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Adaptation and the Individual Talent: An Intertextual Reading of *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (Pp. 185-196)

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Abstract

*A substantial amount of African dramatic works are adapted diversely from those of older Classical, Elizabethan, Modern and even African playwrights. This reveals that the writers admit to being influenced by those playwrights yet elements of their own creative imagination are noticeable in the plays. These creative tendencies in the plays refute the claim that adaptation is akin to imitation. Using one of Osofisan's adapted plays as the bedrock for its position it is the contention of this essay therefore that the art of adapting plays is not tantamount to the practice of slavish imitation.. Through a vivid exposition of the different materials that go into the making of *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*, the paper hypothesizes that adaptation and creative artistry can produce classics at the end.*

Introduction

In his expedition to the world of stories in order to achieve the multifarious purposes of creating ideological, political and aesthetic impact, an author often finds himself at the doorstep of an older one, choosing plays to adapt and update so as to achieve historical conformity and contemporary relevance simultaneously. Adaptation in this case, there are other cases of adaptation in fields such as science and education, entails a writer's recycling of older literary/creative materials with several intentions including the need to bring out another improved version of it. Cassell's *Encyclopedia of Literature* describes adaptation as an attempt to achieve medium of expression through

the medium of inherited material, implying therefore that the source material is only a means to an end and not an end in itself but a raw material for the artist to practice his ingenuity on. In the course of adaptation, a writer uses the other as a mouthpiece, a platform, a witness to his declarations which, to Owoeye, is like calling “on their seniors in the art to bear witness to their claim”.(2008: 307) This is in line with Eliot’s (1993) view in his “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where he affirms that

. . .if we approach a poet without this prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual part of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (1993: 71)

Thus the existing and the new meet in an artistic marriage to give birth to a literary child imbued with the attributes of both. The interface of adaptation and creative skill and the problems involved in the merger are what I therefore set out to examine here through the experimental theatre of Femi Osofisan as explicated in his *Who is Afraid of Solarin?*, a conscious adaptation of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*.

Adaptation as Literary Concept

The concept of adaptation is one that spreads across all genres of literature and is in consonance with the theory of intertextuality which posits, according to Kristeva, that “...any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another...” (1986: 37) The theory of intertextuality dwells a lot on the text and its link with other texts all around and posits that meaning can be got only by relating a text to others. The term intertextuality has become so wide that it tends to overshadow others earlier used to describe the relationship between texts such as allusion, parody, adaptation and even influence. Irwin laments, “intertextuality has eclipsed allusion as an object of literary study” (2004: 227).

The interest here, however, lies mainly on adaptation, a concept subsumed under the theory of intertextuality though it accommodates authorial intention in a manner that the proponents of intertextuality as literary theory are averse to. Irwin(2004) exclaims that

Authorial intention is unavoidable; intertextual connections are not somehow magically made

between inanimate texts but are the products of authorial design . . . (p.228)

Though the trend that Barthes (1988) and Kristeva (1986) would have all follow is to look only internally at all texts and ignore the author, this paper is going right back, in agreement with Irwin to the author to find his intentions in adapting older literary works because the texts that the proponents of intertextuality would have us focus on are nothing but the products of the writers' decisions.

It is important to note, right away, that adaptation is not an act for prospective "literary dubbers" (Owoeye, 2008: 307) who have no ideas except that which they see in others' works neither is it the result of a dearth of initiatives on the part of the adapting playwright. Levy equally supports this, saying adaptation is not "an uncritical acceptance and perpetuation of historical precedents" Most adapting playwrights have their own original ideas which are only located in the vision of the older writer, employed to expand, transmit or shape the author's intention. This, as we have seen, turns out to be the most crucial aspect of the sub-genre otherwise the greatest criticism of adaptations would be that they are slavish imitations or mere repetitions. To avoid this, every adapting writer has always displayed, almost lavishly, his own creativity and imaginative ability in order to imprint a personal stamp on the material he has decided to rework.

Adaptation in the Dramaturgy of Osofisan

Femi Osofisan is a master adapter whose record of adaptations is unmatched by any on the continent and is soaring high enough to stand side by side with Bertolt Brecht, the playwright with the greatest number of adaptations till date. However, Osofisan is an adapter with a difference, one who vigorously shakes his sources and reconstructs the work with a fierce imposition of his own ideology and views. Osofisan does not produce any gently or slightly modified version of a play rather he disrupts the whole order of the earlier play and puts together something fresh and inspiring, with his own dramatic trademarks loudly imprinted on it.

Osofisan's dramaturgy is guided by certain beliefs and principles, which are reflected in all his plays with a genius. His strict belief in egalitarianism and classlessness in society has earned him various titles from critics who want to give extraneous reasons for his commitment. However, there is one claim of his, which appears to be his driving force in his playwrighting career. In an

interview with Enekwe in 1978, the year Osofisan wrote *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* he states clearly that

. . . literature has a relevance to society, because it takes roots in society and deals with characters and situations taken from society. The province of the imagination is not ethereal, but is socially conditioned, and the writer himself is sociologically, ideologically determined (*Excursions in Drama and Literature*; 1993: 21)

The statement implies that the first consideration of Osofisan, like other adapting playwrights, lies in the relevance of the material to be adapted to his immediate society, the purpose he can achieve by bringing in something that already existed elsewhere into his own surroundings. Thus we find him, through such plays as *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, *No More the Wasted Breed* and *Women of Owu*, transforming older plays from Greek and African origins to a contemporary society that is fraught with manifestations of the same issues raised by the older playwrights. His adapted works always promote his literary department on the subjects of gender, myth and leadership. Thus while *No More the Wasted Breed* counters the traditional notions of sacrifice and scapegoatism, *Another Raft* is pitched against the claims of and the idea of submission to fatalism. In *Who Is Afraid of Solarin*, the playwright superimposes the decay in government circles in Russia as witnessed in *The Government Inspector* upon the equally corrupt Local government system of administration in Nigeria.

Who Is Afraid of Solarin? and The Government Inspector

In *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* Osofisan makes no attempt to conceal the fact that the play is an adaptation of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, though the style, theme and language of the play are altered with a view to heighten the humorous effect of the entire play. *The Government Inspector* ordinarily appears Nigerian the way it reeks of corruption, insincerity and concealment of truth and diversion of government funds. Osofisan has however, increased the humour and raised other issues in the play, which relate directly to the Nigerian political system and the entire Nigerian society at large.

The impending visit of the Public Complaints Commissioner to the Local Government gets the Council Officials jittery and apprehensive of what will become of them if the reputedly strict and no-nonsense commissioner should really visit and discover all their fraudulent acts just like that. Their meeting

in Gbonmiayelobiojo's sitting room at the beginning of the play is thus to find a way to forestall the occurrence of such a dangerous visit. Various options are considered and weighed thoroughly before they agree to send for Baba Fawomi, an Ifa Priest, to help them use spiritual powers to cancel the visit of Solarin, the Public Complaints Commissioner whose name alone sends shivers down the spines of every one of them. Baba Fawomi only plays on their intelligence because it is obvious he has no power of divination as he claims to. Yet he is smart enough to keep all of them following him and he is the one who discovers at the end that Isola is only a fake and not the real Commissioner. Isola, like Hlestakov, plunders them so much when he discovers that they must have mistaken him for a very important government personality. He collects so much money, promises to marry Cecilia and elopes before the truth is discovered.

Osofisan himself has commented on his play *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* that it is

. . .an adaptation that I've tried to make relevant to our own Local Government system which has just been established, and in which there's a lot of corruption. (*Excursions in Drama and Literature*, 1993: 27)

Apparently, the writing of *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* is triggered by the parallel discovered between the tsar government in Russia and the Local Government system in Nigeria.

Osofisan however blows up what appears to be subtle sense of humour in *The Government Inspector* as he throws everybody into raucous laughter by the satiric characters, situations and statements he creates. Bamidele Lanrele says, "If Gogol's *The Government Inspector* is comic satire, *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* is tragic satire". (1996: 75). The humorous in the play is achieved through various means as the creation of caricatures of Nigerian politicians, wrong use of English words and the extremely amusing manipulation of Baba Fawomi, the Ifa Priest. It is amidst the tears of laughter that the audience will catch some reverting statements about the level of corruption of the local council officials and this makes Lanrele to further comment that Osofisan is "a playwright who is fond of covering the realities of our social and political life with mock laughter"(78). The academic background of the Price Control Officer for instance is revealed in a most humorous manner:

PCO: . . . No sir, that's not how it happens in Political Science! Ask anyone in the Faculty. They'll tell you about me before I withdrew from the University with the Senate's advice. . . (1978: 13)

While the fact that the speaker is a University dropout thrills the audience to laughter, the salient truth that this is the breed of leaders who rule the country has been exposed and that is the way each one of them rattles on about his situation and personality. Hence, *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* raises the vital issue of leadership as the problem with Nigeria, and indeed the whole of Africa. Where leaders are made of school dropouts and religious whores, to say they are corrupt will then be an understatement.

All the council executives in the play are caricatures of their equivalents in real life. Mrs. Mailo typifies the half-illiterate, half educated Nigeria woman politician who prides herself on her influence and family heritage while the types of Miss. Animasaun throws morals to the dogs and uses 'bottom power' to get whatever they need. Gbonmiayelobiojo, the Council Chairman is no better in his speech and manners. The Chief Magistrate who should be the foremost person in uprightness and law keeping is most profane and immoral among the lot. Oriebora, Pastor Ifagbemi, Lamidi and Lemomu are all absurd and queer characters who have greed and gain as the reasons they do whatever they do in the play.

In creating these seemingly purely Nigerian characters from *The Government Inspectors*, the confirmation is made that an adaptation is more of a work of expertise and skill rather than that of imitation. Much as *Who's Afraid...* follows Gogol in terms of story line and characterization, it equally carves a niche for itself as a play with its own significance and style.

***Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* and Socio-Political- Historic Realities**

The theatre of Osofisan is often the melting point of various issues of social, political, historic and mythical concerns. The totality of his works reveals a deep concern for the effectiveness of the machinery of running society that is intricately linked to its source. Jeyifo (2010 : 89) comments that there is

remarkable similarity between the structure of many of the plots of Osofisan's plays and the symbolic structure Prototypical dilemma tale of traditional African folklore.

Aside making jest of individual politicians, *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* is a statement on the Nigerian government of the time, the government policies and their insincerity of purpose. The Councillor for cooperatives jokingly asks the Councillor for Education.

CC: And what of you; is it the burden of plunder from the UPE buildings project that keeps you stunted?

Later, the playwright supplies an information in the footnote that

The Universal Primary Education project started by the Federal Nigerian Military Government in 1976 is to make primary education free and compulsory for all Nigerian children. The programme became controversial because of the enormous costs and allegations of official corruption involved in the exercise (*Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* 1978: 7)

While *Who Is Afraid...?* is not a chronicle of the bad policies of the Nigerian government of the time; it mentions two central ones; the Universal Primary Education project mentioned above and the Operation Feed the Nation, another failed project of the same government. Hence in the midst of jesting and mock laughter, salient national issues are brought up and they eventually become thought provoking.

Isola is discovered to be “fake” just when it becomes too late and the real Public Complaints Commissioner arrives. The Public Complaints Commissioner for Ogun, Oyo and Ondo States of Nigeria when the play was written is Dr. Tai Solarin, a man known for his sternness and severity where justice and obedience to the laws are concerned. The play was written to honour him hence the titling of the play after him though he, like the Inspector in *The Government Inspector*, is a faceless character. In the world of the two plays therefore, true and conscientious people do not exist in the physical but in the imagination, a kind of voice of conscience scourging the corrupt officials for their graft and misdeeds.

Who's Afraid...? can thus be read as a critique of the Nigerian government and leaders of the time considering the way the play tackles the dual issues of corruption and unqualified leadership with precision. The significance of this ample treatment of leadership issues in the play lies in the fact that the same handling is traceable to Osofisan's other plays, adapted or otherwise.

Who Is Afraid of Solarin and Creativity

Osofisan's departure from his source play becomes noticeable right from the Part One where the officers decide to do something about the impending official visit. This set of officers may be decidedly redundant in academics or on the job but when it comes to covering up their crime, they become sharp and ingenious. Many 'unholy' and even violent options are considered before they finally agree to hire a spiritualist to hinder the much dreaded commissioner from visiting. This attitude is characteristic of Nigerians who do not believe in submitting themselves to law and justice, there must be a way to escape from punishment whatever the cost. Arrangements have been concluded to prevent the Commissioner from coming before it is discovered that Isola is already staying in the Pastor's house.

The zeal with which the Councillors believe that Oriebora is the Commissioner shamefully reveals that they have no faith in Baba Fawomi at all. Their patronage of Oriebora is more than that of the Russians who do not consult any spiritualist at all. Not one of them remembers Baba Fawomi when Oriebora is assumed to be the visitor. This complete lack of belief in their objects of worship is the reason why they change religions and are not convinced that any religion is the one to stick to. All the show of religious piety and commitment are only hypocritical and selfish. Abeni first objects to consulting Baba Fawomi because in her words;

My Bible, bought in London, was blessed ten years ago by no less a personality than Leader Ezekiah Ijonru himself, at a ceremony from which you departed, if I remember right, wobbling on your feet with drink . . . I have a rosary from a special curio shop in Jerusalem, birthplace of the Saviour. I pay my dues also every Sunday to the First C S M Cathedral . . . I don't believe in juju (1978: 9)

The statement above holds no water because later when Baba Fawomi is brought, it is on the grounds of unanimity and she raises no objection at all. It becomes clear that she, as well as her colleagues, has no principle and her initial objection is only pretentious. When Baba Fawomi later gets angry that he is served liquid soap as wine, their response give them away as Baba Fawomi's regulars;

BABA FAWOMI: (who has packed his things) Don't bother to shut the door. I am' leaving. Giving

toilet soap to Orunmila. You're going to sacrifice a lot to purge this. And as for the Public Complaints Commissioner, forget it, you're lost. I have already uttered a terrible curse to bring him here. He'll soon be arriving.

ALL: (*in consternation*) What, Baba Fawomi! You won't do that! *Not to old clients?* Consider our families!. . . (*Italics mine*) (25)

The ridicule here is also not only for the corrupt humans but the gods and their agents too. What I believe Osofisan would have us detect is that there is nothing supernatural nor extraordinary in a priest who could not perceive that he has been served liquid soap instead of wine. In all his plays, Osofisan has always unveiled the gods and their representatives to melt down the assortment of myths that surround them. He has never hidden his stand on the ancient form and the purpose they serve in his work. And so, he becomes really pragmatic in his plays, rather than being pretentious. This down-to-earth and practical approach of his leads to the demystifying style he employs. According to Gbilekaa,

The practicality of his theatre has made him to subvert both myth and history using them as pegs to hang his ideological and political idiosyncrasy. (1997: 75)

The practical side to the credibility of the Ifa Priest and his like is that which leads us to see his gimmicks and show of religiosity. That Osofisan's ideological and political idiosyncrasies are also imprinted on this imported play is what is interesting and it is the certification and seal of approval that the adapting playwright lacks neither imagination nor skill.

Osofisan introduces other features into this play to show that he is taking some steps beyond what the older author has done. The concept of the characters Lamidi and Lemomu is the creation of Osofisan, which he intends to use to reveal the extent of the pettiness of the group of leaders the Nigerian nation is bestowed with. Though they are reminiscent of Gogol's Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky, these two do no more than inform of the arrival of an important government personality at the inn. These Nigerian versions are under the service of those leaders who live on gossips and hear-says, employing the secret services of professional talebearers who spy on

unsuspecting citizens and report their activities to these supposed leaders. While the State Security may not be well paid or paid at all, these private 'information service' get good remuneration for the fowl job done.

Among Gogol's council officials, we find no female characters; the only female casts included are Mayor's wife and daughter. Though Gbonmiayelobiojo's wife is involved, her equivalent is Cecilia, Pastor Ifagbemi's daughter. Aside from these two, we have two women among members of the council executive. This attempt at gender balance is an attribute of Osofisan's plays which he tries to bring into this play as well. What is intriguing however, is the rate at which the women match the men in indecency and graft. The woman in them has become silent in the face of corruption while they wake up to the potentials offered them by their sex in their greed and lustful lifestyle. Abeni, the Price Control Officer makes a confession about her personality when Force is Force tries to talk her into accepting a proposal:

. . . Everybody knows that I am ugly, and I've got vulgar manners. And all that talk about eloquence is pure rubbish. Just because I picked up some words from playing scrabble, and overheard some gossip about Zik and Awo. . . (66)

This statement contrasts Abeni sharply with a character like Tegonni or Ayoka of *Yungbayungba and the Dance Contest* for instance. And so Osofisan is revealed, women promoter though he is, to be impartial in his value judgment.

In all plays adapted by Femi Osofisan, *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* is still the closest to the source play in matters of contents and theme. Even the comic intents of Gogol are exaggerated, but not thwarted. This is not the case in many other instances. Sometimes when he fashions out a new play from an existing one, it is to take a different and radical ideological stance from that of the earlier playwright. This has made him and other playwrights to venture into the works of fellow but older Nigerian playwrights. Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark and other older writers loosely tagged "first generation writers" in Nigeria have been committed to the defence of 'tradition' and the supernatural in their works. The "second generation writers", to which Osofisan belongs, and other younger playwrights no longer see the defence of tradition and the belief in fatalism as fashionable. Thus they write various

versions of those plays written by the rather ardent supporters/promoters of the gods and fate.

Conclusion

While noticing that *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* does not deconstruct *The Government Inspector* absolutely, the weaving together of the literary, social and political fabrics in the making of this adaptation confirms that a text is a medley of quotations whose concatenation are done at the whims and caprices of the writer. The artistry employed by the playwright in the making of this distinctive adaptation as Osofisan as those others which are not direct adaptations is commendable. Undoubtedly, to conclude with Obafemi, the African playwright utilizes the idea of intertextuality for popular, materialist purposes. Hence, judging from this adaptation, adapting plays is as good as getting them from other sources like myth, legend, history, politics and society .

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