

# Chapter Forty-Nine



## MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS ON STAGE: TESS ONWUEME'S *SHAKARA: THE DANCE HALL QUEEN*

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### **Introduction**

One can say with considerable justification that there is something superbly magisterial about Tess Onwueme's handling of the mother and daughter relationship in her book *Shakara: The Dance Hall Queen* (2000). For one thing, the playwright has used the medium of drama to make profound statements about parenting and society at large. For another, Onwueme is a mother and one could not ask for a more qualified author to explore the dynamics of our family, and by extension, our national life. In pursuing this concern, Onwueme has merely extended the line of moral literature already drawn by her literary colleague Chukwuemeka Ike in his book *Our Children are Coming* (1990). What these two Nigerian authors have in common is the belief that there is a lack of adequate attention to the welfare of youth in contemporary society.

As a matter of fact, this concern has explored the manifestations of the generation gap between the old and the young; the predominance of communication gaps between parents and their children, between teachers and students, between university authorities and their undergraduates as well as between governments and the youth 'characterized by the latter's restless disposition and seemingly

impetuous revolutionary ideas' (Emenyonu, 112). In *Shakara: The Dance Hall Queen*, Onwueme writes with authenticity on the psychology and crisis of youth development in Nigerian society. It is becoming very clear to anybody with two eyes that modern vices like sexual abuse, drug addiction, debauchery, hedonism and shenanigans have become rife in modern society and, at the same time, they are a very crucial phase of Nigerian life which is often misunderstood and mishandled by writers of lesser talents.

Aside thematic preoccupation, *Shakara: The Dance Hall Queen* is a play that draws from classical, traditional and modern techniques of drama as well as African folklore and the culture of ancestor worship. Here, one is only reminded of the theme of 'conflict' most prevalent in early African writing. But the conflict in this play is at several levels. There is the conflict between tradition and modernity, there is another between the rich and the poor and the conflict between the inner self. Onwueme has such a telling way of presenting these conflicts that all of society is drawn into this drama and like the famous line in Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, the audience is left pondering: 'What are you laughing/looking at? You are laughing/looking at yourselves'.

## **MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN DIALOGUE**

The plot of the play revolves around four female characters namely: seventeen-year-old friends Shakara and Dupe, their respective mothers Omesiete and Madam Kofo. As the action begins it is very clear that Dupe and Shakara would have been happier if they had the opportunity of swapping their mothers. Madam Kofo, Dupe's mother, is a rich and oppressive woman who has acquired her wealth from drug-dealing and a broad touch of the criminal. So much engrossed is Madam Kofo with making-money that she scarcely has time for her only daughter, Dupe. Dupe is unhappy and would have preferred Omesiete who is warm and caring. Omesiete, Shakara's mother, is a wretched woman working on Madam Kofo's weeds farm for a pittance. But she is a true mother, kind, strong and a nurturer of life. It for these qualities that Dupe admires and loves her Shakara her daughter hates her for her innocence and honesty. It is this dual plot that sets the tone for the rest of the action of the play.

Madam Kofo's quest for money and her frequent business absences gave the two friends (Dupe and Shakara) the opportunity to go clubbing, to drink, smoke and even bring men to her estate. When she discovers what is going on she explodes and from this moment the denouement ensues rapidly. Dupe is angry and runs away from the estate. Madam Kofo comes up with another ingenious plan to destroy Shakara's family. She visits Omesiete with the proposition that she should personally smuggle drugs to the United Kingdom. But Omesiete declined insisting that she is contented in her poverty. But Shakara had overheard Madam Kofo's proposition and followed her to her estate offering to take on the mission herself. But events turned out badly as the man who was Madam Kofo's confidant and protector (Uncle Shanka) also doubled as a police mole. Consequently, there is a raid on Madam Kofo's residence during which the Drug Law Agents and the Police discovered a gargantuan amount of drugs stashed in her house. She is arrested and handed a life sentence while Shakara gets a jail term. Madam Kofo could not bear this sudden drop and she slumped and died. At the end of the day, Shakara is forgiven and it is expected that both She and Dupe will live a good life with Omesiete, the good mother.

It is quite probable that one of Onwueme's concerns in *Shakara: The Dance Hall Queen* is to show the polarity of existence. This concern is evident at the early stages of the play when we encounter Shakara and Dupe in the first act. As the two engage in erotic and provocative dance in Gondola Night Club, they are also consciously aware that they are stuck together. This feeling of togetherness is intensified by the realization that the two girls differ both in outlook and their desires. Though they can jive and flirt together, Dupe prefers the calm and loving Omesiete, while Shakara would rather have the wild and emotionally distant Madam Kofo. This kind of polarity is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's three Absurdist plays. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, we have Vladimir and Estragon; Pozzo and Lucky, in *Endgame*, we have Didi and Gogo; Nagg and Nell, in Kapp's *Last Tape*, we have Hamm and Clov; Kapp's present voice and Past voice. We find parallels also in Irene Salami's pairing in *The Queen Sisters* (2002) where two sisters, Ubi and Ewere represent these polarities. At a deeper level, all the three dramatists Onwueme, Beckett and Salami intend to characterize human

existence in terms of these polarities. But most importantly, it is all these polarities that bring Dupe and Shakara together as soulmates. These same polarities are also conveyed in the proverbial wisdom of the dog when Dupe intones: 'Those who have buttocks don't really know how to use them. But those of us who don't, strain so hard to perch on our tails'. This as much as to say that where there is load there is no rope to tie, and where there is a rope there is no load. It is from these polarities that Dupe goes ahead to point out all that is wrong with her mother:

For what? Just because she gave birth to me? Where was she when I needed her to nurse my wound? Gone! Nursing her precious weeds. Gone for her business, Career woman! So, what does she expect me to do? Fly or Freeze? Ha, my friends! Love's not like tap water that you can turn on and turn off at will, you know?

No! Like her mother, the Queen mother said to me one day, 'Love is a two-way traffic of partners traveling together' (Onwueme, 14).

In Parenting, a feeling generally exists that the relationship between a mother and daughter is unique and special because the bond between the mother and daughter is strong. But this thinking is not wholly true because there are times when the relationship between mother and daughter gets sour or is strained and complicated. This happens quite often when the mother is a single parent. And this is the kind of thing we encounter in *Shakara: The Dance Hall Queen*. Truth is that the relationship a girl shares with her mother can seriously affect her self-esteem, her self-worth, her sense of identity and even her ability to make friends. The precise character of Dupe is endowed with the capacity to censure in a constructive manner:

Now people, tell me. Who's a mother? The one who gives birth, or the one who gives care? To me, Mother is 'The Care-Giver'. And what about you? What is mother to you? Who's a Mother to you? Tell me, tell me. This question's nagging-choking me. And I will not rest until I find the answer! So, help me friends, where do I go from here? Until my queen, the real mother comes, I will be waiting. Yes waiting (Onwueme, 14).

A proper understanding of Dupe's model of a mother can hardly be

reached without the realization that Omesiete is her nanny, care-giver and nurturer. Truth is that Madam Kofo (Dupe's biological mother) has no time for her and her emotions. She only has time to pursue dirty lucre. It is instructive to note that when a girl is in her teenage years, she usually looks up to her mother. In other words, her mother is her role model and she wishes to be like her. The teenage girl gets her perfect image of a woman from her mother. But again, many things can disrupt the relationship between mother and daughter and one of them is neglect, abandonment or distance. By the time we encounter Madam Kofo in Act Three, she is rude, oppressive and cruel. She barks instructions at her head-laborer Omesiete:

Well, Missis-what-do-you-call-yourself?... If I were you, I'd get more serious with the job. Tending every seed in that farm like my newest-born child. You hear me? Or be ready to move out, now! You hear me? You understand? I'm disappointed, very disappointed. I appointed you head-farmer because you were jobless. I employed you for your past record.... I mean your nanny service....caring for my daughter. But see how ungrateful you have become. Ruining my business. And ....trying to take my child away from me (Onwueme, 35).

There are four things in this extract which reveal character and motivation as well as advance the action of the play. The first is that we come face-to-face with Madam Kofo's tyranny and insensitivity. The second is her admission that Omesiete is a caring nanny. The third is her accusation that Omesiete wants to snatch her daughter from her. Lastly, the extract brings to the fore the presence of capitalist forces in society. In this regard, the relationship between Madam Kofo and Omesetie is based on exploitation. Madam Kofo is the employer with economic power and Omesetie is the employee or wage slave. In such a relationship, Madam Kofo will continue to grow richer and Omesetie will continue to grow poorer. This kind of cruel and unjust relationship can easily give rise to conflict. By the time we meet Madam and her daughter, Dupe in Act Six, we are in a better position to make conclusions about her. She is so engrossed in a telephone conversation with her friends and business associates.

The conversations largely border on how much profit she is going to make, how much quantity of weeds she is going to supply in the United States and United Kingdom, who and who is to be bribed to open doors for her international travel and the fact that her 'Precious weeds' is gaining acceptance and recognition all over the world. The first time we see Dupe on stage with her mother she is desirous to have a heart-to-heart talk with her. She would like to talk to her mother like a daughter and mother. Most importantly, Dupe would want to know who her father is. In a word, there are many things Dupe would have loved to share with her mother as a girl. But the woman shuts her out. Instead, she bribes her with gifts and other material comforts. Next moment Madam Kofo is out of the house attending to another business call. Unknown to Madam Kofo Dupe is all grown. As a matter of fact, she tells her mother bluntly that 'I am not a child anymore'.

She is demanding for her identity, her self-worth, her self-esteem and even her independence. And this is point where Madam Kofo errs lamentably. She has failed to realize that the greatest gift you can give your daughter while she is young is your time. She has failed to understand that a good mother is expected to take her time off her busy schedule to focus and spend some time with her daughter to let her know that she is of great value as an individual. A good mother is also expected to make her daughter feel special by sharing her joys and sorrows with her, her failures and successes and even her secrets. More than that, a good mother should involve her daughter in household chores from an early age and that way the girl will develop a sense of responsibility. Madam Kofo seems to be oblivious of all these.

Besides, Dupe is seventeen years old. This means that she has reached adolescence, the most difficult phase of a girl's life. At this period, Dupe is not only trying to find her identity but to cope with her physical and emotional changes. Left alone, her friend, Shakara becomes her only comforter and confidant. As a matter of fact, the two are soulmates. Now, Gondola Night Club and the many other glammers of city life beckon. The two yielded. And of course, there is Prince, Dupe's boyfriend, always at hand to provide company, alcohol and other things of the flesh. And by the time Madam Kofo realizes what has been going on inside her house, a huge amount of damage has been done. But even

at that, Dupe gives a proportionate part of the blame to her mother as she prepares to break away from her.

Won't you let me have my peace? All my life you have brought me nothing but pain. I have no mother. I have no father. You don't love me. Only your money. And the ones that love me, you hurt and don't want to see. You will pay dearly for this! I am leaving (Onwueme 100).

At the end of it all, Madam Kofo admits that it is all her fault. 'Please, my Angel. I couldn't help myself. I was running'. She pleads to Omesiete for pardon and to take care of Dupe, her angel. But in all these, Madam Kofo is revealed as a mother devoid of care, love and affection. She is a woman who pursues money to the detriment of her daughter's upbringing. When juxtaposed with her daughter Dupe, Madam Kofo will pale into insignificance because she is a woman who has accepted wealth as her religion and money as her god. Her daughter Dupe comes across as a more intelligent and convincing character. She appreciates the emotion of love and she seems to know the dynamics of human values and relationships. The audience identifies with her right from the beginning because she is in search of an identity and self-esteem. She is also in search of love. Where she finds them does not matter. What matters is that what she cannot get a home, she gets abroad.

Like mentioned elsewhere, Onwueme's characterization is anchored on the polarity of human existence. Dupe's friend and our heroine Shakara, on the other hand, is a rebel through and through. She reminds one of Sophocle's Antigone and William Shakespeare's ten most powerful female characters. But this polarity is also very pronounced in Irene Salami's play *The Queen Sisters* (2002) which tells the story of two sisters, Ubi and Ewere. The two sisters are historical figures. Against her wish, Ubi is married off to the Oba of Benin. Since it is not her wish to remain in the harem as one of the Oba's numerous wives, Ubi becomes wicked and aggressive. She is rude, bold and arrogant. Her co-wives and Benin chiefs find these attributes very irksome and disturbing. The only way to put Ubi's insolence and arrogance in check is to bring her sister (Ewere) to join her in the harem as co-wife. But Ewere's kindness and humility sharply contrasts Ubi's wickedness and

arrogance. Courteous and respectful, Ewere becomes popular and well-loved. Her jealous sister (Ubi) plots to kill the Oba in a manner similar to the intrigues of Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The attempt failed and Ubi is chased out of the harem because her co-wives discover that she bed-wets. With Ubi's departure, peace returns to the harem.

In presenting us with two contrasting characters, Salami raises two fundamental issues that are common in human life: good and bad; vice and virtue. In the first place, Ubi may appear mean and evil, but she has another side that is worthy of emulation. She is outspoken and candid. In this regard, she is a major mouthpiece for the African woman. Ubi is a woman who wants to wave her banner of freedom. It is for this reason that she demands to have part of the kingdom. Her aggressiveness, therefore, should not be misconstrued to mean evil. In fact, we can make an exaggeration that these two sisters invariably represent two brands of feminism the radical and the accommodationists. In putting the play on the stage, therefore, Salami's passionate concern is to suggest that these two opposing qualities are necessary for women's development. On the other hand, Ewere's docility and humility are held up as virtues worthy of emulation. She is the very epitome of kindness; she radiates love. Consequently, she becomes a favorite of the Oba as well as her co-wives. She has a lot of patience. She knows fully well that patience does not grow sour, no matter how long you keep it. At the end of the day, she is greatly rewarded. Virtue triumphs over evil.

Whereas, Ewere is docile, calm and quiet, Ubi is fearless, self-willed and bold. In juxtaposing Ubi and Ewere together, the two characters are meant to represent the polarities of human existence. Ubi and Ewere are therefore meant to serve as a form of inspiration. It is a historical fact that the two sisters were married by the Oba of Benin. It is also true that one of the sisters (Ubi) was recalcitrant and restive while the other was humble, calm and gentle. In the historical sense, therefore, Salami is using the two sisters to make contemporary statements about the African woman. The statement is a strange blending where good and evil, vice and virtues are curiously mingled together. What is clear for now is that Salami and Onwueme are relying on these polarities not just to realize their characters but also to make contemporary statements



about our family and national life. Besides, Onwueme's *Shakara* draws comparison with Sophocles' *Antigone*. A word or two about the play would be insightful.

After the death of Oedipus, who is the protagonist in Sophocles' play of the same title, two of his sons, Antigone's brothers, fought in a war to control Thebes. They ended up both dying in the war and Creon, their maternal uncle, is now king of Thebes. During the war, Creon had taken sides with Eteocles and thus gave him a proper burial. But the other brother, Polynices, Creon said is a traitor and decreed that his corpse should be left on the surface of the earth to rot and be eaten by animals. Besides, Creon decreed that anyone who tried to give Polynices burial rites would be put to death. This is the point where Antigone (Polynice's sister) comes in. The basic plot of the story therefore revolves around the conflict between Antigone's family principles and religious traditions and Creon's embodiment of the state and its authority. Antigone and Ismene are Oedipus' daughters and sisters to Eteocles and Polynices and when Creon declared that Polynices corpse should be left to the vultures and dogs, Antigone is fully prepared to defy such an edict.

In other words, Antigone is stubborn and self-willed. She is also principled and is willing to stand by, and even die, for her principles. Her sister, Ismene is her foil. She is afraid of death and the laws of the state. Even though she has sisterly affection for Polynices she will not go as far as to risk her own life for her brother. Later, however, when she has more resolve, it is too late for anything to be done for her brother. Only Antigone remains a consistent fatalist. From the beginning of the play to the end, Antigone is consistent in her acceptance of death. Apparently, such a characterization is similar to *Shakara* and *Dupe* and in their own case, the two girls are bold enough to throw all cares to the wind, violate certain societal norms by bringing a man to their mother's house for example. The one attribute shared by all these characters is rebellion.

Again, some critics have argued that the play *Antigone* seem to have two tragic characters. But this view is not wholly true. The king, Creon, has several of the qualities that constitute a tragic character but he does not possess all the necessary traits of a tragic hero. It is Antigone, who is a woman that seems to possess all the traits required of

a tragic character and a feminine heroine. For one thing, Antigone is a good person with a better understanding of other people than Ismene, her sister. For, another, Antigone is principled, reliable and constant in behavior and her beliefs. Besides, she is unrelenting, resolute and consistent. It is small wonder that she willingly accepts the choice of death. Her strong resolve leads us to a discussion of the theme of challenge of male authority embodied by her. This very theme is developed up to this climatic point in the exchange between Creon and Antigone.

**Creon:** And you, Antigone,  
You with your head hanging – do you  
confess this thing?

**Antigone:** I do. I deny nothing

**Creon:** Tell me, tell me briefly:  
Had you heard my proclamation  
touching this matter?

**Antigone:** It was public. Could I help hearing it?

**Creon:** And yet you dared defy the law.

**Antigone:** I dared.

It was not God's proclamation. That final justice  
That rules the world below makes no such laws.  
Your edict, king, was strong,  
But all your strength is weakness itself against  
The immortal unrecorded laws of God.  
They are not merely now: they were, and shall be  
Operative forever, beyond man utterly.  
I knew I must die, even without your decree:  
I am only mortal. And if I must die,  
Surely this is no hardship: can anyone  
Living, as I live, with evil all about me,  
Think Death less than a friend? This death of Mine  
Is of no importance; but if I had left my brother  
Lying in death unburied, I should have suffered.  
Now I do not (Sophocles qtd. in Jacobus, 72).

Antigone is quoted at length because her rebellion is similar to that

of Shakara. When we meet Shakara with her mother, she rejects her real name Nwaebuni. Instead, she tells her mother that her name is Shakara. She has chosen to live on the streets and in night clubs. She tells her mother the kind of life she wants to live.

Say whatever you like. I know myself...where I want to be. Those ones you label riff-raffs are the best family I ever have to give me hope. They crowned me. Named me the Dance Hall Queen. Without them, what else do I have to my name? Nothing. And yes, my name is "Sha-ka-ra! Dance Hall Queen". I like me. I love myself (Onwueme, 19).

Shakara has made her choice and she is courageous to tell her mother frontally. She has no respect for family the same way Antigone has no respect for the state. In the case of Antigone, she represents the highest ideals of life namely: courage and respect for the gods. She believes that the law of the gods which dictates that a body should be given proper burial rights is more important than the law of the king. Creon, as king, becomes very angry that a woman has questioned his sovereignty and condemns Antigone to death. In this regard, Creon has refused to compromise or humble himself before a woman. He would prefer to be insulted by a man and not a woman. For Shakara, she rebels against family making it abundantly clear that her mother has no hold over and she has the right and she has chosen the kind of life she wants to live. She also rebels against society. She is not interested in school because both the law and the school favor only the rich. And this explains why she would wish to have Madam Kofo the rich woman as her mother instead of the long suffering Omesiete.

Taken together, both Shakara and Antigone demonstrate feminist strength and thoughts in several ways. For Antigone, she challenges a powerful male establishment headed by her own uncle, Creon. We find a situation where Creon is devoted to his laws, while Antigone is loyal to her beliefs. We also find a situation where Antigone, as a woman, is acting out of obligation and duty to her family, the gods and her conscience. That Antigone did not run from her death sentence suggests an inherent bravery and obstinacy which the chorus recognizes before her departure to death. For Shakara, she challenges

her mother directly and refused to listen to wise counsel from her mother. Shakara has no respect for her mother because she is poor. She holds her contemptible and looks at her with outright disdain. The similarities between Shakara and Antigone are obvious and they only remind one of other powerful and strong female characters in Shakespeare's plays. Since this trait in Shakara is crucial and relevant to the development of the entire action of the play, it is worth citing some of these examples. It is also my conviction that these examples will throw more light on the issue of the relationship between parents and their children.

In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the vain and foolish Lear decides to retire as king and give all his lands and money to his three daughters. But the portion of land and money to be given to each daughter is dependent on their declarations of how much they love him. The two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, become hypocritical in their statements. The last daughter, Cordelia, frankly told the father that she loves him according to her duty as a daughter and the bond between a parent and child. Enraged, king Lear banishes her and tells her two suitors, both princesses, that whoever wants to marry her can have her but without the dowry they had been expecting. The Duke of Burgundy declines but the king of France agreed to take Cordelia as his wife because she has shown great courage by standing up to her father. Later in the play, the other two sisters cruelly rejected Lear and he is imprisoned in a dungeon. During this trying period, it is Cordelia who provided aid for her father. It is also during this period that Lear knew the bond between a father and daughter. In all these, women are portrayed as chattels but Cordelia stands out as an uncommonly courageous daughter with great strength and determination.

In William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, we are also confronted with the issue of marriage and the wisdom of women. Portia is the only daughter of a rich father who is dead leaving her to manage a wealthy estate. But before his death, Portia's father had stipulated in his will that all those wealthy and powerful suitors who come to woo Portia must choose from three caskets, one of which contains Portia's picture. At the end of the day, it is Bassanio who made the right choice. But he borrowed money for the journey from a friend (Antonio) who in turn had

borrowed from Shylock-- a money lender. When a judge is required by the Duke of Venice to try the case Shylock has brought against Antonio for his inability to repay the loan at the stipulated time, Portia disguised as a famous young judge shows extraordinarily qualities in delivering her judgement. Portia's power lies in her wisdom, recognized by all those who do not know that she is a woman. In the profoundest sense, Portia, though a woman, demonstrates superior intelligence and wisdom than all men.

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is presented as a very strong woman. She certainly exercises power even over her husband, Macbeth, in the first half of the play by encouraging him to murder Duncan. She uses her sexuality and flattery, she taunts him and mocks his lack of courage. In other words, she appeals to the sense of obligation towards her. She comes in more strongly as he wavers and finally he kills Duncan. What is interesting about the character of Lady Macbeth is the fact that she seems like a strong woman but psychologically she is not strong enough to deal with her guilt. At the end of the day, their marriage falls apart and they become estranged. She suffers terrible nightmares and finally commits suicide. Lady Macbeth comes across as an odious character full of evil but she is strong enough to probe a man into action.

*Much Ado about Nothing*, is a remarkable play in which Shakespeare intertwines an ancient mythological story with an ultra-modern love story. Beatrice is a feisty, independent woman and everyone around her seems to know that fact. She is also fearless and bold. But she is highly intelligent and, of course, is a very good example of a feminist. She is independent; there is no question of her being told who to marry. She will always have her way and do what she pleases. This is the point where she resembles Shakara. But in all these, Beatrice has contempt for men. She particularly dislikes, Benedick, a soldier who visits Messina regularly and stays in her uncle's house. Ironically, these two seeming enemies are tricked by their friends into falling in love. The play ends with the couple confirmed in their love and their decision to marry. We can infer with considerable justification that Beatrice is a forerunner of modern feminism.

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, we encounter one of Shakespeare's strongest female characters. She is a very young girl and a

commodity for her father, a rich merchant, who is preparing to trade her for a connection with a noble family. Juliet's father is actually in the middle of that process just as Juliet is falling in love with Romeo. All through the play, Juliet has only one thing on her mind – to marry Romeo. But Romeo's family and that of Juliet are longtime enemies as a result of an ancient grudge. Without telling her father the reason, Juliet refuses to marry the Count Paris. Juliet's father swears at her, threatens her and even strikes her. But Juliet is undaunted. She does not give way and desperate for a way out without giving up her love for Romeo, she seeks the advice of Friar Lawrence. The Friar's solution is that Juliet should take a drug that will make her appear dead. She will be placed in a tomb and Romeo will come and take her away. Initially, she is terrified of waking in a tomb stuffed with corpses but she takes the drug. Although the love between Juliet and Romeo could not bear fruits as a result of family animosities, Juliet is a female of enormous determination and courage and is, without doubt, one of Shakespeare's strongest characters. She reminds one of Shakara in this regard.

In *Othello*, Desdemona shows great strength at the beginning of the play even though she submits passively to her husband as he strangles her to death at the end. At the beginning, we find that Desdemona's father has attempted to stop her marriage to Othello- the Moor. Her father, like Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, has ideas about who should be her husband. But Desdemona, just like Juliet, has already fallen in love with a black man, though her father is strongly opposed to it. The similarities between these two plays are obvious. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the two lovers fall in love against the wishes of their parents. It is the same thing we find in *Othello*. Again, in both plays the lovers marry secretly without their parent's consent. In *Othello*, Desdemona, while addressing her father easily comes across as a strong feminist, bold, independent and capable of making personal choices. Desdemona damns all consequences and tells her father directly that she prefers her husband. Thus, Desdemona is an exciting character who has enormous strength to say things like that before powerful men.

In *As You Like it*, Rosalind is the central character. All through the play Rosalind is disguised as a man until at the end. Through this method, Rosalind is able to organize everyone to fit in with her needs

and desires. Her aim is to turn the man she wants to marry into someone who can match her qualities and be as strong as she is. It is also through this technique that Rosalind demonstrates her feminine strength and prowess.

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola finds herself shipwrecked off the beach of Illyria and discovers she has lost her twin brother in the wreck. Viola disguised herself as a man and finds employment as a servant in the household of the Duke. Disguised as a man, Viola has the freedom to move around without a chaperon. Her ability to adopt herself to her circumstances in spite of her female upbringing where she has been protected by men and all decision about her have been made by men, is an indication of her female strength. It is not only that adaptation that suggests her strength but the ability to manipulate her circumstance for her own desired outcome, which is to marry the Duke.

There is another female character that features prominently in Shakespeare's Histories. Her name is Margaret of Anjou. She is there in *Henry VI* parts 1, 2, 3 and *Richard III*. The historical Queen Margaret was the wife consort of King Henry VI of England. In Shakespeare's tetralogy (four plays on one subject), Henry is a weak king and a meek and mild man. On the other hand, Margaret is a ruthless, ambitious, intelligent woman who dominates Henry completely. Margaret becomes involved in the power games that are going on around her and takes her enemies head on. She thrives in a men's world of politics and war, and even enters the battle field in *Henry VI Part 3* and stabs the Duke of York. In *Richard III*, she acts like a prophet, cursing the nobles for their responsibility for the downfall of the house of Lancaster. All of her prophecies come true: the nobles are betrayed in one way or another and they end up being executed. Margaret is therefore a strong, fearless and daring female character.

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we come face-to-face with feminine strength reminiscent of Cordelia, Juliet and Desdemona. In the play, Hermia rather than marry Demetrius, the man her father has chosen for her, runs away with Lysander, the man she loves. Her father begs Duke Theseus to use the full weight of the law to make her comply and she is told that if she does not marry Demetrius her punishment will be death. Like other strong female characters in

Shakespeare, Hermia stands up to her father, and even the most powerful man in the world. She does this with logical argument and remains calm while doing it. She then courageously runs away with her love. Hermia's strength lies in her calm assertiveness and her determination to control her own destiny rather than hand it over to the men around her. Now, it could easily be discerned that what all these female characters in Shakespeare's plays have in common with Shakara is boldness, fearlessness and the ability to take their destiny in their own hands.

Back to our heroine, Shakara. It is very clear that she is obstinate, stubborn and wayward. It is also clear that she has no respect for family values. She looks at her biological mother Omesiete as a wretched and timid woman who has chosen the path of poverty. She has demonstrated abundantly that she is not willing to follow her mother on that path. Shakara has chosen to follow the path of success. If her mother and elder sister Kechi are going to Egypt, Shakara is going to Jerusalem. Shakara, the eavesdropper, overheard a proposition brought to her mother by Madam Kofo, her model of a mother. Thus, she left her family and offered herself to peddle drugs for Madam Kofo. Shakara has consistently refused to listen to her mother. She has also refused to listen to wise counsel. She has become the proverbial fly that refused to listen to advice and eventually follows the corpse to the grave.

As a matter of fact the following proverbs in the play foretells Shakara's downfall: "the fowl which refuses to listen hears inside the anus of the fowl", "the death that will kill someone doesn't ring a bell". As Madam Kofo prepares the young and naïve Shakara for first trip abroad, the two are arrested; Madam Kofo is sentenced for life while Shakara gets a jail term. It is only then that the scales have fallen from Shakara's eyes. This is the moment of discovery for Shakara. This is also the moment of illumination. It is also the moment of recognition. It is at this point that the play *Shakara: The Dance Hall Queen*, wears all the trappings of tragedy. Shakara has recognized something of great importance hitherto unknown to her. Again, this very moment is reminiscent of Cesario revealing to Duke Orsino at the end of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* that he is really Viola, or the point when the fact of Iago's lying treachery dawns upon Othello in Shakespeare's



Othello. For Shakara, her discovery is conveyed in the following words:

Ma...Mother. Forgive me. I was wrong. I was wrong not to have listened to you. I am sorry, Mama. Mama. Kechi. Mama. Dupe. Everybody. Forgive.  
Pleeeeeaaase (Onwueme 144).

It is often said that 'reconciliation has two basic formulas namely: acknowledgement and contrition from the perpetrators and forgiveness from the victim' (Avruch and Vejarano 41). Here, Onwueme has chosen an ending usually associated with the peace process. Shakara has acknowledged her guilt. She owns up that she is wrong. At the same time, she is contrite. She is remorseful and asks for forgiveness. It is at this point that mother and daughter are reconciled. Omesiete holds her tightly rocking her in her arms and Kechi joins in as they encircle her.

Omesiete is a patient and kind mother who has chosen to bear life's vicissitudes with an equal mind. Her husband rejected her after many years of sweet promises on account that she bore only female children. Since then, life took a plunge. But she is undaunted. She has accepted her fate calmly and is determined to suffer in order to fend for her two daughters Kechi and Shakara. She is the head-laborer on Madam Kofo's plantation and would have to bear her insults calmly and with resignation. Patience is her middle name because she knows that if she rebels against her she would lose both her job and shelter. She is a firm believer in destiny and is prepared to open her palm and receive whatever Destiny will place inside it. We admire her mostly because of her refusal to bend in the midst of hunger and poverty.

In Act Eight, she turns down Madam Kofo's proposition that she should smuggle Cocaine and Indian hemp to the United Kingdom. In fact, Omesiete has all the attributes of a female heroine. Here again she calls to mind Isabella in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Isabella is a nun and a woman of honor and in her, we see the virtuous behavior of a chaste lady. She has immense love for her brother Claudius, but at the same time, she refused to be defiled by Angelo. Again, it seems quite probable that in drawing the character of Omesiete, Onwueme was influenced by Shakespeare's Isabella. Shakespeare in turn was

influenced by the older English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. Faced with the prospects of committing adultery, Chaucer's heroine, Dorigen, in his poem 'The Franklin's Tale', contemplates suicide as her only alternative and she reviews in her mind all the classical examples of women who had preferred death to dishonor. Among many classical examples she remembered the daughters of Phido, the Athenian, who leapt into a well, rather than be robbed of their maidenhead. She is reminded of the wife of Hasdrubal, at Carthage, who leapt into a burning fire to avoid rape by the Romans. She contemplates Lucrece of Rome who chose death rather than rape from Tarquins. There are also the seven virgins of Miletus who took their lives in order to preserve their virginity. At the end of the play, Isabella comes out as a heroine who compels the reader to appreciate the values of honor and mercy. Omesiete falls into the category of Isabella because of her principles and bold tenacity. She would rather die hungry than stain her reputation because of filthy lucre.

Omesiete is a single parent through no fault of hers. She is an intelligent mother, capable of providing traditional education through folklore especially, for her first daughter, Kechi. But over and above all, she is a mother who is consciously aware that parenting is no easy task and it takes the child and the parent to work together. Again, she insists children must help mothers to love and understand them. Her words:

Mothers are just ordinary human beings too. Not super humans. What set them apart from others, though, is their dogged strength and courage to persevere against all odds. Like a reed in the tide, often times, they are forced to bend and sway this way and that way, without breaking...Ah children! Don't you know that love is a two-way traffic? Don't you think sometimes you make it difficult for parents to love?...You children must help mothers to love you. You think parenting is easy? What you need to know is that every child is different. What works for one may not work for another. Parenting? It's the school we mothers go to learn from trial and error (Onwueme, 59-60).

Here, Omesiete is on the pulpit delivering a sermon on motherhood. Three things in this excerpt are worthy of attention. In the first place, Omesiete draws attention to the difficulties and challenges associated with motherhood. From this position, she turns to the children urging them to realize that it is also their duty to offer

themselves to training and proper upbringing. Finally, she drops a cautionary note for parents to the effect that children have different emotional, physical and psychological make-ups. In the most profound sense, Omesiete is asking all mothers to realize that it is their duty to educate their children about different aspects of life. It is the duty of the mother to teach her daughter how to carry herself in the society and how to walk into life.

Perhaps, as a result of her experience with her second daughter, Shakara, Omesiete is not blind to the fact that motherhood is a daunting task. And this explains why she is asking children to make themselves amenable. At the end of it all, both parents and children must be working together in an environment of love and understanding. Later as she continues her conversation with Kechi her first daughter, Omesiete concludes that 'children are the best teachers of parents'. This paradoxical philosophy derives from William Wordsworth, the English poet who puts forward the argument that 'the child is father of the man'. Omesiete is right in the sense that childhood is the beginning of manhood. This is as much as to say that the qualities of all adults are derived from childhood. If we accept this logic, then we may conclude that in this play, Madam Kofo comes to grief because of her refusal to listen to her child, Dupe. Similarly, Shakara is given a jail term because she is deaf to wise counsel from her mother, Omesiete. In the final analysis, good parenting is a two-way traffic where daughters and mothers are expected to come together, sharing in their joys and agonies in their griefs and ecstasies.

## **Conclusion**

Adolescence is a crucial difficult phase in a girl's development. During this period, the girl needs advice, she needs love and respect as well. In the play *Shakara: The Dance Hall Queen*, Mama Kofo does not seem to understand this and the result is a major catastrophe. She slumps and dies. Omesietè comes across as a model of motherhood but in spite all her efforts, her second daughter, Shakara, has chosen to work for Madam Kofo because she wants a quick escape from her shabby roots. She ends up with a jail term because of her recalcitrance. It is a queer mixture of good and evil. The good mother does not have a good

child. The bad mother has a good child but loses her to the city because she has not time for her affections.

Tess Onwueme has demonstrated very clearly that life could be so ironic. But in the midst of irony, she calls for a synergy between children and their parents. I have copiously provided examples from other dramatists especially Sophocles, William Shakespeare, Thomas Beckett and Irene Salami to draw attention to characterization and the polarity of existence. All my examples are meant to show that in drama, more than any other genre of literature, characterization is rooted in the logic of motivation and reaction. In this regard, Onwueme and Salami have benefited from the older Shakespeare. It is left to be said that Onwueme is very original and has turned her genius to highlighting the dignity in our folkways and oral heritage as evident in a plethora of proverbs and other folk materials in the play.

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