Song of a Goat

Song of a Goat reads like a Greek Tragedy because as in the latter man is pitted against forces beyond his control. It is unlike Shakespeare's tragedies in which the tragedy is caused partly because of the hero's inherent weakness. Othello's weakness is Jealousy. Macbeth has an over reaching ambition. King Lear is credulous and Hamlet suffers from inaction. So in a typical Shakespearean tragedy the hero himself invites the doom and destruction on himself. In a Greek Tragedy often the hero is a victim of a family curse or a heir to the sins of his parents. The hero, therefore, battles against unseen forces and fails.

The Song of a Goat is reminiscent of Greek tragedies. Zifa has become impotent after fathering a son. He can no longer produce children. This is the central issue and the entire play revolved round resolving this crisis. In the conflict that ensues Zifa finds himself isolated and has to fight a host of opponents all of whom belong to his family. So ultimately it turns out to be not individual against the society but the individual against his own family.
In the First Movement there are two characters Masseur, a man with extraordinary powers, including powers of healing and Ebiere, Zifa's wife who has come to seek medical counsel from Masseur. After examining Ebiere, Masseur tells her that her "Womb is open and warm as room". (page 3)¹. He allays her fears and assures her that there is nothing wrong with her. But he warns her against staying empty:

An empty house, my daughter, is a thing Of danger. If men will not live in it Bats or grass will, and that is enough Signal for worse things to come in

Ebiere pleads that it is not her fault and she has always kept the doors open, "my house open by night and day" but her husband has kept away from her. She is ashamed of herself and she even wishes to die if only to prevent people from taking her for a sterile woman. She admits that her husband has been avoiding her. Initially she thinks that her husband has been avoiding her because of the problem she had in bringing forth her son. But later she realises that there is deeper reason. After hearing
her Masseur corrects her and assures her that there is no shame in revealing this fact to her families. He goes even a little further to say "a good proposition/ Would be for your husband to make you over/To another in his family". (p-5) Ebiere is shocked to hear such a advise and rejects it:

That will be an act of death,
It is what dead forbid you speak of

To assuage her moral sense Masseur suggests a situat which has the sanction of tradition and which will free her from immorality:

So large a Cowrie may pass Blood of a goat through its nose
A big gourd of palm wine and three heads of Kola - nut split before the dead of
The land, and the deed is done.

But Ebiere is not prepared to accept the advice and so she leaves the place. Now, Zifa comes in search of his wife and Masseur broaches the subject of impotence. Zifa says that he is helpless and that there is no remedy for it. He might restore his formal virility and beget
children. But Masseur reminds him that it has been several seasons now and he has not regained his manli­ness. There is no birth cure for his wife "When the fault is not with her". However Zifa is hopeful and he cites the example of Ogun's wife who has given birth to children after seven years of waiting.

Masseur however makes a distinction between Ogun and Zifa. While Ogun never abandoned his wife Zifa was guilty of it. Moreover Ogun's family has a curse and it had to be removed to have more children. Zifa too reme­mbers Ogun's story and is eager to have a cure for himself. He says that he would offer the best sacrifice to cast off the curse. He narrates how he has been a loving husband and has consulted all experts on the land. He has been advised to adjust himself to his curse. He is sad that he is being punished for his father's sins. People who dared not oppose his father when he was alive accuse the son for honouring his father. While pitying Zifa, Masseur advises him to consider handing over his wife to another person. Zifa becomes angry at the sugge­stion and heaps curses on Masseur. But Masseur assures Zifa that it has the traditional sanction. Zifa refuses
to reconcile to this idea and thinks that his death will solve the problem. But Zifa advises him to think coolly and act on his advise.

In the Second Movement an important mystical character begins the action of the play just as Masseur is another mystical character who opened the first movement. Masseur elderly, wise, experienced symbolizes tradition who is eager to guide his society. His being a physician is not literal but spiritual. He understands the melody affecting the family of Zifa and so offers a cure. Orukorere on the other hand is semi-mystical in that she appears other worldly in her behaviour but she is very realistic also. As Zifa's aunt she is concerned about the family, the impotence of her nephew.

As the Second Movement opens Orukorere is shown crying for help. She has heard a cry of a goat. Both Zifa and his brother Toney are annoyed at her cries. However Orukorere continues her cries and says that she continues to hear the cries of a goat. The neighbours who gather cannot understand her and they hear nothing
but she insists that a goat is held by a leopard. When the neighbours begin to take Orukorere and the threat of the leopard seriously Zifa attributes her behaviour to drinking. He is angry that the people have been helping her free drinks but the neighbours reply that no one has given her drink. They even say that a drink is not available even for sacrifice. One goes to the extent of saying that she does not need a drink to behave this way. Orukorere stands by her vision and insists on the search for the leopard:

I must find him, the leopard
That will devour my goat, I must
Find him. Surely his footsteps will show
Upon the mud? Surely, those claws bloody
From hunt of antelopes in the forest
Will show in the sand? or has the wind
Swept them off before housewives come
Upon them with brooms at break of day?
Or sports him no spoors?

Orukorere has double vision as has been suggested by the Third Neighbour. She anticipates some threat to the
family and her reference to the leopard again and again is a warning to the family. Soon after to everybody's surprise she passes on and it looks very strange to every one. The neighbours want Zifa to act at once but Zifa prays to the spirits of his village to advise as to what he should do. The neighbours begin to leave after advising Zifa to take care of her. Now she is foaming in the mouth and shivering. They all comment that there is a curse on the family and it is this curse which has made the "sweetest maid" become queen woman. Many young men had offered to marry her but she refused to marry any. It is her father's curse which has made her life like that. No only had she refused to marry human beings she refused also "the people of the sea". As a punishment the people of the sea have put a spell on her. In a long dialogue involving so many neighbours it may be gathered that Oruko has extraordinary powers of prophecy.

From Orukorere now the focus shifts to Ebiere. The neighbours have noted how queer she has become and how she looks too stiff and acquired clay colour. All these suggest that Ebiere is not the same woman that
she was. All those who have been commenting get away like goats before ants on seeing Ebiere. She is also told about Orukorere's crying by her son, Dode. She is not surprised because she has been such a thing before. She is all sympathy for her. She says:

"The woman is almost a child once more"

"Why, yes. Any one can see that from how she behaves And for that alone I get rather fond of her" (p. 20)

Zifa also agrees with his wife and says so to his brother.

While the three discuss Orukorere Dode, brings up the news that she is up and sinking. Now Orukorere comes out of her trance and tells them that she has missed the leopard. She adds that she is not a proper leopard but might be a snake. As she sets out of the house she asks for money but she is refused.

In the Third Movement there is a domestic scene with Ebiere scolding Dode for playfulness. She complains that he does not know how to bathe but knows how to eat all through the day. She is so annoyed with his behaviour that she knocks him on the head. Tonye who has been
watching the mother and the son chide Ebiere for her rudeness. He even boasts that children in his family are well taken care of. At this Ebiere makes a hissing sound and Tonye taunts her that she is like a snake and her hissing suggest spite and sinister notice. What he cannot understand is that such a thing should come from a housewife and he is innocent of her meaning. At this Ebiere expresses her helplessness in the family. But the lack of sympathy is common to every one in the family. Tonye does not understand the cause of her misery. Ebiere now comes out openly and tells him how she has not been able to bring forth children after the only child. She says:

Thus the elders pray: only one seed
The elephant brings forth at a time until
The house is full, yes, until the house be
Full even if this takes ten falls of the flood

The analogy with the elephant is indicative of her disappointment with the only child. Tonye advises Ebiere to give up all thoughts of more children and take care of her child and husband properly. He finds fault with her for neglecting them, not cooking regularly and soon.
Stung by criticism of her irregular ways she counters him that she has been very regular:

Of course, it is the woman who is in the wrong
Always - I who have suffered neglect and
Gathered mould like a thing of sacrifice
Left out in sun and rain at the cross-roads
You talk to me of my short temper; what
Short temper have I when it is pulled and
Tugged at daily like a hook-line? p.

No longer content with indirect suggestions Ebiere now provokes Tonye to take up the duties of his brother. She demands that he must prove his strength and manliness. Initially he resists Ebiere's provocation but ultimately yields to her. Orukorere hears about it from Dode and closes the door for them. Although she has not prevented Ebiere and Tonye from the sexual act she realises that it is a sign of woman of the great betrayal of her rage. Pleading her helplessness to separate Tonye and Ebiere and feeling pity for Zifa she remembers how there was a fore warning of all this before:

I said there was
A serpent in the house but nobody as usual
Will take me seriously. Yet the hiss of the creature
Was up among the caves, down under the
Stool. Last night I cried it had coiled itself
Into a pad to pillow my head but the house
Was full of snoring sound and as usual
Everybody snorted. p.

In the climactic final movement Zifa discovers the truth.
The adulterous relationship between his brother Tonye
and his wife incenses him. What is more hurting than
his brother's conduct is his wife's concern for his
brother. He cannot understand the change that has come
over. She had always been critical of Tonye but:

Now she stands

Guard over him in my bed against him

Zifa spares to kill both of them. Orukorere unaware of
Zifa's anger reminds everyone to get ready for the market.
She thinks that Zifa got up early to make offerings of
sacrifice to those who guard the house. Zifa refers to
his misfortunes "these many years" but his aunt advises
him to be patient. Now Zifa comes out with cause for
his anger which lies in the infidelity of his wife.
He demands his aunt to tell him whatever had happened between his brother and his wife. Orukorere explains how she has tried her best to prevent the adultery. She instills courage in him and soothes him saying that only a goat cries when it is caught by a leopard. She tells him that he is not a goat and the strong do not weep.

After a very intimate scene between Zifa and his aunt in which both of them discuss the crisis in the family there is a tense situation. The brothers Zifa and Tonye confront each other. While Tonye thinks that his brother is unaware of the adultery Zifa is angry with his brother. Tonye insists on Ebiere going to the market to barter the fish for other provisions needed in the house but Zifa rejects it. The aunt pleads for patience and ask them not to follow.

From the conversation between Zifa and his aunt it may be gathered that there is going to be a sacrifice. The house needs cleaning. When Zifa leaves for a while on a visit to the shrine Orukorere is unhappy at the turn of events. She says that several transgressions
have been committed in the house. She invokes her
dead brother to tell him how fortunate he is in the
other world. If he were alive he would find his sons
"like bad fish eating one and another". Meanwhile,
there is the goat crying and she must leave to find
a live chicken to carry out the ritual.

It is ironical that while every one in the
family knows about their guilt. Ebiere and Tonye
delude themselves in the belief that no one knows
about their affair. Ebiere even suggests to Tonye that
they could run away and "set up house in another week".
Tonye will catch fish and they will have their child.
Tonye warns against such a move since Zifa does not
want Ebiere to go to market. Then Ebiere tells him
that Zifa will leave on his ship and before he returns
they might fly. Now Zifa returns and is in querrulous
mood. He tells his aunt that he will now make sacri-
ifice to the gods. He has long ignored the advise to
that effect. But Orukorere reminds him that he is not
cleansed yet. It is harmful and rash to go against
the custom. But Zifa is in a hurry. He asks his
brother and his wife to hold the goat by the feet and
horns. Once the sacrifice is performed Zifa is confident that the corruption is removed. Zifa asks his brother Tonye to put the goat's head with all its horns into the pot. Ebiere and Tonye are surprised by Zifa's command because they know that it is difficult to push the goat's head into the pot. While Tonye is at it Ebiere fails. Orukorere asks Tonye to run away lest he should be killed by Zifa. Tonye begins to flee. He locks himself up in a room. Zifa warns him that he will break open the door and kill him. Orukorere now calls out the people. People gather and they understand what has happened. Towards end of the play we will find that Tonye has hanged himself and Ebiere never recovers but dies. Zifa himself walks into the sea.

The Song of a Goat is firmly rooted in the Nigerian soil. The characters, situations, problems are all authentic. The Ijaw beliefs in curses, spints and ritual offerings from the texture of the play. Clark builds the plot to its climax by a series ofMomments, each Movement ending with arousing expectation of future events. The play has a sense of
doom as every character is powerless and caught in a web which he cannot break. The dramatic quality gains its strength from the poetry of the play. Like the tragic hero in a Greek play the central character, Zifa, is a plaything for gods. For the Nigerians the play reflects the cardinal value of family - for the men to bring about strong treed and for women to faithful to their men.

References

1. All textual passages are taken from OUP, London editing J.P. Clark's three plays.