Urban dislocation and post-colonial transformation in the plays of Femi Osofisan

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The modern city fascinates and repels. And all analysts are agreed on this. Be they from the perspectives of geographers, sociologists, architects, town-planners or social workers, reactions to contemporary urban settlements have always been characterized by ambivalence and ambiguities. The city generates hope; it celebrates love and indeed, proffers innumerable wonders. But the same city engenders despair and loneliness, destroys great dreams and promotes chaos and crimes. Write Michael P. Weber and Anne Lloyd (1973:3) as they struggle to capture the image of the contemporary American city:

> City planners talk about an urban crisis that cannot be solved without drastic action. Inner city residents complain of rundown housing, poor schools, lack of jobs, and a variety of other shortcomings. On the other hand young professional people point to the cultural intellectual and recreational advantages of urban life. The sub-urban business person-commuter however speaks of job opportunities while decrying morning and evening traffic jam, pollution and crime in the streets. Yet all of these people, along with 150 million other Americans continue to live in urban area.

This picture of the American city is applicable, albeit with modifications, to all cities of contemporary capitalist societies. And Alan Gilbert and Josef Gugler would readily support this. In their jointly-authored book, they locate the logic of this universalism in modern technology, the transnational "price mechanism", international finance system and "real estate institutions" (Gilbert and Gugler 1975:24). All of these factors create "a distinctive pattern of land use with population densities and land price gradients, central business districts, high class sub-urban residential areas and inner-city slums" (Gilbert and Gugler 1975:25).

But while this is true, it is also the case that a great disparity exists between city conditions of the metropolitan centres of the world and the peripheral societies. Gilbert and Gugler also make this point with some force. The Third World city,

as the authors argue, stands desperately marginalized in a world economy that is structurally monopolistic and unequal. The Western world calls the shots when it comes to crucial policy decision-making on science, technology and economy. And the Third World only acquiesces meekly. The result of this lopsidedness is dislocation, a reality that Gilbert (1975:25) illustrates graphically:

> In the third World City, the relative poverty of the Black Baltimore slum-dweller is accentuated by absolute material deprivation. Some poor people in the United States suffer from malnutrition; most of the poor in Indian cities fall into this category. Overcrowded tenement slums and too few jobs are abhorrent, but the lack of fresh water, medical services, drainage and unemployment compensation adds to this 'problem in most third world cities. Without wishing to paint Dickensian pictures of squalor, poverty and crime, it is far too easy to sketch the outline of a basically unfair and degrading situation.

It seems interesting, how Gilbert ends his point by referring to a writer. Indeed, most creative works represent studies in Geography, Sociology, Urban Economics, Politics and Estate Management put together. The responses consequently projected range from outright rejection of city patterns to complete acceptance of its forms, and to a critical engagement with its order. Thus, while Charles Dickens is filled with revulsion for the London of Victorian era, Carl Sandberg composes poems in endless celebration of the city of Industrial America.[1] The image painted by James Joyce of Dublin in his *The Dubliners* is so vivid and so graphic that it is almost possible to visualize the city without ever having visited the place. And this much can also be said of J.P. Clark's 'Ibadan', a poem which, in short lines, captures the tension that inevitably generates when the 'running splash' of old ways intersects with the 'gold' of newness.[2]

If other writers are not as accurate in their depiction of physical contours of different urban agglomerations, it does not necessarily suggest that they are less engaged with "citiness" and its ambiguities. Besides his series of autobiography, hardly does Soyinka cite the name of any major city in his works. Yet we do not fail to recognize his engagement with urban contradictions in his works. Take *The Road* as an example. The dominating set-

prop is a physical symbolization of problematic urbanity. The 'bolekaja'[3] is ill-balanced and completely without wheels. Here we get a clear picture of halted motion. Murano was knocked down by a lorry while in a state of transition. Being mute, he becomes a physical representation of indeterminacy, of disarticulation. The layabouts, trapped as they all are in the "Aksident Store" complete for us the picture of an urban formation that is held in a state of suspension, of dislocation and of disorientation.

To Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the chaos and violence of the modern city in Kenya has its roots in a bourgeoisie that prefers to subordinate the interest of the people to that of the transnational corporations and who feel proud as inheritors of the colonial legacy of land expropriation and capital accumulation. We remember how the Member of Parliament plays out Gikonyo in *A Grain of Wheat* as the latter struggles to purchase a parcel of land in Nairobi[4] and how Munira, Wanja and Abdulla are in *Petals of Blood*[5] eventually consigned to the periphery of the social formation in modern Illmorog, a city that developed out of their sweat and determination.

The pattern of analysis being pursued here would seem to hold the possibility of leading us to a cul-de sac. This, precisely, is with regards to our chosen authors' disposition towards citiness. Because, while Osofisan's commitment to post-colonial transformation can hardly be doubted, it may be argued that city pictures have not always featured in his works. Indeed, with the exception of *Once Upon Four Robbers*[6], and one or two other plays perhaps, most of Osofisan's published major plays are set in the rural past. So, where Lagos is readily recognizable in most locations of Cyprian Ekwensi's works, where Sembene Ousmane will openly talk of Dakar and La Guma of Johannesburg and where the city of Port Harcourt is openly announced in Rotimi's *If*, the image that confronts the reader in any typical setting of Osofisan is that of the traditional community complete, quite often, with its rites and rituals, its festivals and taboos, and in short, its homogeneity.

One small argument to propose against this may be that in escaping always to the rural setting, the playwright has indicated his rejection of the city and its orders. But, as has been indicated, this will be too small and too cheap. My

position in this paper, therefore, is that in those lines which seem to project the traditional village formation are actually etched the physical pictures of the modern city. Even at the surface level, Osofisan drops hints as regard the images he paints: that they are not of the old ethos but of contemporary urban locations. Readers or audiences miss this, however, as a result of their absorption in the dramatists' often powerfully crafted actions and stories. I illustrate this argument with two plays of Osofisan of the early eighties: *No More the Wasted Breed* and *Esu and the Vagabound Minstrels.*[7]

No More the Wasted Breed is set in a riverine location. The inhabitants of the community are in the throes of a plague. The waters of the rivers have crashed over the banks and have invaded the farmlands, and the houses. Strange times, so the people say, especially with food supply that is in acute shortage, with crops that have all rotted away and with a strange epidemic that is feeding on the flesh of small children. It seems clear that we are dealing with a local rural situation, especially with the people's interpretation of their predicament. The gods of the land, so it is said, are angry and they seek penance for their injunctions that have been flagrantly violated over a long period of time. Presently Biokun steps forward. With an earthen pot and a white wrapper round his waist, the chosen carrier seems ready to undertake the rites of appeasement on behalf of the community.

But, as we should know, flood is a characteristic problem of disarticulated urbanization resulting from lack of planning and inefficient system of drainage. Actually, Elusu, the particular goddess in this regard has confessed this earlier on in the prologue and has clearly indicated her great dread of modernity. Says she to Olokun; her husband:

> Olokun; I am surprised at you. When we burst out from the bleeding gash of our mother Yemoja, were we not told to guard them jealously or else wither and die? You've been away but see, look at my face! See what the human beings have made of me, a cesspit of rotten flotsam! See how they choke my breath with oil, my belly with cement! And shit-I, Olokunsu, women of clear eyes, I have become their chamberpot! They've turned my bosom into a restless market of smugglers and pimps and murderers. Am I a whorehouse? So what has happened to the agelong injunction that they must honor my beauty and not fish in me? That they should propitiate me with sweet smelling food? Olokun, these are little tokens of respect for your wife. But see, see how they've

> stabbed me all over with stakes, and entangled my limbs in their fishing nets. (*No More the Wasted Breed,* p.89*)*

Clearly, this community has put several thousand kilometres between itself and the traditional past. The evidence above confronts us with the ambiguities and contradictions of modernity. The discovery of oil implies wealth for the community just as cement means good houses and strong and lasting bridges. But on the flip-side of these positive developments, are the reality of crimes and chaos, and the examples cited for us in this regard include smuggling and murder. The people have lost their innocence and have become very daring. And this is to the extent that even a goddess feels frightened by it. Seeing that death could be imminent for her should the people be allowed to so continue, Elusu decides to restore them to the old ways the characteristics of which include fear and superstition.

But Osofisan's purpose in crafting *No more the Wasted Breed* is to prevent this backward slip. As is well known, the play is conceived as a write-back to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed.* The latter play articulates the story of a young man, Eman, who was born into a family of ritual carriers but who decides to evade that burden. Eman's strategy is to escape from home and seek solitude in a strange land. Much against himself however, the poor man finds himself running to fulfill that same responsibility in his place of exile. As he moves wobbly but inexorably to his doom, Eman recalls his father's original words of warning: "Your own blood will betray you son because you cannot hold it back."[8]

Osofisan feels angry that Soyinka could decide to sacrifice such a brilliant young man as Eman on the altar of an anachronistic practice. Why should anybody think of placating a god who looked on even as white predators invaded his domain and carted his people away into slavery; who would still not act when the plunderers returned with guns, seized control of the land and consequently took over the most precious of the resources of the place? Why should a people not abandon a god who rewarded dedication with betrayal? Biokun, Eman's alter ego in *No more the Wasted Breed* recovers just in time to address these and several other questions to both Elusu and Olokun:

> You watch and let them pass, these alien ships laden with plunder, with our oil and gold and diamonds, with timber, coffee, cotton and cocoa and what else. Leaving us with our hands empty.

> Leaving us abject and wretched, except of course, for the few traitors among us who are prosperous because they agree to serve as the agents of the white predators. Those are your friends, the ones you protect. They can go and come as they will across your waters, or across the skies of your brother Orun. You ask no sacrifice of them, no token of allegiance. They're rich and few, they are the beloved of your priest. But we're numerous and nameless, like the sand of the beach, we're wretched and expendable. A wasted breed, we're ready at a signal, to forsake our deepest dreams and take out a canoe in savage weather. We'll give our life, our blood, while they the privileged, remain here on the shore, bowing to their white masters, gathering fat (...) (p. 110).

Forward then with modernity, Osofisan seems to say. The gods clearly are not concerned about what happens to the masses of the people. Like the emergent bourgeoisie, they seem in league with capitalist powers on the other side of the Atlantic which incorporated the indigenous societies in order for them to be able to exploit the raw material production. To put the blame of the demise of traditional structures on a people who themselves have suffered unfair neglect can be likened to putting the responsibility of hacking down a tree on the handle of the axe. But what do we do about the contradictions of the newly emergent structures? What do we do about the picture of inequality and dislocation so graphically painted in the above-quoted words and which appears to be the logic of urban development in the Third World? As Osofisan seems to suggest, the people themselves will need to take control of their own lives, assert their freedom and rights and consequently work together to create a new world. It is in an attempt to make this point that the playwright establishes a confrontation between Elusu, the goddess of the creeks, on the one hand, and Biokun and Saluga being the representatives of the new generation of humanity, on the other. But by investing the responsibility of mediation in Olokun, Osofisan, in my view, also ends up contradicting himself. Because even when he is of justice, Olokun still remains a god. The implication here is that the freedom being celebrated at the end of the play is one that has been granted by a supernatural being. It is Olokun who, having received humanity's testimony, takes a decision that Elusu is wrong and that she must die. What if he had decided otherwise? What if he had taken the path of self-preservation? And, added to this is the fact that, in the end, Olokun himself does not die; he only withdraws to the waves. "Goodbye, my love", he says as Elusu dies, "*till the next generation*" (my emphasis) (p.110). The italicized words give us a

feeling of foreboding. The gods clearly have not died. They lie in wait on the road to the future.

But perhaps, Osofisan deliberately sets this contradiction so he may continue the process of resolution in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*. This latter play is set at the crossroads, the home ground of Esu, the Yoruba god of indeterminacy. The story is a simple morality tale, fetched and adapted from the repertoire of Yoruba folklore. Directly, it explores the subject of compassion, a theme that the playwright finds appropriate as he sets out determined to confront the crimes and brutalities of contemporary cities. Omele, one of the five vagabond musicians returns to his village after five years to discover that "development" and "civilization" had caught up with the people, that kindness has gone out of fashion. Bewildered, he laments as he explains the new situation to fellow vagabond colleagues:

> Charity! That was the creed we were all raised on, and the whole village practiced it! Not even a stranger passed by without finding a roof, or a warm bed. They taught us to always give, freely, like Mother Nature. They said God owned everything, and that every man was a creature of God. Created in his image. So how was I to know that in just five years since I left, all that would have changed? How could I have foreseen it, that a day would come when these people, my own people, would see men in torment, and drive them back into the wind? (*Esu*, p. 7)

Osofisan finds justification for this new development in the orientation of the new lords of the city. These new lords are the same as the indigenous bourgeoisie which Biokun succinctly describes in *No more the Wasted Breed*: the people who plead austerity and shortages before the masses but open the back door for aliens to plunder the resources of their land. Rich and prosperous, they tie dogs to their door posts such that any destitutes that try to move too close to them could be torn to shreds. In the face of such blatant acts of inhumanity, it seems inevitable for people's psychic orientation to undergo some transformation.

In *Esu*, Osofisan articulates this crisis of dislocation in terms of an opposition between vice and virtue, between kindness and villainy. According to Esu, the character in the play who first appears disguised as an old man, "The owner of the world/has created a balance between the forces of good/And those of Evil. But everywhere, Evil is in the ascendancy" (p.17). The vagabond musicians themselves have just been proscribed by the new military government and have

thus had to wonder from place to place. They arrive at the crossroads tired and hungry. Collectively, they themselves are physical embodiments of this overwhelming disorientation. Their proscription is as a result of their shameless pandering to the discredited politicians while the latter were still in power. They come to the homing ground, hoping to help themselves to the offerings being made to Esu. As he appears on stage to grant them a magic boon, Old Man asks whether they are ready "To help those among you, who are in distress? To bring redress to the wronged?/And justice to the exploited?"(p.18).

Of course, the vagabonds' answers were in the affirmative. But so total, and so pervasive is the moral dislocation of contemporary times that the spectator knows right away that the musicians could not be taken by their pledge to abide by the injunctions. In the end, four of them misuse the power, employing it for personal enrichment. Only Omele dares to differ, demanding no material rewards from those he decides to render assistance to. But by using the power more than once, Omele also ends up violating the injunctions. He contracts leprosy and is ostracized by his colleagues. The stage instruction in part four of the play articulates a frightful contrast between Omele's condition and those of the other four minstrels. It is the same situation the following morning, according to Osofisan, and "On one side, the four lucky singers, eating and drinking merrily, all finely dressed. On the other side, alone, the leprosy-infested Omele, driving flies off his body."(p.55)

They are not satisfied yet, the lucky four, as we are soon to see. They heckle and jeer at him, pelt him with stones and would not listen to his cry of pain. They keep on assailing him until he turns finally and flees. I bring down once more the picture of the original community as drawn by Omele himself:

> Charity! That was the creed we were all raised on, and the whole village practiced it! Not even a stranger passed by without finding a roof, or a warm bed. They taught us to always give, freely, like Mother nature. They said God owned everything, and that every man was a creature of God (...) (p.7)

The society has certainly come a long way with the moral worldview of the people completely altered. So wicked have they become now, and Omele has twice found himself as a victim of this collective crisis of dislocation.

As he says in the introductory note to the play, Osofisan deliberately employs this blatant sentimentalism as a means of returning (wo)man to his/her humanity. Indeed, and as he says, there is no other way to "counter today's macho world of tough American gangsters, super-bands and superman, and Kung-fu experts" (p.iv) beside a return to primal times! Thus Osofisan follows

the logic of morality tales to its very end. Old Man returns to take account of how the boon has been utilized. It turns out that the other men have only fallen for Esu's mischief. Omele, on the other hand, and through his incredible display of compassion has revealed himself as a child of Orunmila. He is appropriately rewarded while the leprosy he earlier contracted is transferred to his colleagues. *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* is Osofisan's statement on man's capacity for love and fellow-feeling, for tenderness and care even in the face of urban brutality and violence. Expectedly, the playwright soon strips his characters of their mystical endowment. "Let the gods disappear" says the male leper, who actually is Orunmila, "to where... (they) came from/In a fairy tale"(p.69). Linking us concretely now with reality, Osofisan makes it clear that the riddles of evil pervading our cities have no magic solution and that goodness cannot be realized through wish fulfillments. The players themselves articulate the necessities for social and political action as they re-assemble on stage:

> JIGI: (....) prayers are not sufficient to counter the violence in the street.
> EPO OYINBO: Neither prayers nor good wishes.
> REDIO: But only the actions of struggling men...
> EPO OYINBO: Only many fists waving together...
> REDIO: For only the muscles behind a wheel can turn it.
> JIGI: Only many voices rising together, to shout "NO", this moment...
> SIN SIN: "YES", another moment...
> EPO OYINBO: And "LET US MARCH" , all the moments (p.70).

There appears to be two mutually contradictory positions in this play. The main parable advocates tenderness and goodwill even in the face of utter mischief and cruelty. Omele, like a true disciple of Jesus Christ is a willing forgiver of wrongs and of acts of injustice and inhumanity. Even when his colleagues willfully conspire to chase the woman he has liberated of a nine year-old pregnancy, Omele would still not lift up his hand. "Nothing", he answers in response to Old Man's question as to how he intends to react. Afterall, he continues, "They were once my comrades. They taught me all I know...I am part of them" (p.65).

Outright stupidity, in my view. Certainly, human beings have to learn to check oppression, fight injustice and resist exploitation by the force of their own arms. To acquiesce to blatant aggression as Omele has done is to encourage the perpetuation of evil. And, to be sure, what we have in *Esu* runs against the grain of Osofisan's otherwise well-articulated vision. A self-knowledge of this contradiction on the part of the playwright perhaps explains the final, winding-up comments of his players.

The crossroads, by way of summing up on this play therefore, is a richly metaphorical location in the world of the Yorubas. It is the point of destiny, of transformation. For the inhabitants of a typical African city that developed as a consequence of total displacement, complete disorientation and acute dislocation, the person to position in such a place is surely not Omele. Neither can it be any of the four minstrels. The person that suits that place may be found in *No More the Wasted Breed*, the first play discussed in this essay. Saluga is measured and humane, he is unflinching in solidarity and commitment, just as he is unbending of will and unshakeable in principle. Inhabitants of contemporary African, nay Third World, cities need these qualities.

This essay commenced by underlining the tensions characterizing the modern city in general. It then proceeded to point out the marginal position of Third World cities; its peculiarly unfair and degrading condition and how this has engaged the attention of different writers. Ultimately, I established Africa as my focus and picked out Femi Osofisan for illustration. In the discussion of *No More the Wasted Breed* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*- being the two plays used as examples- I foregrounded Femi Osofisan's peculiar approach to city dislocations: how he employs local traditions and images even as he engages contemporary urban problems. But, as the analysis has hopefully shown, the transformative alternative negotiated by the playwright in both works is fraught with ambiguities.

Notes

1. The poems collected in Sandberg's *Chicago Poems* are essentially devoted to a celebration of Chicago, the beautiful capital of Illinois. See Carl Sandberg, *Chicago Poems.*
2. J.P. Clark, Ibadan," in *Poems of Black Africa*, (ed.) Wole Soyinka (London: Heinemanns, 1975): 142
3. 'Bolekaja,' a Yoruba word which, literally translated, means 'come down and let us fight' is the name by which the popular passenger bus in Lagos, the commercial capital of Nigeria is known. In *The Road*, Soyinka makes one such grounded bus the dominating set – prop of the play. Part of the play's opening instruction reads: 'thrusting downstage from a corner of the shack is the back of a 'bolekaja' (Mammy Wagon), lop – sided and minus its wheels.' See Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays.*
4. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat.*
5. Munira, Wanja and Abdulla are the three city people who first settled in Illmorog at a time when it was simply a forgotten village. When eventually urbanization catches up with the place, all three but with the exception of Wanja are relegated to the margins of the city formation. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Petals of Blood.*
6. *Once Upon Four Robbers* directly examines the phenomenon of armed robbery in Nigerian cities. Femi Osofisan argues in the play that the 'legalized slaughtering' of armed robbers will not solve the problem of violent robbery. According to him, 'It is obvious that as long as a single daring nocturnal trip with a gun or a matchet can yield the equivalent of one man's annual income, we shall continue to manufacture our own potential assassins.' See Femi Osofisan *Once Upon Four Robbers.*
7. *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, though published in 1993, was first staged in 1983 at the Ekenwan campus of the University of Benin as a workshop production for Theatre Arts students.
8. Wole Soyinka, *The Strong Breed* in Wole Soyinka: *Collected Plays.*

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