an intense phenomenon that most people will do anything to avoid. These outcasts face intense discrimination; some individuals strive not to go against the societal norms that will cause them to be portrayed as outcasts.

Despite efforts to abolish outcaste and discrimination in Nigeria through legislation, enforcement remains challenging. Ujumadu (2020) exclaims that despite official abolition, the Osu-caste system refuses to go in Igbo land. He expresses the view that the defunct Eastern-Nigerian government officially banished the Osu-caste system in 1956 by a law made by the parliament, but to date, it is intensely practiced, even renowned Christians still believe in the existence of Osu. Those who are stigmatised as outcasts face violations of their human rights, including denial of property rights and physical harm. Even though movements and individuals are advocating for the abolition of the outcaste system in Nigeria, the effort to eradicate it is always opposed, because the caste's stigma is rooted in traditional and deeply ingrained beliefs.

Hence, this paper examines the domination and influence of Igbo culture on the Osu-caste and the effects of its resistance. To establish this, a literary context analysis will be done to ascertain the extent to which the Osu-caste is portrayed in the text, *Otaelo*, and how it affected the characters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Marxism as its theoretical framework. Marxist theory, rooted in the works of Kari Marx and Friedrich Engels, provides a critical framework for analysing the economic and social structures that perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation. This framework illuminates the dehumanisation and the ill-treatment that the outcaste victims experience.

In the Marxist study, outcasts are not merely individuals who fall outside the norms of society but are emblematic of deeper structural inequalities within their community. Antonio Gramsci (1975) offers insight into the experiences of the outcast, emphasising how cultural domination and influence contribute to their

mistreatment. The outcasts are often subject to ideologies that portray them as deviant or undesirable. Marxists argue that addressing the plight of the outcaste is not merely about fundamentally transforming the social and economic structures that produce and sustain marginalisation. This transformative change involves rethinking discrimination and creating a more inclusive and equitable society that does not rely on the marginalisation of its members. This theory produces a critical perspective on the concept of the outcast, revealing how social structure, ideological narratives, and cultural hegemony contribute to their marginalisation.

CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE OF OSU-CASTE SYSTEM IN AHMED YERIMA'S *OTAELO*

The outcaste system traditionally places Osu individuals at the lowest rungs of Nigerian society, often regarded as servitude and minority or inferior due to their birth. Brooks (2024) posits that no one has the right to call anyone a minority. Any attempt by individuals classified as minority and inferior, especially those belonging to the osu-caste, to challenge the systematic injustice imposed upon them or to assert their rights is met with segregation, social ostracism, and profound psychological distress.

The societal rejection of the Osu-caste opinion is enforced through ostracism, where the society marginalises and isolates them and those who dare to break the caste norms. When an outcast fights against unfavourable treatments and seeks to assert his rights, he experiences formidable barriers fixed to social, political, and cultural dimensions. The society collectively and deliberately ensures that these barriers are faced by the outcast, their opinions are dismissed and actively opposed. This makes them feel unwanted, and it becomes challenging for them to effect a meaningful change within their community.

Ahmed Yerima recreates Shakespeare's *Othello* to dramatise the calamitous consequences of the Osu practice among the Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria and also address matters of cultural and socio-political concerns in Nigeria. Akorede (1993) asserts that the relevance of the dramatist is determined by the usefulness of the role he plays in the portrayal of the cultural and social realities of his people.

In *Otaelo*, the protagonist, Otaelo, is criminalised by Umuagu community, with the mystical support of Ala (a god) for an offence committed by his mother that ought to be overlooked. Otaelo faces social stigma and ostracism because of the osu-caste system, which led to his isolation within his community. He experiences intense pressure to conform to traditional roles, which deepens his personal internal conflict. When he begins to question the system, he encounters confrontation and

denial from others who uphold the caste hierarchy, challenging his beliefs and reinforcing the rigid social boundaries he struggles to break.

The play condemns the issues of static cultural beliefs, poor identity, and ill-treatment meted out to Osu-casts in Igbo society. In the examples below, we are made to see Ekekwe and Agbo's expressions of how Otaelo is seen in the community. Their comments reveal the people's deep-seated prejudice against Otaelo and the negative perception he endures.

Ekekwe: ... An Osu wants to marry a Princess, when the law of the land forbids him to even dream of marriage to a slave (p.19).

Agbo: An Osu is worse than the lowest animals.

So I was taught, and brought up to know.

Then why did the fools the Igwe dance to stupidity?

First, Osu protected by his god Ala killed the wild beast,

A duty he was created to do, for he is sacrifice.

For that the madness of gratitude flowed, he got a tittle,

Otaelo, an abomination as it was (p. 45).

The people of Umuagu persist and reinforce negative perceptions and a lack of empathy toward Otaelo. This is because they believe in spiritual consequences and curses associated with interacting or sympathising with Osu. These fears are deeply ingrained and reinforce the social barriers.

Otaelo is ostracised by some members of Umuagu. He is denied friends and companions, and he can only marry another Osu. The play presents instances of hatred against Osus due to absurd cultural beliefs. The protagonist Otaelo questions why he is belittled in a society to which he belongs. This is captured in the following excerpt:

Otaelo: No? (Pause.) But what did I do that the air I breathe must also remain thick with shame? (p. 41).

Otaelo gets the response to his queries from Ebuka, his adopted father, that though he (Otaelo) lives in the society as the people of Umuagu and breathes the same air, his type (Osu) is regarded as worthless in the society.

Cultural Hegemony in *Otaelo* created class stratification, jealousy, cultural criticism, manipulation, and destruction for some characters. The play highlights the impact of dominance and social prejudice in Nigeria, reflecting the complexities and conflicts of the Nigerian society.

Political cultural dominance and resistance are portrayed through the interactions and ambitions of characters like Otaelo and Agbo. Otaelo, a charismatic and ambitious military general, experiences political and cultural dominance through

strategic manipulation of societal norms and values. Although Otaelo resists Agbo and those who were against him, he navigates the intricate web of political alliances and rivalries, using his military prowess to gain influence.

Otaelo's rise to power is also his ability to resist, understand, and manipulate the people's cultural dynamics within the society.

Otaelo: ... Your eyes will learn to let your brain think first before they pour tears I climb the ladder of glory in three days' time. I want to excel, not to be brought down by a weeping bull. My spirit no longer feels safe in your hands. Now, leave me! (p. 39).

Otaelo: ... I hold my Chi in my hands, and not even Ala can stop me now. Go, old man. Go to your people. Tell them that I have left them. Tell them that I raise my head above their shame. Now go! (p. 41-42).

Otaelo leverages Umuagu traditional beliefs and social hierarchies to consolidate his authority. Agbo, the antagonist, and some other chiefs, like Obidigbo and Ekekwe, represent a counterforce to Otaelo's progression in the community. An example of opposition is expressed in the excerpt that follows:

Obidigbo: Indeed, there is madness in the air. What was an Osu doing in the palace, before the Igwe, in the first place? (p.18)

Otaelo always opposed everything done by some of his community members. They see Otaelo as a threat and an odd man in the land. Otaelo is perceived as spiritually impure and externally inferior. His community members exclude him from everything and dismiss his idea out of fear. No matter Otaelo's contributions, he faces structural stigma, is barred from participation, labelled unclean, and labelled a threat to tradition. This rejection triggers deep psychological trauma in the Osu. Interestingly, Otaelo uses political figures to reshape the cultural norms and resist their dominance. Due to the Osu-caste system, Otaelo and Chinyere's (Igwe's daughter) relationship faces discrimination in a society bound by rigid cultural norms. Chinyere's friend, Nkechi, expresses her displeasure in the following excerpt when she heard that Chinyere was about to get married to Otaelo, who is an Osu in the Umuagu kingdom, and the Igwe swore with his *ofor* as a confirmation that the marriage would take place. Nkechi criticises the idea and exclaims:

Nkechi: The Igwe by his *ofor* now swore and asked
what Otaelo wanted as reward for his bravery,
and he spoilt it all by asking for your hand in

marriage. He had no right to do this to you.
Ewoo! (p. 24)

The whole community opposes the marriage between Otaelo and Chinyere, except Igwe, who vows to give Otaelo anything he asks for when he defeats their enemies. The following excerpt reveals this: "I am to be honoured. I won the bet we had" (p. 40). Otaelo firmly complains to Ebuka why his right should not be deprived of him. To Otaelo, he won the battle, so he has the right to marry Chinyere, and no one has the right to break the agreement.

This Osu-caste, deeply rooted in Igbo culture, has a great negative influence on Otaelo; belonging to the Osu-caste, he faced discrimination and unfairness due to his lineage being associated with ancestral ties to deities. Evidence of Ebuka's worries about Otaelo's ill-treatment is illustrated in the following expression:

Ebuka: I heard, son. (Pause.) But what are you doing
here amongst vultures waiting for you to fall. Why
have they built your hut so far away from theirs as
if you reek of stench? why do they treat you like a
leper and yet call you a king? Why, son? Gwanum (p. 40).

The people of Umuagu see the great achievements Otaelo has brought to the land, yet they appreciate him but deny him the benefits in the community. Chinyere hails from the freeborn caste, considered noble and untainted by Osu status. The members of the community strongly kick against Chinyere accepting Otaelo's (an Osu) marriage proposal, because it means that they are associating themselves with a lower social status and losing their social standing and the community's cultural norms.

Even though Otaelo struggles to make the marriage remain, the people resist the union vehemently, fearing social exclusion and stigma. The couple's love endured many struggles against entrenched cultural norms and discrimination, which were simply based on their caste backgrounds, which eventually resulted in the couple's death.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how dominance and resistance are represented in Ahmed Yerima's *Otaelo*. The dominance and resistance are depicted in the context of Igbo society through the characters' struggles for power, identity, and cultural preservation. The play highlights the tensions between traditional authority and individual freedom, as well as the impact of cultural imperialism on Igbo society. The character of Otaelo, a powerful and proud warrior, embodies resistance against

the dominant forces of cultural erasure. His determination to erase the Igbo traditions and customs of the outcast system in the face of overwhelming oppression is a testament to the resilience of the Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria.

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