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Premonition in the Tragedies of Shakespeare and Achebe

It is a commonly and easily observed fact that even the most “detrivalised” and “modernized” Christians, scholars, scientists and entrepreneurs of African descent today still consult divinities, diviners and healers when their health or affairs are in trouble. Indeed, some with even doctorate degrees in various western disciplines argue that Western medicines and the Western Christian God are fine in their place; but when things are tough, you rush back to your roots and ancestral ways. This can also be said to be true of some Europeans who perform some ritual once they confront a difficulty. Consider the Western obsession with psychic phenomena and fascination with exorcism.

This study submits that William Shakespeare and Chinua Achebe, in their tragedies, use signs, omens, beliefs, etc., to predict the future. It is established that premonition plays a significant role in their works, intimating much interdependence between man and nature. In fact, most events in the writings of Shakespeare and Achebe appear to have been preordained through certain signs, symbols or happenings. Supernatural figures such as ghosts, witches, or gods seem to dictate the pace of action and orient characters. In the Elizabethan age, for instance, it was generally believed that the positions of the stars and planets in the sky meant good or bad fortune on earth. Eclipses were thought of as harbingers of misfortune. This belief resulted from strong adherence to astrology that was associated with the concept of order. The smooth movement of heavenly bodies reflected an orderly pattern of events in human life; a rupture in this oscillation indicated confusion, a breakdown in the natural order of things.

Place, time or the individual appreciating a sign are important in attributing an aesthetic function to it. C.S. Pierce, the founder of semiotics, identified three kinds of sign: the “iconic,” where the sign somehow resembled what it represented, such as the photograph of a person; the “indexical,” whereby the sign is associated with what it is a sign of, for example, smoke with fire; and the “symbolic,” where the sign is arbitrarily or conventionally associated with its referent.

Semiotics groups these categorizations into two basic classes, namely, denotation or what the sign stands for, and connotation or other signs associated with it. In a work of art, a sign may have a contextual meaning or a historical symbolism. Therefore, meaning in a text is not restrictive, but takes into consideration other texts, codes, and ethos in Literature and society and, above all, the reader's appreciation.

In *King Lear*, the storm is unnatural and the following words of Lear view it as portending a destruction of all ungrateful people. The rumbling thunder and the beating rain can be seen as contrition for Lear for his earlier sin of misjudging Cordelia. These sufferings appear indispensable because they are the throes of knowledge in that nature is seen as the watch-dog of society. Thunder is seen as a sign of the intervention of supernatural forces in the activities of man. John F. Danby draws a parallel between the thunder in *King Lear* and other supernatural incidents in Shakespearean drama:

[it] has metaphysical status. It is the super-natural and the super-rational and the super-human. It belongs not only with the Thunder in *Julius Caesar*, but with the ambiguous ghost in *Hamlet*, the Delphic Caesandra in *Troilus and Cressida*, the doubtful witches of *Macbeth*. (Danby184)

Thus Lear's downfall is explained in terms of his credulity and, above all, the malevolence of nature.

A spectator at a performance of *Macbeth* finds himself transported into a world where human beings are closely observed by supernatural spirits eager to create confusion and to take advantage of man's infirmities. The apparitions in *Macbeth* are neither benign spirits of order nor agents of an inescapable fate, but, in a way that is particularly characteristic of Shakespeare's dramatic art, combine elements of popular belief and a syncretistic mythology (Mehl 108-09).

When the witches greet Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Cawdor and king hereafter, are they simply predicting the future or indirectly exciting Macbeth towards kingship? These weird sisters are mysterious and, upon leaving, they keep the minds of their addressees racing. They can be seen as incarnations of evil in the universe because their nature is not defined. Charles Lamb writes of them as foul anoma-

lies, of whom we know not whence they are sprung, nor whether they have beginning or ending. As they are without human passions so they seem to be without human relations. They come with thunder and lightning, and vanish to airy music. (Wilson xxi)

Macbeth acquiesces the supernatural constitution of the witches, and debates on the sincerity of their prophecy:

This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill; cannot be good:- if ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid-Image doth unfix my hair,
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings.
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man, that function
 Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is,
 But what is not. (I. iii: 130-41)

The thought of kingship agitates him and he wonders how this prediction can be accomplished without him influencing it foully.

Upon reading Macbeth's letter about his encounter with the witches, Lady Macbeth starts nursing prospects of becoming queen. For her to achieve this, Duncan must be killed; she sees the croaking of the raven as a bad omen for Duncan. When Macbeth is killing Duncan, an owl shrieks and crickets shrill indicating the evil act that is being carried out. Lenox complains about the unusual events of the night: chimneys are destroyed, strange cries of death in the air, an owl wails, and earth tremors. Indeed, the murder of a king is an act of high treason and the result is complete chaos because God's representative on earth has been eliminated.

Rosse and Old man further comment on the supernatural happenings in the night of the king's death. Old man talks about the strange phenomenon of a falcon being killed by an owl while Rosse reports that:

... Duncan's
horses[a thing most strange and certain]
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make.
War with mankind. (II-IV:14-17).

These horses later eat each other. These strange occurrences point to the murder of the king. In line with the concept of the Great chain of Being, the death of the king marks a breakdown in order. When Macbeth questions them to know what the future has in store for him, several apparitions are displayed before him. The first, an armed head, probably represents his own head that shall be cut off by Macduff; the second, a bloody child, could stand for baby Macduff and the message it carries is that “none of woman born / shall harm Macbeth” (iv. i: 30); the third, a crowned child with a tree in his hand, bears the statement that Macbeth shall never be defeated until Birnam wood moves to Dunsinane; there is a show of eight kings, the last carries a mirror in his hand in which Banquo's ghost is reflected meaning that his descendants will be kings.

The displays of the witches are quite premonitory. These spirits predict the future in metaphorical terms, but Macbeth reads the message from a literal viewpoint. He blindly accepts his invincibility considering that it is difficult to find two forests moving towards each other, or to see people that have not been born by women. Upon disappearing, the witches keep Macbeth more bewildered; he had come to know his future, but ends up confused. He wonders whether he is dreaming or has actually seen the witches. He is frustrated and resolves to embark on full scale elimination of his enemies to assure his security.

In fact, the supernatural plays a preponderant role in *Macbeth*. Who talks of supernatural in this play talks of the witches. G.Wilson knight comments on their symbolism that it is not evil, nor good; neither beautiful, nor ugly. It is a simply brooding presence, vague, inscrutable, enigmatic; a misty blurring opacity stilly overhanging, interpenetrating plot and action (quoted in Brathchell 132). S. T.Coleridge considers the witches as the shadowy obscure and fearfully anomalous of physical nature, the lawless of human nature — elemental avengers without sex or kin (Bratchell 139).

Granted that the witches are nothing, but women, A.C. Bradley, however, points that their possession of supernatural powers make them extraordinary. Thus they can “raise haile, tempests, and hurtfull weather, as lightning, thunder, etc.”; they can move from place to place maintaining their invisibility; they can keep devils and spirits in the likeness of toads and cats; they can transfer corn in the blade from one place to another; and they can “manifest unto others things hidden and lost, and foreshew things to come, and see them as though they were present” (Bradley 285-56). Commenting on the witches in *Macbeth*, Martin Stephen and Philip Franks affirm that they

are a physical symbol of the evil which is one of the play’s main theme, and they serve to set the atmosphere of the play right from the start, showing that the evil in the play will be of a terrible sort. (Stephen and Franks 63)

Talking in relation to *Julius Caesar*, John Arthos argues that

the play, for its part, insists on the mysterious, on the enigmatic. The signs, the warnings, all that speaks of fate, is kept before us so continuously that we are always being compelled to discover if the sense of supernatural agency is indeed giving us a light to see by. (Arthos 130)

On the feast of Lupercal (February 15), young men run naked in the streets of Rome bearing strips of leather that are used to strike anybody they meet. Women who were sterile and wanted children would stand, hands outstretched, to be struck because it was believed that this practice would render them fertile. Caesar, himself, shares this supernatural view. How can one explain Caesar’s immediate suspicion of Cassius?

Let me have men about me that are fat,
sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o’ nights.
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look.
He thinks too much; such men are dangerous. (I. II: 192-95)

Is it Caesar’s foresight that makes him doubtful of Cassius’s honesty or is he superstitious in thinking that lean and pensive men

are treacherous? The latter view is foregrounded and is later echoed when Caesar comments on Cassius's critical, melancholic and searing mind, his indifference to music as indicators of viciousness.

Again, if we accept the Elizabethan belief that rulers were representatives of God on earth and should, therefore, not be challenged, then, we can speculate that an unnatural force forewarns Caesar of the threat to his life. To Dieter Mehl, these occurrences are in the tradition of theatrical foreboding and mirror the character of the conspiracy and its fatal consequences (139).

While the conspirators revise their strategy to murder Caesar, Cassius is afraid that Caesar has recently become superstitious and, consequently, may stay indoors. But Decius promises to persuade Caesar to come to the capitol where he shall be killed. Calpurnia pleads in vain with Caesar not to step outside the following day because of her frightful dream. Again, the strange things, namely, ghosts shrieking, graves releasing their dead, warriors fighting upon the clouds etc. that the watchmen saw augur evil for Caesar.

On the strength of the above happenings, Caesar's death is imminent. Yet he refuses to heed to this warning, claiming that these predictions are to the world in general as to himself. He blocks his mind even to his wife's opinion that these unusual events always accompany the death of an important person. He is deaf to the fears of the augurers as reported by a servant:

They would not have you to stir forth today.
Plucking the entrails of an offering forth,
They could not find a heart within the beast. (II. ii: 39-41)

The absence of a heart in one of the sacrificial animals represents the loss of Caesar. Unfortunately, the would-be victim considers himself invincible, convinced that the gods' prediction is simply done to make cowards feel ashamed. He compares himself with Danger and affirms that he is stronger than Danger. But Rod Horton and Vincent Hopper remark that it was the duty of the augurers to foretell the future by

noting the flights of birds, examining the entrails of sacrificial animals, or utilizing other occult means of divination. There were also the sacred dancers, the *Salii*, and the holy brotherhood of the *Luperci*, priests

of the wolf, who drove off evil spirits and assured fertility to women. The sacred fire of the city was kept burning by the devout service of the Vestal Virgins! (Horton and Hopper 190-91)

Calpurnia's dream wherein she saw Caesar's statue spouting out blood is revelatory of Caesar's assassination. But the dishonest Decius distorts the interpretation of the dream to mean the greatness of Caesar in times to come. It is interesting to note that even though Decius says this simply to persuade Caesar to come and meet his death in the Capitol, there is some truth in this interpretation in that Mark Antony's funeral speech will excite mourners to get relics of Caesar. Decius adds that it will be ridiculous if senators were to postpone the coronation of Caesar just because Calpurnia has had a bad dream. He flatters Caesar about the latter's fearlessness and Caesar, in turn, ignores his wife's dream by resolving to go to the Capitol. T. McAlindon situates the significance of the strange happenings on the night of Caesar's assassination in the following light:

The portentous upheavals which take place on the night of the conspiracy when "all things change from their ordinance, / Their natures, and pre-formed faculties / To monstrous state" provide a vividly coloured backdrop to the human transformations which constitute the fabric of the drama. (McAlindon 93)

Brutus overrules Cassius's decision that Mark Antony be not allowed to speak in Caesar's funeral lest he rouses the mob against them. Alone, with Caesar's body, Antony prophesies revenge on the conspirators. He talks of Caesar's ghost that shall roam the world, inflicting havoc on Caesar's enemies. Curiously, this prediction comes true. Antony's speech makes one consider the play's action as an attempt at exorcism that changes into conjuration, two rituals that are dangerously alike in that each involves the demonstration of power over spirits (Rose 235).

Marjorie Garber states that Shakespeare's audience would certainly have been familiar with the story of Julius Caesar, and such a collection of portents and premonitions would have seemed to them, as it does to us, to be infallibly leading to the moment of murder. She sums up her opinion on the highly suggestive play, *Julius Caesar*, in this light:

[It] is a complex and ambiguous play, which does not concern itself principally with political theory, but rather with the strange blindness of the rational mind in politics and elsewhere-to the great irrational powers which flow through life and control it Shakespeare again demonstrates the great symbolic power which resides in the dream, together with its remarkable capacity for elucidating aspects of the play which otherwise remain in shadow. (Garber 226-29)

The supernatural in *Hamlet* is centred on the ghost which was a stock element of revenge tragedy; it represented a restless spirit appealing for vengeance against a person that had wronged it. Its purpose was to rouse its avenger into action in case of reluctance. Two types of ghosts, namely, the objective and the subjective, are identifiable in Shakespearean drama. An example of an objective ghost is that of Old Hamlet. It presents itself to several people, particularly those that are within its vicinity. And when some characters such as Horatio doubt its authenticity, the Ghost obligingly resurfaces to convince the unbeliever. A subjective ghost is only visible to the beholder, the one with whom it is directly concerned. Such is the fate of Macbeth as he beholds the ghost of Banquo to the consternation of his guests. Similarly, Richard III is troubled in his sleep by the spirits of those that he slew. In the same vein, Brutus's eventual downfall is presaged by the ghost of Caesar that he sees prior to his death. It would also seem that Hamlet's ghost is subjective when it is seen in Gertrude's closet; it is seen only by Hamlet and not Gertrude. In sum, Shakespeare makes more use of the subjective ghost than the objective one. One reason for this can be the emphasis more on freewill than extraneous factors in the action; put simply, individual initiative and responsibility appear to be more compelling than external forces.

Old Hamlet's ghost, like the weird sisters of *Macbeth* and Caesar's ghost, dominates the whole action, and controls the fortunes and behaviour of all who come beneath its influence. In this connection, Hamlet undergoes some change after his eerie experience with it and the tragedies of Claudius, Ophelia, Polonius, Gertrude, etc. can reasonably be ascribed to supernatural intervention. Thus the ghost is largely seen as a messenger from beyond with the mission of rendering justice through the sanctioning of transgressors.

Horatio is convinced that the appearance of the ghost is not for nothing; indeed, he draws a parallel between it and the events leading to the murder of Julius Caesar. On the strength of this supposition, Denmark is poised for disaster since Elizabethans had much respect for unnatural phenomena. But Horatio's thought is soon discarded when the cock crows and the ghost disappears since it was held, among the Elizabethans, that spirits do not walk in day light. Marcellus sees the crowing of a cock as an indication to spirits to keep away, especially during the season of Christmas.

An important element of the supernatural in *Othello* is the handkerchief. When Desdemona complains to Emilia about its disappearance, the latter feigns ignorance about its whereabouts. She is worried, but consoles herself that her husband is not jealous: "I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him" (III. iv: 26). It is worth noting that there was a belief among the Elizabethans that body fluids such as blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy were assumed to determine a man's temperament. Unfortunately, Desdemona does not know much of Othello; his behaviour and actions betray an imbalance of blood and choler.

Desdemona is stunned to hear the mystery of the handkerchief, and as she struggles to absorb this startling revelation, Othello gives another harrowing lecture on the handkerchief:

'Tis true. There 's magic in the web of it'
A sibyl that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work;
The worms hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy which the skilful
Conserved of maidens' hearts. (III. iv: 66-72)

Judging by Othello's disclosure, can one accept with Brabantio that the Moor's relationship with Desdemona was void of love, but forged by magic? After all, why should a "trifle" like a handkerchief rock such a seemingly solid union? Agreed that this love token is focused on because of Iago's scheming, why should Othello attach much magical importance to it?

If one goes by Othello's words, it is increasingly clear that his relationship with Desdemona is inexorably moving towards disaster

since, as pointed out by him in relation to the handkerchief, “to lose’t or give’t away were such perdition / As nothing else could match” (III. iv: 46). As misfortune looms over her head, Desdemona regrets having seen the handkerchief: “Then would to God that I had never seen’t!” (III. iv: 74), and is forced to lie that it is not missing in order to mitigate his emotions. Unfortunately for her, the more she importunes him for Cassio’s reinstatement, the more compelling the need for the handkerchief. It is as if its sudden reappearance will clear her of the charge of infidelity. And she posits this opinion: “Sure there’s some wonder in this handkerchief; / I am most unhappy in the loss of it” (III. iv: 75).

One shares John Arthos’ view on Shakespearean drama that for all that Shakespeare’s plays suggest of the working of destiny and providence, remote sometimes, it appears, sometimes all-determining (Arthos138).

Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* is extremely rich in the supernatural; most events or signs in the story are premonitory. For instance, the appearance of a moon in Umuaro is appreciated variedly. While Ezeulu sees it as the start of a new month, Matefi, his senior wife, views hope in it. Even its position in the sky is symbolic. Ugoye says this of it: “I think it sits awkwardly-like an evil moon” (2). Matefi, however, remains hopeful.

The Ota stream is abandoned on grounds that the oracle had announced that the big boulder at the source of the stream would fall and kill a person. To avoid this calamity, the *alusi* who owned the stream has to be appeased. Similarly, the affluence of the Eke market is attributed to a deity that mysteriously depleted neighbouring markets in favour of Eke. And the story is told of the Nkwo market that converges regularly instead of only on Nkwo days. The strength of the ancient lady behind the greatness of these markets stretches even beyond the African continent.

Amalu is suffering from *arummo*; spirits intimate that a man with such an ailment cannot last twelve days. Nevertheless, the *dibia* treating him implores all his supernatural might to relieve his patient. First, the sick man’s body is rubbed with camwood. Second, the medicine man fortifies the hut with long gourds and wads of banana leaves against evil spirits. Even the medicine man’s queer appearance bespeaks his supernatural qualities. From time to time, he loads

his gun and fires into the sky. This practice, among Africans, is believed to drive away death. The sick man's inability to clasp the *ofo* in his hands forebodes doom; sympathizers see death as inevitable for him.

While in detention in Okperi, Ezeulu has a dream in which the assembly of Umuaro refuses to listen to his grandfather. In the same dream, Nwaka urged people not to heed Ezeulu's call because he is now the priest of a dead god that has abandoned its people. He is tossed about in a crowd, spat on, and dismissed outright. This vision bespeaks Umuaro's desertion of Ulu and all that it represents. In other words, Ezeulu's downfall is imminent.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the Umuofians dread darkness and attach some mystery to it:

Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it *would hear*. It was called a *string*. (2)

New yams cannot be eaten until sacrifices have been offered to Ani, the goddess, for rendering the soil fertile. The yam festival is marked by joy and merry-making as relatives from far and near are invited. It affords an opportunity for some people such as Okonkwo to offer a sacrifice of new yams and palm oil to the ancestors to solicit their protection of the family in the coming year.

Facial gestures are interpreted superstitiously. Ekwefi tells her daughter that when one's eyelid is twitching, it means one is going to cry; and when it is the upper eyelid, it is a sign that one will see something. And when one is called from outside, one does not answer "yes" because there may be an evil spirit calling. Therefore, if one's name is called, one responds thus: "Is that me?" (29). Again, there is a sacred cotton tree on the *ilo* of Umuofia. It is believed that spirits of good children live within the tree waiting to be born; on ordinary days, barren women sit under it in order to be restored fertility. Even the drummers that beat the big drums during the festival of the New Yam are said to be possessed by the spirit of the drums.

Little Ikemefuna has a peculiar method of predicting events. He has a song that he sings and maintains its bit with his feet. If the bit falls on the right leg, it presages some good news and if it falls on the

left, it forebodes evil. Through this method, he knows that his mother is still alive.

Immediately Okonkwo returns home after killing Ikemefuna, an eerie feeling overcomes Nwoye, pointing to the fact that his friend has been murdered. Nwoye's presentiment of Ikemefuna's death is compared to the one he had when he saw twins in earthenware pots, abandoned to themselves in a forest because they are believed to be evil. Okonkwo's refusal to be associated with cowardice pushes him to murder Ikemefuna. Even though a feeling of guilt and weariness envelops him, he nerves himself. His friend, Obierika, sees a sinister accompaniment to his part in the killing of Ikemefuna.

Ekwefi's new baby, Ezinma, vacillates between buoyancy and frailty, making her mother extremely anxious. People point out that this child is an *ogbanje* that is always subjected to bouts of health and sickness. Ekwefi is determined to nurse this child and the hope of this baby surviving is sustained when a medicine man digs up its *iyi-uwa*, a bond linking the baby with the world of *ogbanje*. This action ruptures the unity between the child and spirit world. This separation is further consolidated when Ezinma is covered with a piece of cloth before a boiling pot of herbs. As she perspires, the evil force of *ogbanje* gradually leaves her.

During the funeral celebration of Ezeudu, the ancestral spirits appear and talk in tremulous voices. People run for protection as one of these spirits seems violent and the two men tethering it are stretched to their limit in trying to control it. One of the *egwugwu* is so dreadful that it cows people. In fact, the *egwugwu* are seen as intimating a link between the living, the living-dead ancestors and the unborn. They ensure the umbilical cord between the world of man and the world of spirits. It is even said that during ritual ceremonies, women in search of babies make themselves as attractive and as "pure" as possible so as to attract the reincarnation of such spirits from the spirit world (Ogbaa 97).

The explosion of Okonkwo's gun during a funeral and the resultant killing of the bereaved's son can be seen as the making of the earth goddess that he had offended when he killed the innocent Ikemefuna who ran towards him, calling him father. He is apparently at the peak of his prosperity and it is at this moment that the goddess

strikes him. He is smashed to the ground at the time when his life is sweetest.

The Lagos inhabitants in Achebe's *No Longer At Ease* believe that if one kills a dog on the highway, it forebodes good luck while a duck ushers ill luck:

‘Na good luck,’ said the man. ‘Dog bring good luck for new car. But duck be different. If you kill duck you go get accident or kill man.’
(14)

As a consequence, the streets of the city are littered by the carcasses of dogs.

As Obi makes preparations to spend his leave in the village and discuss his marriage to Clara with his parents, Clara points out that it is preferable to call off their engagement because she is an *osu*. When Obi's father knows about Obi's intention of marrying Clara, he opposes it on grounds that such a girl is an outcast that must never be accepted as a wife. The father argues that if Obi takes her as wife, it is tantamount to bringing the mark of shame into the family and invoking curses on himself from generations of children. The consequences of such a disaster cannot be fathomed. Factors such as a free man having a sexual relationship with an *osu* or being born under *osu* conditions make one automatically an *osu*. Even people that are kidnapped during tribal wars take the status of an *osu*. Considering the above remarks, Obi's engagement to Clara is an act that can only bring sorrow.

In the light of the above illustrations, it is evident that both Shakespeare and Achebe, through signs, occurrences and deities, predict the future. Whereas Shakespeare explores more of natural happenings in his illustration of the reality of the supernatural, Achebe attests it through much use of beliefs within his society. Both writers, in their writings, can be seen as asserting the primordial role of the supernatural. They seem to be awakening us to it by appealing that this element deserves much attention. It should not be dismissed outright because the experiences of their characters render it credible.

It is clear that both Shakespeare and Achebe strongly assert the interdependence between man and nature. For instance, in the European society, amulets like a cornet of red coral or horseshoe are

thought to bring harm on the 17th and good on the 13th or vice-versa according to different areas. People usually avoid being thirteen at table. In the African milieu, some animals are considered sacred; they are totems and must not be killed else misfortune befalls one. The black mamba in Kom, the elephant in Mamfe and Buea, the lion in Nso, and the royal serpent in Foumban are good examples. Furthermore, the hooting of an owl above one's house presages the death of a relative.

With Shakespeare, the whole action of his tragedy is enveloped in the mystery of unleashed actions that constantly surprise us. The network of sacred figures, images, beliefs and ideas which form the traditional vision of the cosmos help Achebean characters in the compelling quest of being able to explain, predict and control events (Ejizu 118-20). The affairs of men and the will of the powers are reflected in the physical world. Stressing the harmonious relation between the physical world and the supernatural one, Harold Turner states that

[t]he diviner may cast stones, sticks or bones and examine the way they lie...The belief lying behind all these methods is that the whole universe is interconnected and has a common pattern running through it, so that if the skilled person looks carefully at any one part of it he will be able to read off what is happening in other parts. (Turner 35)

Chinua Achebe, in his writings, apparently shows the supernatural to be truly anchored in his society. The fates of his central characters, namely, Okonkwo and Ezeulu appear to be remotely guided by external forces. And these foreign elements constantly step in the action to sanction vice and reward virtue. In fact, within Igbo cosmos, problems are perceived as the result of the unstable relationships between the community and the supernatural order. After all, when a man suffers setbacks in life, he could abandon his *ikenga* (seen as defining one's physical and moral strength) and create a new one. Shakespeare, on the other hand, portrays an Elizabethan society that is at the crossroads of the supernatural. Despite the overwhelming presence of the ghosts in the action, man still exercises sovereignty over his actions. In other words, the supernatural forces can only tempt, suggest, seduce, but they cannot implore or command. Stated differently, these forces can only act vicariously, using

man as an instrument of fulfilment. In fact, there is the impression that external forces and man seem to be inextricably linked. Realms of sign and societal practices bind individuals to social structures, compelling some of them to consider societal laws and beliefs sacrosanct.

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