

# INTERROGATING THE OSU CASTE SYSTEM IN JUDE OGU'S *THE SECRETS OF NOTHING*

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## Abstract

There exists a caste system among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. The Igbo society where the caste system is practised is divided into Osu and Diala or the cult slaves and the freeborn. It is an obnoxious form of social discrimination with those considered to be Osu at the receiving end. Studies indicate that legislative and religious measures have failed to address the scourge. Literary artists have portrayed the problem in their literary works with a view to mitigating it. The present study therefore examines the portrayal of the system in Jude Ogu's novel, *The Secrets of Nothing* using the theoretical orientation of Cultural Criticism. Shalizi (2021:1), says that Cultural Criticism is what is practised by cultural critics, the intellectuals formerly known as moralists and publicists, before those became dirty words. That is to say, they are those who have taken it upon themselves to describe the conduct of their fellow citizens to their fellow citizens, taking conduct in a very broad sense, including prominently that part of it which concerns moving ideas from one mind to another; to judge whether and how that conduct is wanting; and to suggest more desirable states of affairs.

Ogu, in this novel, interrogates the culture of his society that promotes social dichotomy and shows where the culture is wanting. The outcome of this study indicates that Ogu acknowledges the seriousness with which the system is considered by the society and prescribes measures for putting an end to the practice and its social implications. In this regard, Ogu can be accorded the status of a cultural critic.

**Keywords:** Osu, Diala, interrogation, portrayal, social change.

## Introduction

This article examines the portrayal of the Osu caste system in Jude Ogu's *The Secrets of Nothing*. Literary creativity from any part of the world is largely a response to social issues confronting that society. African literature, to a large extent, could be considered as literature of protest (Ogude, 1991). The protest culture in African literature, rooted in the era of slave trade and colonialism, continues to bear on postcolonial issues. The Osu caste system, which history predates colonialism, is still practised among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. Igwe and Akolokwu (2014) say that the Igbo ethnic group is predominantly found in the south eastern region of Nigeria and the Igbos are among the three major tribes of the country. Presently, continued Igwe and Akolokwu, majority of the Igbos are Christians but some still practise the indigenous traditional religion.

According to Dike (2002), the Osu caste system is a dehumanizing system which has divided and alienated the Igbos. The caste system classifies the Igbos into two distinct groups; the Diala, or the freeborn and the Osus. Dike (2002) laments that the people referred to as Osu are regarded as sub-human beings; the unclean class or outcasts and that this classification "has caused inter-communal discords and wars between the Osu and the Diala in Igboland" (p.2).

The discriminatory Osu caste system, Dike (2002) stresses,

Involves inequality in freedom of movement and choice of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality in the enjoyment of the right to marry and establish a family and inequality in access to public office. (p.2)

Ubaku and Ugwuja (2014) report that in 1956, the Eastern Nigeria colonial government had outlawed the practice of the Osu caste system and a plethora of punitive measures were canvassed in the Prohibition Act. But regardless of those measures, say Ubaku and Ugwuja, the system continued to be practised. Thus, note Ubaku and Ugwuja,

One can surmise that the Osu/Diala dichotomy has become a seemingly intractable communal problem in Igboland as it continues to stoke the embers of social segregation, parochialism and often, a general apathy in communal affairs. The effects of these discriminatory practices are myriad and deleterious to the Igbo society in particular and the Nigerian society at large. (p. 292)

The Osu caste system, Onwubuariri (2007) also notes, has been in existence in Igbo land since antiquity. Onwubuariri laments that

The caste system has gone through several stages and generations. But due to the fact that most Igbos see it as an integral part of their culture which cannot be easily changed or amended, all efforts towards abolishing it [has remained] abortive and illusive. (p.4)

Today, Onwubuariri maintains, the problem posed by this system has grown beyond the containment of law and order.

The problem of the caste system is resounded in Abia et al (2021) who posit that the Osu caste system is among the world's longest surviving status-discrimination as that of the Indian caste system. The system, according to Abia et al, has been handed down from one generation to another and has defied the influence of westernization, Christianity, advances in science and technology and democracy. Amalu et al (2021) also relate that in 1959, a year before the political independence of Nigeria, the eastern Nigerian assembly, had passed a bill for the abolition of the Osu caste system. Similarly, contend Amalu et al, after the independence of Nigeria, another bill for the ban of the practice was passed in 1979. But from all indications, the bills have never achieved the desired objective as the practice is still actively in place.

From what the aforementioned scholars say about the caste system, we can confidently draw the conclusion that the system is a social reality among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria and that political, religious and legal measures have not been able to adequately address it. What roles are literary artists playing in mitigating the problem? Nigerian writers, especially Chinua Achebe and Jude Ogu have played

significant roles in the interrogation of the scourge. The Osu belief system constitutes a substantial thematic preoccupation of Achebe's novel, *No Longer at Ease*. In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo, the central character, has just returned from the United Kingdom where he had his university degree. Equipped with his education and new ideas, Obi is optimistic that he could change his society for the better. But one of the first problems he encounters is that of the Osu caste system. Dathorne, (1974) captures the influence of the system in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* when he highlights the difficulties faced by Obi Okonkwo, in the novel:

The Umuofia Progressive Union, which had subsidized him overseas, demands he repay his loan as quickly as possible. It requires him to live up to the standards of a senior government official and it feels it has the right to interfere in his private life. Clara, the girl with whom he is having an affair is an Osu, a descendant of cult-slaves, and the members of the union consider it unthinkable that Obi should have anything to do with her, much less marry her. (P. 70)

While discussing the validity of the study of the English novel in African universities and the qualities of great literary works, Palmer (1986) stresses the significance of realism in their portrayal of the depicted issues. Palmer (1986) is of the conviction that a good literary piece should have "... the capacity to enrich our understanding of life, extend the range of our sympathies, develop our minds, satisfy our curiosities and even deepen our knowledge of the social, political and historical issues ..." (p.1). The Osu caste system in Igbo land is a serious socio-political issue that deserves serious attention and writers that portray the scourge in their literary works deserve serious critical studies; hence the thrust of the present work.

### **Interrogating the Caste System in *The Secrets of Nothing***

Jude Ogu's *The Secrets of Nothing*, published in 1993, portrays the Osu caste system in Igbo land. Through the use of a linear plot

structure and occasional flashbacks, Ogu narrates a story that portrays the Osu caste system as a hydra-headed monster that negates interpersonal and intergroup relationships. In the novel, the author demonstrates the modus operandi of the system and its effects on individuals and groups. Through the artistic creations of cinematic scenes and characters, Ogu does not only tell the story of a society bedevilled by forces of ancient practices but equally prescribes measures for putting an end to the cultural belief. The Osu caste system, as portrayed in the novel, is a dreadful phenomenon that places those considered to be members in a subhuman category. Ogu's desire for a change in his Igbo society is concretized in the realistic situations and the character traits assigned to his fictional characters in the novel.

Dike (2002), cited earlier, states that the operation of the Osu caste discrimination reaches the height of its intensity when it comes to the issue of marriage. The caste belief does not permit a marriage between the Diala and the Osu. The theme of love and marriage constitutes the central preoccupation of the story in Ogu's *The Secrets of Nothing*. The plot of the novel is constructed against the background of love between a young man and a young woman. Ofondu Uwakwe is the son of Jeremiah Uwakwe, a prosperous farmer, who has demonstrated commitment to the pursuance of education in a strongly materialistic Igbo society. Unlike other young men of his age grade, Ofondu exhibits a rare sense of moral responsibility and love for justice and equity. Unlike his friends and age mates who take pride in excelling in their sexual exploits with girls, Ofondu concentrates on his studies, considering premarital sexual indulgence as a sign of irresponsibility. His interest in studying at the university is informed by his earnest desire to provide solutions to the problems of his society. Logically, the central character of the novel studies sociology; a course that is concerned with the study of man in society.

Ofondu is in love with Emilia, a beautiful girl in his neighbourhood whom he had once saved from the molestation of Akidi, a village bully. Emilia is the daughter of Mercy Ekerendu, a widow who lives with her only daughter in the house of her late

husband. The relationship between these young people grows naturally with parents on both sides giving their tacit approvals until, of course, when the young couple announce their intention to get married. It is then that hell breaks loose. This is the time the Osu caste system decides to rear its ugly head. Ebem, a consummate dissembler with a grudge, is Uwakwe's neighbour. When he learns of Ofondu's intension to marry Emilia, he decides to pay a visit to the Uwakwes. Ebem has a tale to tell. Choosing his words carefully, the visitor addresses his host and the following conversation ensues:

'Jeremiah, son of Uwakwe Ndioma,' Ebem began slowly, 'don't allow the shrew to sleep on your mat. I know you won't allow it.'

Jeremiah knew that Ebem had something important to disclose.

'Ebem Nwanuka,' he called, looking Ebem straight in the face, 'both of us are men. Shrews are not meet, and I don't eat them. Neither will you allow a shrew to steal into my homestead if you see it doing so in my absence'. (p.55)

Ebem, having completely drawn the attention of his audience, proceeds with his narrative for a gradual emotional build-up.

'We know how important your son, Ofondu, is to Amanze', Ebem said, brandishing his cow-tail for emphasis. 'You won't allow him to sprinkle stain on himself and all your extended family.'

'How? He is a careful boy.' [Jeremiah replies]

'And sensible too. [Ebem continues] But at times the learned ones reason from the anus'. (p.56)

Ebem proceeds to inform Jeremiah that the elder brother of Emilia's mother had married from an Osu family and that automatically condemns her generation to the status of an Osu. The discussion between Ebem and Jeremiah Uwakwe triggers off a chain of events leading to the creation and sustenance of social rifts in the hitherto peaceful village.

The friendly relationship between Ofondu and his father takes a negative plunge when Jeremiah Uwakwe warns his son to terminate his relationship with the woman of his dreams. Jeremiah Uwakwe does

not only stop his son from relating with Emilia but also proceeds with a trip to the house of Emilia's mother to give her a stern warning against her daughter's visit to the house of the Uwakwes. To underline the seriousness with which the society considers the caste system, Jeremiah Uwakwe solicits the assistance of his friends, Ibeneme and Ogumba, Ofondu's maternal uncles, to help him talk to the young man. Using a metaphorical allusion, Ogumba compares the Osu caste system with a venomous snake that must be rid of at all cost, saying; "The Osu thing is a dangerous snake. If you cannot remove it when it enters your house, the best thing is to burn down the house to make sure that you have killed the snake" (p.94).

As part of his artistic design at deconstructing the caste system in the novel, Ogu establishes a convincing cause-and-effect relationship to show his readers that the question of Osu/Diala dichotomy is only an absurd manifestation of the human ego at work. Ogu portrays in the story that unscrupulous individuals hide behind the caste system to achieve personal vendettas and other forms of selfish interests. From the discussion between Ofondu and his mother, we learn that Ebem's information to the Uwakwes about Emilia's mother's Osu status is motivated by the desire for vengeance. Ebem had wanted Emilia's mother to be his concubine as soon as her husband had died. When the widow declined his advances, Ebem had felt his ego slighted and "... he swore that he would not live to see the daughter of Mercy Ekerendu happily married" (p.115).

There are several other categories of people who benefit from the system and would want to sustain its practice. Politicians and religious leaders for instance, capitalise on the Diala/Osu dichotomy to promote their political and economic interests. In a conversation between Ofondu and his friend, Eusebio, we learn that members of the political class in Igbo land capitalise on this division among the people to advance their political interests. Church leaders on their own part feign ignorance of the existence of the dichotomy because challenging it would affect their Sunday's collection of tithes.

The strength of the caste system is portrayed in the novel as capable of affecting not only social relationships but also the psychology of individuals. The case of Dr Gogo Egbensi, who is a member of the marginalised Osu class, is a good example. Dr Egbensi teaches Sociology 201: “African Traditional Beliefs and Taboos,” in the Department of Sociology in the University of Ibeagwa where Ofondu is a student. Dr Egbensi studied for his doctorate in London but seems to hate the course he teaches. Ideally, his educational status and exposure should have impacted on his academic and social relations. But the opposite is the case. He is the nightmare of his students. He deliberately fails those who take his course and is responsible for the rustication of many. His students believe that “... Dr. Egbensi was suffering from some inferiority complex and that he made up for his lack of self-confidence by being callous” (p. 62). Egbensi suffers inferiority complex because of his social status as a member of the dreaded Osu clan that is looked down upon as an inferior class of human beings.

Ogu demonstrates in the novel that concerted effort aimed at demystifying the system is a panacea for uprooting it and that sound information on the belief is vital. When Dr Egbensi asks his students to submit a term paper, Ofondu takes up the opportunity to conduct a research on the origin of the Osu caste system with a view to fulfilling his academic requirement and to use the knowledge for the enlightenment of his traditional community. He therefore proceeds to interview Ukoha, “... a man believed to be more than one hundred years old” (p. 80). From the old man, Ofondu learns that the original name of the Osu people was *Ochu* which literally translated from Igbo language, means “Revenge”. Ukoha further informs Ofondu that *Ochu* men came about as a result of communal wars.

The laws of war, Ukoha begun, brought in *Ochu* men into our society. In central Igboland, there is neither victor nor vanquished in any given war. The law required that in settlement, both sides must balance their losses, if any. For example, in a war, if Amanze killed twenty-one men of Udo village and Udo village killed fifteen men of Amanze village, the law required Amanze village to hand three men



alive to Udo village to make sure that each village had lost eighteen men. This was called Ochu, (revenge). Such men used for Ochu, were usually strong and were kept by the receiving village for the future. If there happened to be any sudden attack on the village, the Ochu men were the front liners in the ensuing war.... (p.82)

The misunderstanding regarding the socio-historical context of the caste belief, Ofondu learns from Ukoha, came about as a result of Christian missionary incursion into the Igbo heartland. Due to their ignorance of the Igbo socio-political tapestry, Ukoha relates, the missionary preachers had distorted the context and pronunciation of the Ochu nomenclature; reducing it to refer to something unclean or cult slaves, and pronouncing it as Osu instead of Ochu.

As depicted in the novel, the obnoxious Osu caste system has led to the murders of innocent people in the name of clan purification. For example, Ugonwa, a beautiful woman from Amanze, was married to her spouse in Mbohia village. The “Mbohia people married Ugonwa, not knowing that she came from an Osu family” (p.93). She is carrying a seven months’ old pregnancy when she is discovered to be Osu and is subsequently poisoned to death as a means of purifying the family of the spouse. And even in death, Ugonwa’s remains suffer discrimination because her husband’s relatives “... refused to have her corpse buried in their land until the whole of Amanze went as a warrior group to enforce the burial...” (p.93).

The caste belief is portrayed in the novel to be strong enough to defy the assimilative influence of Christianity. Far from unifying the opposing clans, Christianity appears to further widen the gulf between the two classes of the same Igbo ethnic group. Following the family row and subsequent estrangement between Ofondu and his father, Ofondu joins *The New Children of Christ Movement*, a campus religious group with the hope of using the platform to enlighten and unify his deeply divided community. On Ofondu’s request, the campus religious group pays a visit to Amanze.

Equipped with the Bible and pamphlets detailing Ofondu's research outcome, the student evangelists mount a stand in the market square and begin to preach to the villagers what the group considers to be the words of God that created all human beings without class distinctions. They emphasise the need for dismantling the Osu caste system, which in their conviction, is contrary to the purposes of God's creation. Unfortunately, the mention of equality between the Diala and the Osu clans does not go down well with Diala men. The Osus on the other hand assert their new status as Ochu men having learnt the socio-historical origin of the concept from the distributed pamphlets. The sermon triggers off a violent confrontation between the Diala and the Osus.

At first it was hand-to-hand fighting. Then rickety stalls and kiosks were pushed down and their props and beams used as weapons. As more men from the quarters arrived, the fighting took on a more bloody dimension. Machetes were used freely and several men lay dead in pools of blood. In addition to this, there was the burning of market stalls. In less than ten minutes nearly all the kiosks and stalls in the Eke-Amanze were in flames. (p.133)

Meanwhile, Jeremiah Uwakwe, Ofondu's father, whose son is believed to be behind the whole denouement, comes to the scene with a loaded gun with the aim of shooting down his own son. He was on his farm when he had learnt of his son's role in the visit of the preachers and had abandoned the farm work to come and save his honour. Luckily, Ofondu had left the scene before the arrival of his father. Before the local police can arrive unto the market square, twelve people are killed and several others wounded and the whole market is on fire. Having failed to kill Ofondu, Jeremiah Uwakwe is pressurised by the Diala clan to put up an obituary notice announcing the "death" of his son even though the son is still alive. The obituary is meant to be symbolical of severance of all connections with the son. But some Diala men are not satisfied with the severance of relationship between Jeremiah and his son. Such Diala men, led by Ugoagwu, a local

politician, keep heaping one demand after the other for Jeremiah to fulfil. They demand that Jeremiah must swear to an oath that he would search for his son wherever he is and kill him. The pressures become too much on Jeremiah Uwakwe that he commits suicide.

Having demonstrated the ills associated with the Osu caste system, Ogu proceeds to prescribe solutions to the menace. The title of the novel, *The Secrets of Nothing*, summarises the message of the story. The author wants the victims of the system to do away with the shame and secrecy associated with the belief. He urges the society to be frontal in its denunciation of the system. The secrecy with which the system is shrouded, as depicted in the story, encourages its sustenance. The desired radical social change is artistically incorporated in the episode following the fracas at the market square.

After the carnage, the marginalised Osu clan draws inspiration from the pamphlets distributed by the members of "The New Children of Christ", which redefines them as Ochu men instead of Osu. They now take pride in their origin as Ochu men. The narrator of the story says:

The caste affray in Amanze produced far-reaching results. For the first time, the Osu people came out openly to declare their pride for being what they were. They called themselves 'Ochu Men - the impeccable pride of Igbo militarism'. The old ones among them began to tell stories, imagined or real, of great Ochu warriors of the past. Within a few days, they had coined the word 'Ochuists' to distinguish themselves from the rest of the people of Amanze. (p.141)

To further demonstrate their pride in their newly discovered identity, the now Ochu men create a social club known as "Ochu Social Club of Nigeria" with Dr Egbensi as its first Secretary-General. Interestingly, several erstwhile diehard Diala men register and become members of the club swearing that all along, they had in fact hidden their real Ochu identities. Dr Egbensi feels deeply sorry for the callous treatments he had meted to his students including Ofondu. In a dramatic twist, Ugoagwu, the champion of the Diala class who is

responsible for triggering off the bloody fracas in the market square, leads a delegation on behalf of one of the Diala members, to seek for Emilia's hand in marriage – the same Emilia who is considered to be Osu and is responsible for the social unrest witnessed in the village. This episode of the story underpins Ogu's message in the novel that the question of Osu or Diala is nothing other than a product of hypocrisy and egomania. The identification with the Ochu class by the Diala men symbolises the beginning of social integration which is key to the overall message of the story.

Ogu's message to his deeply divided Igbo society is that love and respect for one another are indispensable tools for social rebirth and economic prosperity. Love, especially, is a soothing balm for healing the self-inflicted wounds of the Igbo society. This message is encapsulated in the love affair between Ofondu and Emilia around which the entire story in the novel revolves. Ofondu runs the risk of losing his life in pursuit of his childhood love but remains committed to it. Even though Ofondu and Emilia finally elope to America when Ofondu is granted a scholarship award to continue with his research on the Osu caste system in Igbo land, it is expected that they would come back home at the end of his studies to offer the much-needed leadership his Igbo society dearly needs. The death of his father could be seen as part of the sacrifices a society has to make for its rejuvenation.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The present study interrogates how the Osu caste system is portrayed in Jude Ogu's novel *The Secrets of Nothing*. In the novel, Ogu uses the story to draw the attention of the readers to the dehumanising practice of the caste system. Studies on the caste system indicate that the system manifests intensely when it comes to the issue of marriage between the Osu and the Diala and this is reflected in the story.

Through the love story between Ofondu Uwakwe and Emilia Ekerendu, the novel reveals how the system negates interpersonal and group relationships. When Ofondu informs his parents of his intention to marry Emilia, hell breaks loose as his kinsmen who are Diala

consider it unthinkable for one of them to marry an Osu. Through his artistic creation of scenes, characterisation and deployment of conversation however, Ogu demystifies the system. The question of Osu/Diala dichotomy, as Ogu depicts, is nothing other than human ego at work. Ebem, a neighbour of the Uwakwes, fails in his bid to make Emilia's mother his mistress and seizes the opportunity provided by the proposed marriage between Ofondu and Emilia to humiliate Emilia's mother.

The caste system as portrayed in the novel, is so strong that it does not only affect interpersonal and group relationships but equally tells on the psychology of individuals. Dr Egbensi a university lecturer, suffers inferiority complex for being a member of the Osu clan and makes up for his lack of self-esteem by being callous to his students. The system has also led to the murders of innocent people who are classified as Osu. Ugonwa, a beautiful woman from Amanze is married to her spouse from Mbohia village. When she is discovered to be an Osu, she is poisoned to death and the Mbohia people humiliate even the remains of the dead by denying it burial rights. Jeremiah Uwakwe, Ofondu's father commits suicide to escape the pressures on him to search for and kill his son for identifying with the Osu clan and his role in the market square evangelism.

Ogu believes that the best approach to the mitigation of the scourge is frontal appraisal of the system through education and socio-historical awareness. He artistically incorporates this belief in the scene where Ofondu interviews Ukoha, an old man, who relates to him that the Osu concept came about as a result of misunderstanding by Christian missionaries of the Igbo socio-political tapestry. Ukoha informs Ofondu that the original name of the concept is Ochu, which is an Igbo word for "revenge", and that the Ochu men were not evil and inferior people as presently believed by the society.

The research outcome conducted by Ofondu on the origin of the caste system provides the platform upon which members of the Osu class recreate themselves. Following the violent confrontation between the Osu and the Diala clans in the market square, the Osu class, which

has now been redefined as Ochu men, takes pride in their new status and initiate the formation of a social club. Ironically, members of the erstwhile diehard Diala clan now identify with the Ochu men and register themselves as members of the new social club. This episode of the story encapsulates the message of the author of *The Secrets of Nothing*: that frontal approach to the discussion of the caste system, love and respect for each other are the necessary ingredients for the unification of the Igbo ethnic group.

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