

OSOFISAN AND THE PARADOX OF A LITERARY STYLE

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Abstract

In order to understand trends and developments on the Nigerian stage, the literary dramatist is considered a determinant of its future advancement. Theatre as a composite art possesses the ability to relate to other cultures, traditions and fields of learning, reaching out and unifying them dynamically.

This paper examines select works of Femi Osofisan as a paradigm for measuring foreign influences on Nigerian drama and theatre, which ideally should maintain a close link with its traditional heritage. It is the submission of this paper that, although Osofisan's theatre is rooted in the social culture of Nigeria, it is however subsumed in Euro-American aesthetics, values, ideologies, philosophies and attitudes. Osofisan, like many other Nigerian playwrights, is thus considered as a product of a paradox. He is inspired by religion, education, his numerous contacts with the West, philosophies and aesthetic traditions of other nations and cultures; a product of the colonial accident and a nostalgic longing for the ancient past. This creates in his writings an identity crisis, which leads to a literature of activism that is committed to fighting for one form of freedom or the other while being enslaved within the same bonds from which the playwright is seeking a release.

It is the submission of this paper that, Nigerian literary drama therefore requires a new form that is akin to its cultural heritage. The formal theatres and the arts theatre syndrome is inhibiting to the vibrant traditional Nigerian theatre culture.

Introduction:

Cultural realisation is an important stage in the technological development of a people. In order to improve technological efficiency, people need to be motivated to take control of their own creative destiny.

This idea emerged in the minds of creative writers like Femi Osofisan who seek to use the theatre as a tool for revolution, freedom fighting, and liberation struggles. It emerged as a reaction against the developed world's continuous imposition of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Since the 1980's a new and energetic politically oriented theatre has come to existence on the Nigerian stage. This theatre has been tagged with such names as:

The People's Theatre.

The Popular Theatre for Social Change.

Theatre of Liberation.

Theatre of the Oppressed

Guerrilla Theatre

Theatre for Development (TFD)

The Marxian Theatre.

These names echo western experimental attempts at creating one form of political theatre or the other for the underprivileged. These new theatre movements are a result of, or reaction to religious, political, social, cultural and educational practices of a developing society.

In Nigeria, the liberation theatre movement is a direct reaction to the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. The proponent of this style of theatre believe that the colonial masters were merely replaced by select elites who served the interest of the colonialists and the multinational companies, enriching their pockets while the majority of the people groaned in hunger and are reduced to intimidation by military coup d' etat and illiteracy. They provide the nation's workforce but are paid insufficient wages while being

reduced to consumers of foreign technology in the name of industrialisation and globalisation. This trend led the people to flee from the rural areas to the urban centres in search of white-collar jobs.

Although there have been valiant resistant movements in parts of the country against colonialist and neo-colonialist moves, the current liberation movement is relatively new to Nigeria. It is a product of the middle class, intellectuals, labour unions and other interest groups. Their inspiration is also a result of contact with similar movements in the west and Latin America. This cross-cultural fertilisation has brought the awareness of neo-colonial exploitation. Among the converts to this struggle are teachers, trade and labour union leaders, student union bodies, women groups, artists and other civil and human rights bodies.

To the forerunners of this revolution, freedom is more than material satisfaction. It is both material and psychological. Erven (14) puts it this way:

In the third world context, freedom means more than emancipation from hunger, thirst, political violence, homelessness, and even physical abuse. It also involves the yearning to create and enjoy economic, political, educational, social, psychological and cultural conditions that would ensure a maximum realisation of human potentials.

Osofisan belongs to the group of radical Nigerian writers who believe in the ideological commitment and conviction that social change could come about by the playwright's ability to raise mass awareness to a positive revolutionary level. While the older generation of Nigerian writers deal with psychological and metaphysical exploration of human conditions and the meaning of life, Osofisan and his emergent group of writers focus on contemporary issues and reject the tragic vision of his predecessors

while opting for the socialist belief in collective heroism.

Osofisan belongs to the reactionary group that demands recognition of the fact that theatre is theatre, that theatre is not real and cannot be real, and to be most effective it must be frankly artificial, and theatrically conventional. Therefore a stage should be called a stage without an attempt to create the illusion of reality. This group is strongly opposed to realism of drama and theatre. Osofisan's artistic reaction to the reality of the Nigerian situation has led to his works taking the form they have taken. Osofisan and his group of contemporary Nigerian writers believe that Nigerian independence is full of empty slogans. They are aggrieved about the bankruptcy of the earlier generation of Nigerian politicians. He and his colleagues in this tradition reject the style of the first generation writers of Soyinka, Clark, and Okigbo. To correct this anomaly, Osofisan's plays show a 'radical revolutionary perspective on contemporary social political issues' (Awodiya 24). His plays propose an alternative to the political impasse and social disorder in the country. Through his plays and critical essays, Osofisan presents to the Nigerian (African) stage an alternative theatre tradition different from the course pursued by Soyinka's generation of playwrights.

Osofisan's theatre manifests a robust experimental theatre tradition that is but a phase in the conscious struggle for political and cultural transformation of Nigeria. Invariably Osofisan's drama mirror's an artist's protest of the decadent political, social and moral order in Nigerian society. The thrust of this theatre lies in the social function of the theatre. He sees the theatre as emerging from the political turmoil which is Nigeria and seeks to use the theatre as a revolutionary tool to raise the consciousness of the masses and by doing so mobilise them into taking control of their history to effect a revolutionary change in the social order. Osofisan speaks of his "ideological commitment to change" in an interview with Olu Obafemi (23-24):

First of all, let's not have any illusions. Art itself cannot change society, be it drama or novel or poetry. But I believe that the kind of awareness, which may lead to change in society, may be cultivated through the medium of art. I think one of our problems emanate from the lack of awareness of the real options available.

Osofisan reinterprets Yoruba mythology to suit his revolutionary philosophy and theatrical aesthetics. While rejecting the tragic vision of the Soyinka generation, Osofisan believes that a revolution is to be achieved only through the collective will and not by the effort of an individual hero.

Although Osofisan started as a student of Wole Soyinka, over the years he has been able, through his prodigious output of plays, to shake off this master-student relationship and has even spearheaded leftist criticism of Soyinka's works. In an interview with Ossie Enekwe (19), Osofisan agreed to having been influenced by Soyinka; but says that he has been able to shed off the Soyinkan influence:

I think it is fairly obvious that I started off as his (Soyinka's) disciple. But that is a long way back. There are things he has taught me, which only he could teach. But I have moved beyond.

Osofisan subscribes to be a leftist and a socialist without wanting to be dogmatically called a Marxist. The influences of Marxist ideologies are quite clearly stated in his works. He sees himself as a progressive artist who is concerned with unveiling the myth of the gods. He sees Soyinka's use of myth and history as retrogressive because Soyinka tends to protect the myth and cult of the gods.

Thus Osofisan marries Marxist ideology with poetic and mythic elements from his own culture in his plays and demands a change

of social conditions of the oppressed and down trodden masses in society. Speaking on his leftist inclination in an interview with Olu Obafemi (24), Osofisan comments on his ideological influences when he states that:

We are still very much a colonial society; bearing in mind that many of us were indoctrinated by the western system. For a long time we were closed to the left, the socialist countries. We just didn't know anything about them.

Osofisan subscribes to the theatre of commitment, using the theatre to achieve social change. In answer to the question of his ideological commitment, Osofisan's reply was that although he abhors labels, however no true artist who is committed could ignore the corruption, squalor, and filth in Nigeria. He stated categorically that:

The narration we invent as artists are already corrupted by the lives we lead, and by the very forms we choose for our compositions. No moment, I mean, no single moment in the biography of any fable is innocent or neutral. No strategy of story-telling is ideologically pure, uncommitted, uninfected –or unfecundated... The creative process invents, and is invented in turn by ideology (Awodiya 36).

Osofisan has over twenty-one published plays and twenty-three unpublished plays to date. (Awodiya 41). Between 1995 when Awodiya made the calculation of Osofisan's works and 2008, Osofisan has churned out over twenty-nine new plays. The volume of plays to his credit makes him readily the most prolific African playwright and goes to underscore his influence on the Nigerian stage.

Born on 16th June 1944 in Erunwon near Ijebu-Ode south western part of Nigeria, Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan has been a professor of drama since 1985, this paper therefore seeks to examine two selected plays of Femi Osofisan with the hope of showing how foreign influences have inadvertently crept into his works and

consequently imposed on the sensibility of the Nigerian theatre audience through his works.

Twingle Twangle a Twinning Tayle.

In *Twingle Twangle...* Osofisan makes use of the folk narrative pattern and built the plot of the play on parallelism. Through the eyes of the Ifa priest (Babalawo), he tells a story of two life choices using for his illustration, twins who embarked on a life-educating journey for the period of five years. Through the personalities of the twins, he presented characteristically the two alternative life choices and the two philosophies associated with the choices.

He takes the twins, Kehinde and Taiye, through a journey of probation that is meant to test and challenge them to bring out the characteristics of each philosophy. While relying on organised violence on the one hand and on the other, he uses music and medicine.

At the crossroads, the twins parted, each his own way. While Kehinde chose the bag that contains instruments of war, Taiye chose the bag that contains medicinal herbs and musical instrument. Each in his journey overcomes obstacles and becomes king in the land of Etido and Ereko respectively. The two life philosophies, represented by the government established by the twins are then tried and tested within a period of five years.

On their return home from the journey, the question of which of the two life philosophy is better is beamed to the members of the audience in a characteristic Osofisan style. Osofisan states clearly in the song that ends the play that

Each of these towns as you see
Represent a philosophy
Which is better, which is worse
That's for you to choose (92).

Two features which characterise Osofisan's theatre according to Chris Dunton (67) are:

an absorption in theatrical form that leads to the use of elaborate framing devices, multiple disjunction in tone and narrative flow, the use of role play and the play-within-the-play; and a commitment to the probing of social and economic injustices in Nigeria that constantly places the aspiration of the under-privileged as the dramas central reference point.

His absorption in theatricality is taken almost for granted in the play. The play opens as a prologue being sung as a gossip by members of the cast as audience members. Thus from the beginning of the play, an attempt is made to integrate the audience into the structure of the performance that at the end of the play when the question of making the choice between the two philosophies is presented in the play, it comes as no real surprise.

Furthermore, in the middle of the play, Osofisan breaks down the action of the play and brings out the entire cast on stage. He advises for a change of actors and the actors argue for roles, and he also provides alternative beginning for the play from the moment of intermission (see Osofisan 50). This action jolts the audience back from the dream world to the reality of the moment that they are in the theatre watching a play. Thus, this Brechtian alienation effect characterises the work by a deliberate attempt to make play; deliberate introduction through the progression of the plot disjunction in narrative flow, the role-play and play-within-the-play. Brecht's plays belong to the radical people's theatre, which has influenced the Nigerian stage through the works of Osofisan.

Also, Augusto Boal (122), in his experiment with the people's theatre in Peru discovers that the spectators have to be involved in the performance of the play:

Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to

the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself often in opposition to the character. In the first place a 'Catharsis' occurs. In the second, an awakening of critical consciousness. But the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself. The spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; On the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonist's role, changes the dramatic action, tries out situations, discusses play for change-in short-trains himself for the real action. In this case, perhaps this is not revolution in itself but it is surely a rehearsal for revolution.

This same pattern of the oppressed is seen in Osofisan's integration of audience into the performance and involves them in making decision as to how the conflict in the play is to be resolved. The assembling of the cast on stage and the breaking of the action of the play to allow for intermission allows time for the audience to think and probably discuss the issues raised in the play.

Another influence on the play is the use of the theatre as a living and present medium of communication as stated by Augusto Boal (126) in his third kind of liberation theatre thus:

One begins to practice theatre as a language that is living and present, not as a finished product displaying images from the past

Osofisan presented the play as a metaphor of the Nigerian Society, using the language of the theatre to focus attention on contemporary Nigerian society's struggle for democracy, with Kehinde and Taye representing the two choices available to Nigeria. The immediacy of the issues raised in the play is imprinted on the mind of the audience when reflected against the background of current events in the society.

In Boal's theatre as in Brecht's, participants (audience) are given time to think and react to issues raised in the play. This variation of Brecht and Boal has found its way into Osofisan's plays with his beaming of the question of choice on the resolution of issues raised in the play to members of the audience and the breaking down of the narrative flow so that the actors can swap roles. Osofisan's dissatisfaction with the continuous performance of western classics in Nigerian schools has led him to look at the other side camping with Brecht and Boal.

In an attempt to reinterpret history and make the masses take control of the productive forces, Osofisan leans heavily on Marxian philosophy. In *Twingle Twangle*, the origin of the amphibious monster, Bilisi, which is embedded in the myth of the people of Etido and has achieved the status of a god among the people, is revealed and Bilisi is not only destroyed physically but destroyed ideologically, as the people's attention is diverted to themselves as a means of solving the problems that were plaguing the society. A new structure is thus erected to occupy the place where Bilisi used to occupy. Kehinde states this philosophy clearly in his speech to the people of Etido:

Kehinde: When I arrived here, you lived in terror.
A mere monster, a beast with no brains, held you in
its power and you fed him with your prettiest girls
every new year. But I arrived, and changed all that.
By that example I meant to teach you the lesson
that, if you wish to live in freedom, you must begin
by unmasking the fables of superstition, conquering
fear, and daring to stand up and fight. (47)

The origin of Bilisi is re-interpreted by the playwright based on the Marxian belief that:

Political, judicial, philosophical, religious, literary,
artistic, etc development is based on economic

development... Men make their history themselves. Only they do so in a given environment, which conditions them, and on the basis of actual relations already existing, among which the economic relation, however they may be influenced by the other-the political and ideological relations are still ultimately the decisive ones. (Marx and Engels, 58)

Osofisan creates an artificial environment in his plays so that his characters can be motivated to take over the productive forces and change their society and history positively. Taye earnestly advised the people of Ereko to take action and defend themselves instead of fleeing their homes before their oppressors, however, not violently but through wisdom, medicine, music and cunning Thus:

Taye... To plant seed is worth nothing if you cannot defend your farm from pest. A man must stand for what he believes in, whatever the price. You see, once you begin to run, you'll never cease from running... These soldiers that are coming, you must think of them as weeds! Yes, a special kind of weed. And the only way to defeat them is- shall I tell you? By feasting! (79)

The playwright seeks solution to the conflict in the play in 'doctrinaire socialism' by stressing abundant wealth in the feast to combat oppressive forces in the town of Ereko while ignoring the African philosophy of equal rights and justice as a basis for African/Nigerian socialism, without providing adequate guidance to the use of the abundant wealth. Thus there is no guarantee that the wealth will not go the way of earlier generations if placed in the hands of the poor majority on whose side Osofisan is fighting.

Osofisan uses Orunmila, the Yoruba god of divination as a

metaphor in the play. Through the eyes of the Ifa priest, he takes us to the world of the two twins, where through cinematic techniques, he experiments with two systems of government: Dictatorship and Democracy- Orunmila is used as an embodiment of knowledge to give vent to Osofisan's view of a revolutionary society. 'He finds in Orunmila an ideal system that fits very neatly with his socialist philosophy' (Awodiya 41). Orunmila is the god in Yoruba cosmology who can look into the past and predict the future. Through Ifa divination, Osofisan forecasts and maps out a vision for society. The Orunmila motif is synthesised with Marxist pattern of social prediction based on precedents to direct the course of action in the play.

To convince the people that the gods are responsible for their troubles, Osofisan has to first move the people against the gods. This is a very difficult task considering the revered status of the gods in Africa. In *Twingle Twangle* Bilisi is reduced to the status of a mere monster and killed and the myth, which has sustained Bilisi's survival as a god over the years, exposed. In *Yungba Yungba* the priestess of the river cult is also exposed. Osofisan's vengeful gods according to Umukoro (32) are not African:

Such vengeful gods that impose disaster on the people are Greco-Roman. They are not African. In the African view, a person chooses his fate, good or bad, and the role of the gods is to approve that choice even in the case of bad choice... the gods allow an escape route through sacrifice.

Osofisan oversimplifies the role of the gods in order to destroy them. This does not have a basis in African philosophy. In *Twingle Twangle* Osofisan assumes that the carrier profession is an ideological trick to suppress the poor and perpetuate bourgeois tradition. That they are all invented lies and are punishment on the poor (see Osofisan. *Twingle Twangle* 47). The idea that only the

poor are being used as carriers is not true to African reality. The rich are also used as carriers. In Soyinka's (1975) *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin Oba is a carrier and he belongs to the ruling class. Osofisan opposes the carrier tradition to give root to his Marxian philosophy.

Again, the subjugation of the male characters by Mama Ibeji is very un-African. The Ifa priest remains silent in the face of insults that are hurled at him and only threatens to invoke curses on Baba Ibeji instead of his assailant. Or is this a deliberate statement by Osofisan that since the society is not democratic it is not a male society anymore? A society where the women folk have the upper hand in matters and tyrannise over the male folks? Well, if that were the case, then the play is not a true symbolic depiction of the Nigerian situation. Osofisan overemphasised the subjugation of Baba Ibeji and the Ifa priest for theatrical effects, thus sacrificing plausibility on the altar of theatricality.

Like Sofola, Osofisan gives details of costume, prop, lights and scenery in the text (see *Twingle Twangle* 9). Osofisan's absorption in theatricality hinges on the influence on the literary theatre tradition. Osofisan has lived and worked mainly in the university community. He writes for the bourgeois university community audience. This audience has been the main focus of Osofisan's theatre. Thus he 'employs in a dialectical and progressive fashion the medium of the total theatre already pursued by Wole Soyinka' (Obafemi 126) and Zulu Sofola. Chris Dunton (90) commenting on the theatricality of the play *Twingle Twangle*, maintains that it is 'a play which shows Osofisan taking his theatre skills on a spree'. His theatre adds a new dimension to the epic as belonging to the African tradition.

Finally, the speech of Professor in the play is an imitation of Mark Anthony's speech in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and it is altercated with French and Latin expressions.

Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest

In *Yungba Yungba*, Osofisan once again uses the formalistic strategy of the epic theatre to exploit technical resources of the traditional African theatre in which he skilfully weaves into pattern the use of song, dance, drumming, miming and storytelling to reinforce the ritualistic and festive aura of the play.

The play focuses on the denial of democratic rights. Through the debate proposed by Ayoka, Dunbarin, and Laboopo – the *Yungba Yungba* group – they argue for the realisation of the political aspiration of the younger generation. The argument progresses through a tightly woven plot of intrigue, dance, music, and mime to the final part where Iyeneri, the priestess at the shrine of the river cult, is forced to open the way for a democratic process. Ukpokodu (123) observes that in the play

The Nigerian scene under Babangida is the social-political background trampoline to leaping to international dehumanisation of freedom of existence.

Marx and Engels propose that social condition is directly tied to the material reproductive forces that are the summation of the economic structure of the society on whose foundation rests the legal and political structure, which corresponds to forms of social consciousness in a society. Thus the mode of production of material, political, social and intellectual life is directly based on this structure. Marx and Engels (42) further argue that it is the consciousness of a man that determines his being. At the point where men are conscious enough to take control and change their social conditions, there arises a conflict in the bourgeois materialistic society:

The bourgeois relation of production are the last agonistic form of social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals, at the same time

the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material condition for the solution of the antagonism.

Art become important in this antagonism. As Umukoro (23) reiterates:

It either reinforces or undermines the efforts of the proletariat. Marx and Engels therefore advocate a form of art, which would help to educate and develop the consciousness of the proletariat, and mobilise them closer to victory over the bourgeois.

Osofisan's efforts at using the theatre to create social awareness in the proletariat and mobilise them to take control of the forces of production finds root in and affirms this Marxian ideology. In the play, the *Yungba Yungba* group is used as the revolutionary arm to raise the social consciousness of the younger generation:

Ayoka: Our voice! My sisters, weighty things are happening in the land! The world is moving, and rapidly too, all around us. Nothing is standing still! Except us! Are we youths just going to continue to dance gleefully every season and choose our husbands, as if that's all we are good for? The affairs of our state, don't they concern us too? After we shall have danced and been applauded, shall we return home to find food cheaper in the markets, and abundant in our kitchen? Is it the husbands we choose whom we shall now cook to tame our raging stomachs? Or will our parents now cease to die in their numbers as they do now, in great poverty, and of disease, which have long been wiped out in other lands? Think my dear sisters! These and other issues on which we need to put our voice, and insist on being heard. (29-30)

The Yungba Yungba group further motivates others towards revolt by exposing the lies perpetuated by the priestess of the river cult to destroy the credibility of Iyeneri, so that they are able to protest and change the course of things. Umukoro (24) observes that Osofisan's play

Reflects the Nigerian society as a capitalist society and proposes that the Marxian model of socialism also called scientific or doctrinaire socialism is a more valid politico-economic system for the country... This is what generates the central ideas in the plays and informs the other dramatic elements.

The characters in the play are based on two classes: The working class and the bourgeois class. The bourgeois comprises the kings represented by Taye, Kehinde, Olori, etc. in *Twingle Twangle* and Aperin, Iyeneri and Iyaloja in *Yungba Yungba*, while the ruled are the impoverished workers, who are in the majority waiting to be led. Thus the conflict in the plays becomes a class conflict.

In the preface to *Yungba Yungba*, Osofisan warns against what he sees as a purely Nigerian interpretation of the play. He called for the working class of the world to unite and fight oppression. This call for the working classes in Europe and America to unite with their African counterparts is overstressing the issue. Historically, the aims of the working classes in Europe and Africa are so divergent that the possibility of a union becomes a mere ideological farce. Osofisan states the purpose of the play in the preface to the first production thus:

This fever of freedom, which first erupted in Eastern Europe, finally spread to Africa, starting from the Benin Republic next door to us... Right now Zambia and Kenya are in the grip of this desperate struggle between recalcitrant despotism and liberation

ideologies. This is what the play is about – the struggle all over Africa, between self-perpetuating regimes and democratic forces. (XIV)

Thus there is a concern for universality and an attempt is made by the playwright to transfer existing dogma of Marxian philosophy to the Nigerian context while concealing the real problem of the working class behind aesthetic flaws. The real problem of the Nigerian working class is not government, but the forces behind the government; specifically Europe and America whose multi-national oil companies dictate the pace of economic development and keep the wages of the Nigerian workers down in order to raise the pay of their counterparts in Europe and America.

Umukoro argues that there is no basis for social relevance in the plays of Osofisan and sees the plays as not being a true depiction of the Nigerian society. He states that:

The conflict between the working class and the bourgeois class for ascendancy bears scant benefit for the Nigerian society. This is because both classes are parasites. Thus the victory of the working class over the bourgeois is not a victory for justice in Nigeria. (29)

In Marxian philosophy, religion is the opium of the masses and therefore the gods are illusions. This is carried further in Osofisan's ideal socialist Nigeria in his plays. He devotes some of his plays to demystifying the gods¹. Also in *Yungba Yungba*, the priestess of the river cult is reduced to a mere political figure that clings to power lustfully. Osofisan rejects out rightly the African world-view of the gods in Yoruba cosmology (see Soyinka 1979) and sees belief and faith in the gods as architects of Africa's problems as escapist. As a result he embarks on a secularisation of the ancient cults of his ancestors. In *Yungba Yungba* the position of the priestess

of the river cult become a political position to be contested for, in a dance contest in which the winner rules for a year.

Osofisan's subversive interpretation of history in Marxian philosophical terms is based on the precept that:

... Our concept of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the Hegelian manner: All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different formation of society must be examined in detail before the attempt is made to deduce from them the political, civil-law, aesthetic, philosophic, religious etc., views corresponding to them. (Marx and Engels 61)

Thus the exploitation of one class by the other is based on the social condition of past ages and to examine bourgeois ideas. In *Twingle Twangle A Twynning Tayle* Osofisan does this by putting forward another reason for the carrier motive – fear; and in *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, he does it by exposing the lies, which have been perpetuated by the ruling class as a trick to remain in power. Thus for a revolution to occur, radical ideas must rupture traditional ideas. Cowardice, narrow-mindedness, helplessness, and the inability to take, must be swept away to give way to the historic movement that is to bring about change in society.

Osofisan's characters are not individualised. They possess group personality. Each group of characters manifest characteristics that are similar to that particular group. Philosophically, reality is thus divided into two exclusive poles. The characters are also compartmentalised into the good and the bad. While the dominant class dwell at the bad pole, the good are subjected to intimidation and exploitation.

Osofisan's preoccupation with the question of human choice as responsible for human state of freedom and un-freedom, motivates the play along existentialist line of reasoning and makes

it apparent that Osofisan is using the play to address a world wide human problem, and in the play he expands the frontiers of existentialism along religious (spiritual) and mythical lines.

Conclusion

Today in Nigeria, the playwright is a product of a paradox. He is inspired by his religion, education, contact with the west, philosophies and aesthetics of other nations and cultures- a product of the colonial accident and a nostalgic longing for the ancient past. This then leads the playwright to idealise the past, which in turn creates identity crises that further leads to literature of activism that is committed to fighting for one form of freedom or another, while being enslaved within the same bonds from which the playwright is agitating for a release. The contemporary Nigerian playwright while agitating for cultural, political, and religious freedom from Europe and America is philosophically, aesthetically and ideologically indebted to the West.

Although it is more than thirty years since Osofisan first emerged as a playwright worthy of note with *The Chattering and the Song*, it is true that the intervening years have considerably modified his political, philosophical, and literary ideas; nevertheless, his more recent works like *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* and *Twingle Twangle A Twynning Tayle* can be best understood as an outgrowth of his earlier works. Osofisan's achievement in the theatre lies in the consistency with which he has pursued his philosophy and the totality of his entire collection of plays, poems and critiques.

The relative instability in Africa compared to the developed world has proved crucial to the development of Osofisan's career as a writer committed to social change and democratisation of African states, since the instability gives him the raw material for his plays by continually denouncing the lot of the masses.

If, according to Soyinka(21) one of the writer's major

occupation is to “record... the mores of and experience of his society’s” or according to Ngugi (34) “to sensitively register his encounter with.... His people’s history’ and to ‘document for posterity the oral traditions and cultural heritage of the community” (qtd. in Ebong, 75) then Osofisan’s subversive Marxian rendering of the gods and subversive version of history and myth does not find root in Nigerian culture. His revolutionary aesthetics is totally out of the scope of the Nigerian society. Therefore, his plays cannot provide the much needed reference point on the Nigerian situation. His sense of revolt is informed by Marxian philosophy. He is unable to find an equivalent in African philosophy and relationship to the gods- a philosophy capable of expressing his revolutionary ideas. Thus his treatment of gods is characteristic of the Western universe of an individualistic society that finds fulfilment in self. He thus denies the existence of the gods in Africa, which makes him an apostate of the African religion. This posture may be attributed to his travels, education, job and contact with other cultures. Osofisan pointedly agreed that

Reading from other cultures, especially from East-European countries, helped to heighten my neutral attitude to religion inevitably therefore, my own thinking, my writing is coloured by all these things. (Awodiya, 35)

Born under Christian parentage, Osofisan studied the history of Christianity and church history. His summation of Christianity and major world religion is that of an instrument of oppression. Hence his treatment of the gods as incapable of solving man’s societal problems. But if in his revolt, Osofisan can now conceive of the Nigerian (Yoruba specifically) gods in the status of a figment of man’s imagination in Western philosophical terms, then his travels and education within and outside the country must have informed him of this subversive turn, because, Osofisan’s gods do

not belong to the class of gods in African mythology. Furthermore, Osofisan humanist dimension is Brechtian. His continuous demonstration that man can alter his future by seizing the materials of production instead of waiting for the gods to intervene to solve man’s problems was first dramatically exposed by Brecht (See Brecht: 1961) who sees man as the ‘centre of the universe’ capable of bringing change to society. Osofisan’s theatre is rooted in the social culture of Nigeria that features a mixture of traditional Nigerian and Euro-American aesthetics, values, ideologies, philosophies and attitudes.

Notes

¹See Femi Osofisan 1982. *No More the Wasted Breed*. Ibadan: Longman; and 1988. *Another Raft*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited.

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