

The Main Themathologic Preoccupation of Femi Osofisan's Radical Drama

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Introduction

But the younger Nigerian dramatists are determined that something can and must be done about the Nigerian condition. *Their plays end usually with a call for action and change, rather than with noble resignation to a fate which masters men in every age. Often there is an explosion of revolutionary action right on stage. Their concern is not with continuity but with new directions... Their assault on the way things are is direct and their prescriptions for cure are clear.* Often this makes their texts less rich in meaning and ambiguity than the poetic dramas of Soyinka and Clark, but they are winning a new audience for theatre and giving it a new role in the struggle to change the consciousness of Nigerians.¹ (my emphasis)

Gerald Moore, a very perceptive critic of drama and theatre, in the above quotation has in the main grasped the thematic focus of the Nigerian literary drama of the radical vein. This new dramatic trend started its potent incursion on the Nigerian stage from about the 1970s and is fast becoming an aesthetic force to reckon with. Writers in this radical framework (in Marxist parlance) include Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, etc. The potency of this alternative aesthetic is attested to, among other things, by the fact that playwrights who hitherto tenaciously clung to non-radical dramatic theory and practice are steadily employing the *modus operandi* of radical aesthetics in their various works.

From the ample evidence adduced from this aesthetic twist in Nigerian dramaturgy, one could (with confidence) assert that the works are, essentially, philosophically influenced by Marxist dialectical-historical materialism which emphasises the apprehension of the objective reality of the world as well as changing that reality for the benefit of society. Dialego puts this more lucidly and I wish to quote him at some length:

Firstly the need to understand the world as it really is –which is broadly speaking, *materialist* approach, an approach which treats the world as a material force in its own right that exists independently of what we may think or like it to be; and *secondly* the need to understand this material world, either in nature or society, as a world of interconnected change and development, a world of universal conflict and contradiction between what is new and dying and what is new and struggling to be born – an approach we call *dialectical*.² (Dialego's italics)

It should be pointed out at this juncture, that the expression of dialectical-historical materialism in artistic form and content is the bedrock of Marxist aesthetics. I shall now employ the canons of Marxist aesthetics in an attempt to critically analyse the radical dramaturgical works of Femi Osofisan who is unarguably one of the leading dramatists, theatre directors

and critics of Nigerian provenance, with a focus on their main themes. His four plays which are purposively selected for the analysis that follows overtly contain the themes of *revolution* and *revolutionaryromanticism* which are very pivotal to Marxist dramaturgic aesthetics and criticism.

Revolution and Revolutionary Romanticism in Osofisan's Radical Dramaturgy

While the drama of non-radical idiom views conflict in society through the medium of theatre as being the divine design of the gods/goddesses, spirits and forces of nature in a perpetually irredeemable situation, radical dramaturgy perceives the conflict as generating from class struggle in society. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels pointed this out very early enough in their prolific writings when they posited that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle." They went further to expatiate that this struggle is between the "oppressor and oppressed" and that this struggle either leads to "revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."³ Radical drama aptly realises that to resolve this conflict for the benefit of the larger part of society, the majority in society has to fight it out in the form of a revolution since the oppressor hates and resists the idea of relinquishing his privileged position. Marx and Engels stressed this point in the following context:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of the men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.⁴ (emphasis original)

Our plays of investigation, namely *The Chattering and the Song*⁵, *Morountodun*, *No more the Wasted Breed* and *Red is the Freedom Road*⁶ all contain, thematically, the revolutionary element from the class antagonistic perspective. In *The Chattering and the Song*, for example, the conflict in the main play is between the workers and the State. The workers' budding revolutionary movement, termed the Farmers' Movement in the play, is spearheaded by Leje, Sontri, Moka, Yajin and later Funlola. They constitute the vanguard for the budding revolutionary storm. Moka, however, betrays the Movement and decamps to the side of the State as a secret police agent and arrests Sontri. The Farmers' Movement is aimed at stimulating consciousness in the farmers and workers towards the total annihilation of the State apparatus of exploitation and dehumanisation. The monstrous coercive State apparatus is exposed through a corrupt Public Service that trades in human souls and conscience for parochial materialistic gains. Sontri partly unmasks this in his mock trial of the weaver birds which is histrionically comic and satiric. The weaver birds which are a theatrical symbol of the poor in the society of the drama, are convicted because they have built their nests

Without procuring cement at inflated tariffs from authorized profiteers, without *a priori* development plans being forwarded for intellectual distortion in the Press, and finally, without waiting for these plans to mature in the patient womb of time . . . a preliminary wisely assured elsewhere through the ingenious invention of red tape. . . ahem ahem . . . we can only wonder how their government functionaries manage to eat, deprived thus of their legitimate ten percents. . . ahem . . . that's just by the way ahem . . . such retrogressive practices, we repeat, must not be allowed to proliferate; therefore, guilty! guilty! guilty!⁷

The accused (weaver birds) must therefore be “hunted and massacred without mercy.”⁸

The-play-within-the -play, which is, in fact, the central scene of the larger play, explores further this revolutionary theme. Here too the conflict is between the downtrodden and the State. However, while the State in the larger play represents the modern State in Nigeria, the State in the playlet represents the pre-capitalist feudal Oyo kingdom under the exploitative-tyrannical and oligarchical canopy of Alafin Abiodun. The forces of the downtrodden are powerfully represented by Latoye, the agitator, and he lays bare the high-handedness of this sucking and scroogean monarchical system, and appeals to Alafin's guards to understand their plight that is hitherto encapsulated in ignorance, to support him in the tooth and nail war against oppression:

Alafin and his men are fed and are flourishing, but they continue to steal your lands. They are rich; their salaries swell from the burden of your taxes. Their stores are bursting, your children beg on the streets.⁹

This revolutionary theme also finds itself at home in Osofisan's *Morountodun*. Here the revolutionary belligerency is staged by the farmers against the coercive State apparatus. The State in this play too is exposed as being corrupt, exploitative and dehumanising. The entire dramatic conflict is epitomised by Bogunde, a revolutionary combatant in the play, in the following excerpt when he states that the wanton brutality meted to them by the State is “All because we refuse to pay money we haven't got. Because we refuse to let men with two balls like us march upon our heads.”¹⁰

This conflict precipitates a physical combat between the poor farmers and the privileged or oppressor class with resultant bloodshed on both sides. The major aim of the peasants in this bitter and herculian struggle is to restore humanity to society which has been systematically and monstrously dehumanised by the diabolic agencies of the State. The State of the play, which is wholesale capitalist, serves only the interest of the privileged few. The peasants' action here is in complete accord with Paulo Friere when he asserts thus:

But while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is man's vocation. This vocation is constantly negated, yet it is affirmed by that very negation. It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and violence of the

oppressors; *it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity.*¹¹ (my emphasis)

No More the Wasted Breed also hinges on a revolutionary conflict. This drama is constructed on the traditional purification ritual in society. This ritual of human sacrifice is supposed to be an annual affair in the society of the play. The victim, by his ritual death, it is believed, carries away the sins of his society. It is also believed that this scapegoat leads society to regeneration. The play reveals that religion, being a diabolic super-structural component of the animist *bourgeois* society, has made this sacrificial obligation an exclusive reserve for the masses in the society. Here, Biokun who belongs to the masses is just about to perform the senseless ritual obligation as a carrier when his bosom friend, Saluga, interrupts the process by questioning the rationality of choosing only the propertyless, the hoi polloi in society as scapegoats, instead of the rich with their pot-bellies, in the following conversation with the priest:

SALUGA: Tell me, why is it always us who give our lives? Why is it always the poor who are called to sacrifice? Why is it always the wretched, never a wealthy man, never the son of a king, who is suddenly discovered to bear the mark of destiny at difficult moments and pushed on to fulfill himself in suicidal tasks? Why?

TOGUN: You must ask the gods, who decide such things. Carriers are born –

SALUGA: Yes, Born poor –

TOGUN: With the mark on the chosen. Look at the mole on his chest.

SALUGA: And who decided that chest moles are the mark of identity for carriers? *Why not fat cheeks like yours for instance? Or a rotund overblown belly? I would have thought that a more juicy meal for your cannibal gods.*¹² (my emphasis)

Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road* also deals with revolutionary conflict for the purpose of freedom of the oppressed. The oppressed here are people who have been captured and enslaved in a foreign kingdom. Some of them were soldiers of respectable ranks while others were kings in their respective kingdoms prior to their time of captivity. The slaves are subjected to a lot of inhuman and barbaric treatment in this foreign land. Among them is Akanji who plans secretly to emancipate the slaves including himself. The conflict here is clearly between the slaves and the monarchy. Apart from sacrificing the children of the slaves to the gods of the kingdom, the inhumanity meted to them is exemplified in the following stage direction: "*At this moment enter a group of SLAVES, with a SLAVE DRIVER. Chained together about the waist and ankles, the SLAVES carry boulders on their shoulders or heads.*"¹³ Another stage direction puts it that "*The whip cracks. An OLD WOMAN falls. It is AKANJI'S MOTHER. He turns his face away.*"¹⁴

Akanji, in spite of all odds, manages to mobilise the slaves into a formidable revolutionary force. He explains to them that their degrading condition is not the work of the gods or other spiritual beings, and that it is

only their collective might directed against the oppressor that will guarantee their freedom. In reply to one of the slaves, who believes in fatalism, Akanji has this to say:

No. The gods you speak are in our muscles! Surrender is in your willing, not in magic. I offer you freedom, but only to men. Only to those who can stand and beat their chest.¹⁵

His pedagogy and andragogy of the slaves on the need and strategy of regaining their cherished freedom leads them to praxis and all of them shout with revolutionary conviction, "Death to all oppressors!"¹⁶

This theme of revolution, as opposed to resignation to fate, is tied to what is termed, in Marxist parlance, as *revolutionary romanticism*. It is very germane, at this juncture, to focus the critical lens on this aspect of the aesthetic. Situating this aspect within the realm of scholarly discourse, a Marxist aesthetician points out that

In our circumstances, romanticism is connected above all with heroic themes; its eyes are turned, not on the heaven of metaphysics, but on the earth, in all its senses – on triumph over the enemy and triumph over nature.¹⁷

It is pertinent to initiate this facet of our field of investigation with the above quotation so as to avoid confusing revolutionary romanticism, as an aesthetic construct bearing a Marxist stamp, with romanticism *per se*. As it is evident in the above quotation, this construct is anti-metaphysical and it is built on what could be rightly termed *revolutionary optimism*. The incongruousness of this and romanticism *per se* is flamboyantly demonstrated in the semantics of the following excerpt:

romanticism in the majority of cases has been connected with idealistic roaring into metaphysical dimensions and "other worlds", with its exalted emotion of the "sublime beautiful" led beyond the confines of the objective world.¹⁸

It could be argued, with ample justification, that all the four plays of our study, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Morountodun*, *Red is the Freedom Road*, and *No more the Wasted Breed* are constructed, consciously with the spirit of revolutionary romanticism. In all these plays, the collective energy of the people that is vigorously employed in praxis is not based on metaphysicality; it is based on social awareness and articulated struggle. Secondly, it is crystal clear from the action of the plays that victory for the people is either achieved or hoped for. Freedom is presented as man's vocation which must be pursued relentlessly and vigorously until it is finally achieved.

Paradigmatically, it is dramatically vivid that the revolt of the slaves charismatically stage-managed by Akanji in *Red is the Freedom Road* is successfully implemented and freedom is won by the dehumanised, not by divine design or assistance, but by a social revolution, pure and simple. This play, like the others in our investigative field, is a histrionic representation of the playwright's consistent conviction and vision that freedom is a social quest; and that once there is meticulous strategising and homogeneous

progressive action on the part of the oppressed, there is no power inside or outside society (including the gods) to suppress such gargantuan and invincible social might.

Similarly, the successful revolutionary action spearheaded by Saluga against the social iniquity imposed on humanity in general, and the poor in particular by Elusu, goddess of the inland waters, and her priest, Togun, in *No More the Wasted Breed*, is also of vital importance to this critical inquiry. Contrary to non-radical approaches to aesthetics in the theatre which is firmly tied to the apron strings of animistic cosmology, the aesthetics of revolutionary romanticism as employed in this piece of theatre brings the goddess to a fatal trial. She is found guilty. As a result of this, she is not only forced to resurrect Saluga whom she has just killed but also she has to retract the flood and the deadly epidemic she has antisocially castigated the community with. In fact, she has to die for her monstrous iniquities for the purposes of regeneration in this very society. The following excerpt at the play's end captures precisely the core or kernel of revolutionary romanticism:

OLOKUN: I withdraw to the waves. You have become masters of your own fate. How beautiful, and how tragic. Farewell. (*Exit*)

BIOKUN: Yes. How beautiful and how tragic! Farewell!

SALUGA: Farewell, god of justice! We salute you.

BIOKUN: Look, Saluga! That's Oriki coming, is it not?

SALUGA: With Erindo! They're running! Running here!

BIOKUN: Running! He's saved! My son's alive!

TOGUN: And the people bursting out of their huts!

SALUGA: Drums! I hear drums!

TOGUN: And the sun, see! The sun is shining again!

SALUGA: The whole world's awake again! Leaves are turning green, look!

BIOKUN: Let us go! Let's go and join the dancing!¹⁹

The successful revolutionary struggle of the farmers against the capitalist status quo in *Morountodun* is another good example of revolutionary romanticism. The farmers believe in their collective action for the struggle against dehumanisation in spite of myriad perplexities which include the inadequacy of weaponry and the betrayal of the farmers by cut-throat dupes and vampires like Lawyer Isaac and Alhaji Buraimoh. These two have sold the farmers literally to the State for money as pointed out by the Superintendent:

SUPERINTENDENT: You haven't heard? Lawyer Isaac who was helping us track these ruffians down. They were once with the peasants; he and Alhaji Buraimoh till we found their price.

ALHAJA: How do they come into this?

SUPERINTENDENT: *We bought them.* But the peasants captured them and almost put them to death. During the evacuation, they seized the chance to escape. And then got shot by mistake, by my boys. You see the irony. That's war for you.²⁰ (my emphasis)

The success of this revolutionary action is registered at the end of this play through a character called Director when he says, as a dramatic raconteur, that

Well, the old man was right. Marshal [the leader of the revolution] and his men did not come back. It was, you'll admit, a suicidal mission? . . . In the end, peace came, but from the negotiating table, after each side had burned itself out.²¹

The thematic focus here, therefore, is not only on struggle; it also projects a positive view of optimism as contained in one of Titubi's revolutionary songs:

Be always like this day
Beside me. Wear hope like a jewel:
It never fades
It never fades
It never – ²²

The Chattering and the Song is not excepted in this aesthetic frame. Both the playlet and the larger play converge within this frame. In the playlet, it is clear that the success of the revolutionary action triggered off by Latoye against the feudalistic egocentricism of the Alafin smacks of revolutionary romanticism *per excellence*.²³ Although Sontri, one of the leaders of the Farmers' Movement in the larger play, is apprehended by the Gestapo before the Movement can fully translate theory into praxis, his arrest ironically adds fuel to the revolutionary inferno. In this connection, I have submitted elsewhere that

One might ask, if... Osofisan stands for the common man why should Sontri, one of the leaders of the farmers fall victim to power sadism at the end of the play? The answer here is that ... Osofisan is not a "romantic" artist and he is aware of the fact that a revolution cannot easily succeed. Yet we could see that the spirit of revolution does not go to prison with Sontri (Femi Osofisan).²⁴

Sontri puts it candidly to Moka: "There's nothing you can do to stop the birds from singing. Moka, the revolution is already on wing, you cannot halt it!"²⁵

The theatrical *joie de vivre* contained in the harvest celebration at the end of the play is revolutionary romantic. The revolutionaries have abundant hope in their victory over the oppressive, retrogressive and oligarchical sociopolitical and economic order. A stanza of the song of those celebrating makes the point crystal clear:

When everyone's a farmer,

We'll wipe out the pests
 In the land,
 No more injustice,
 Labour's for all
 No more oppression,
 All hands to hoe²⁶

Conclusion

This study has identified and explicated the main thematic preoccupation of the selected radical dramas of one of the most seminal Nigerian dramatists, critics and theatre directors, Femi Osofisan. The focus has been on the themes of revolution and revolutionary romanticism which one considers to be the fulcrum of Marxist dramatico-theatrical aesthetics. Based on the foregoing, one has no doubt in one's mind that there is the appropriate treatment of the two cardinal themes in these dramas.

END NOTES

1. Gerald Moore, "Political Drama in Nigeria", A. B.B.C. Talk Show, broadcast on Sunday, 8th October, 1978, quoted in Yemi Ogunbiyi, "Towards a More Relevant Drama and Theatre", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria; A Critical Source Book*, Lagos, Nigeria Magazine, 1981, op. cit., p. 129.
2. Dialego, *Philosophy & Class Struggle*, Ibadan, Afrografika Publishers, (nd)., pp. 5 – 6.
3. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Peking, Foreign Language Press, 1975, pp. 32 – 33.
4. Ibid.
5. Femi Osofisan, *The Chattering and the Song*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1977, p. 20.
6. Femi Osofisan, *Morountodun and other Plays*, Longman Nigerian Ltd., 1982.
7. Femi Osofisan, *The Chattering and the Song*, p. 20.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 42.
10. Femi Osofisan, *Morountodun and Other Plays*, op. cit., 1982, p. 49.
11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 20.
12. *Morountodun and Other Plays*, op. cit., p. 105.
13. Ibid., p. 120.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 131.
16. Ibid., p. 132.

17. Nikolai Bukharin, "Poetry, Poetics, and the Problems of Poetry in the USSR", in Bernard F. Dukore, ed., *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winton, INC. 1974, p. 969.
18. Ibid.
19. *Morountodun and Other Plays*, op. cit., pp. 110 – 111.
20. Ibid., p. 57.
21. Ibid., pp. 78 – 79.
22. Ibid., p. 79.
23. *The Chattering and the Song*, op. cit., pp.41 – 42.
24. Charles Uji, "Osofisanic Theatre Experiment in *The Chattering and the Song*", unpublished review of the production of the play performed at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre, 14/4/77, p. 4. This production was directed by Osofisan and he played the role of Sontri himself.
25. *The Chattering and the Song*, op. cit., p. 47.
26. Ibid., p. 56.

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