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**THE CLASSICS AND DECOLONIZATION: FEMI OSOFISAN'S
TEGONNI AS METAPHOR**

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Postcolonialism and the Classics

Postcolonialism in the words of Leela Ghandi, is a disciplinary project devoted to the task of Revisiting, remembering and crucially, interrogating the colonial past'(1998:4) it does so with a view to dealing with this past in order to surpass it to achieve a psychological recovery by suggesting an alternative culture, an alternative epistemology or system of knowledge.

The study/teaching of the Classics in African departments of Classics, should be an instrumentality of decoloniality; this maybe done in two ways; one, as a means of opening the eyes of Africans to the atrocities of the global north against Africa. secondly, it should be a means of demystifying and rewriting the years of colonization and pillaging the African continent. This concept of coloniality as power matrix, is the basis and rationale for the exploitation of the world and its resources by European systems of domination. It acts as the foundation for colonialism/imperialism, capitalism, nationalism and modernity. Coloniality naturalises all of these concepts, or makes them appear universal and inevitable. It can therefore be seen as the governing intellectual ideology of the modern world-system from the sixteenth century to the present day. It functions by creating systems of racialised hierarchies, including systems of knowledge and culture centred on Europe. It entails a refusal of knowledge production to colonised peoples and societies, and a denial of Indigenous, pre-colonial or non-European systems of knowing, being and creating. Coloniality permeates all levels of society and subjectivity in the modern world-system, including gender, sexuality and identity. (17)

In fact, postmodernist epistemology has challenged the certitude of rationality in respect of apprehending/comprehending universal truths, and has even gone as far as denying reality. The profile of most African/all classicists within our departments of Classics is a process of hybridization- an "otherness", which in Homi Bhabha's paraphrase is " a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once, which makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable Evolué... to accept the colonizer's identity.

Sadly though, some of our colleagues have accepted the 'disambiguation image of being,' and would not entertain any suggestions for a departure from the present status quo. Decoloniality, which is an ongoing project will help us resist the

instrumentalization of reason produced by coloniality. By striving for liberation through the decentering of the colonial matrix of power. It demands a mode of critique which combats the perceived universalism of coloniality and its associated systems.

Presently, these departments seem at sea, with an identity problem, in the face of daunting challenges. There is therefore, need to create an identity by evolving a home-grown identity. The reality is that the traditional/ western Classics, discriminates against its African practitioners/members, even at FIEC conferences which are dogged by racial undertones, and are directed at members of colour.

Besides the issues of colour discrimination, there is also the economic imbalance which has also created a big gulf between the western classicists and their African counterparts. Thus, there isn't a level playing ground, as the tile tilts in favor of the west, who have the advantage of/ langue [language and enabling environment. Thus, for an effective decolonizing of the Classics, African Classics departments, would require a re- definition of Classics, in line with the words of Leela Ghandi as a project devoted to interrogating our colonial past. In order words, by 'Revisiting our past we must aim at achieving a psychological recovery/ rediscovery, via an alternative culture, an alternative epistemology or system of knowledge. There has to be a deliberate emphasis on creating a cultural identity that is fundamentally African in the words of Bhabha, "re-membering, and putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present"(1994:63) this re-membering' would ensure that our post coloniality becomes part and parcel of our present trials, terrors and tribulations of our colonial past (2008:23).

When in year 2000, Hardt and Negri heralded a new phenomenon which they termed, "Empire", created by Globalization which cuts across the territorializing impulses of colonialism, materialism and nationalism, based on ' the belief that fundamental principles of empire is that its power has no actual or localization terrain or centre" this phenomenon (I.e., The globalized empire), is intriguing, in a sense, that reminds one of the Roman empire, possessing in its time, an overwhelming military, technological and economic power,(the Barbarian lands for the Romans, the third world/Africa for the west) and multi ethnic and - cultural societies.

Perhaps the words of Mathura Umachandran, (would stretch further this view of decolonization), that; "the classics can only really start to think of itself as a global project once it has reckoned with how it has been invested all over the world in histories and ongoing realities of colonialism and racialized extractive capitalism of many kinds... we must stop producing the idea of a white antiquity, but to underscore the idea that the ancient world was much larger than Greece and Rome.

In fact, Classics by its very definition, is a white supremacist project. For classicists, the ancient “world” is literally just Italy, Greece, and their colonies. Maybe a smattering of Persia, Egypt, and the Levant.” (Cited in Krishnan Ram-Prasad)

What exactly are the advocates of decolonization of the classics all about, you may wonder?

Many advocates of decolonization don't want to abolish the canon; James Muodoon (2019), observes, ‘they want to interrogate its assumptions and broaden our intellectual vision to include a wider range of perspectives. While decolonising the curriculum can mean different things, it includes a fundamental reconsideration of who is teaching, what the subject matter is and how it's being taught.’”

A recent video that trended online, revealed the predictability and the hypocrisy of traditional Classics. The narrator was telling a black lady that the bust of emperor Septimius Severus at the entrance of the British museum though painted white, was actually Black; in fact, he was a black emperor, perhaps, one of the Nubians who ruled Rome and also Egypt.

Mcniell and Riello, expressed a need to instigate a new dialogue involving the studies of 'global history involving Africa and the Classics. The Classics for a while now have enjoyed the privilege of being the focal point of European imperial culture.

The aim is to expose Classics to contemporary preoccupations, by making it lose the privilege of eurocentrism.

One way of achieving this is relativisation of classical history, such that it is no longer conceived as the epitome of civilization. This will provide the opportunity to deconstruct imperial epistemologies inspired by the ancient classical world. A recent book by Gerristen and Riello, contends that despite 'global history, prominence should be given to the use of 'artifacts' as new ways to narrate history. These objects should be used as powerful tools for the creation of "global connections"(Bloomsbury, 2015: 6) This contention becomes a powerful position for the hybridization of the Classics and Africa, ie., a potent argument in favor of decolonizing the Classics. Both classical ruins and ruins in general can be tools in re-evaluating global historical perspectives. This will provide a new way of reading classical Antiquity. Thus, reconstructing the present Eurocentric classicism.

Osofisan's *Tegonni* as Metaphor

This paper wishes to say that beyond the self-reflexive tendency in his plays, there is an underlying deliberate deconstruction of an existing socio-cultural status quo, skillfully ensconced within a comic dimension of the individual peculiar strand of comic technique through which the playwright scoffs at the illusion of authority/paternal power. Despite the tragic atmosphere in *Tegonni*, the

metafictional environment provides some breathing space for the audience through the comical splices. As revealed in the structure of the play, he attempts a deconstruction of plots in the original plays through a restructuring that is wrapped in his strand of metatheatricality, while nudging at perceived socio-cultural complexities. An essential feature of this framework is that the playwright could and did on occasion draw attention to the artificiality of his creation, whereby the play, which avers to be a representation of truth, is shown to be a simulated entity, through the deliberate shattering of the illusion of reality.

Metatheatre or the capacity of stage text and performance to refer to and comment on its own nature as an artistic medium has been an age-long adaptation in western theatrical tradition (Crow, 2002, p.132). Metatheatricality is a situation in which the playwright consciously draws attention to the play as a play whereby drama makes reference to itself as drama. In other words, “theatre attempts to become more pretentious by hosting its own critique” (Okoye, 2010, p.119). In the words of Slater (1985, p.14), metatheatre is theatrically self-conscious theatre, i.e., one that demonstrates an awareness of its own theatricality. However, this literary technique exploits its own conventions and devices to effect comedy and pathos. In other words, this dramaturgical device can become an instrument in the hands of playwrights in deconstruction of perceived socio-cultural, and political contradictions.

In acquiescence with Tompkins, metatheatre may also be described, “as locations of deliberate dis-locations of colonial power,” as a strategy of resistance. And as indicated in Osofisan’s post-colonial dramatic text, *Tegonni*, is “a self-conscious method of re-negotiating, re-working- not just re-playing the past and the present” (Tompkins, 1995) Hence for Osofisan, this brand of his dramaturgy splits the action into multiple locations, and appropriates them to resist a text or a dominant paradigm.

The audience is, however, not left out of this dislocation of text and subtext and ‘dominant paradigm (Tompkins, 1995, p.8).

The foregoing, therefore, privileges the prospects of decoloniality in the teaching and interpretation of western classics, and a reinvigoration of what can be authentically- Afro classicism.

Scholars (Fraenkel, 1960, pp.135-221; Slater, 1985; Beacham, 1991; Wright, 1974, pp.183-196; Barchiesi, 1970; Muecke, 1986; Frangoulides, 1997) generally agree that Plautus’ plays, which are also adaptations from Greek comedies, are more self-consciously theatrical, even than their Greek originals, with such dramatic antics as audience address and theatrical reminders. For Osofisan, the borrowings are varied; in his words, “certainly all of our playwrights who come after owe a debt of gratitude to those imaginative pioneers (Osofisan, 1998, p.20).”

Osofisan's plays, usually, make use of such devices as play-within-the-play. In this paper I wish to argue that beyond the self-reflexive tendency in his plays, there is an underlying deliberate deconstruction of an existing socio-cultural status quo, skillfully ensconced within a comic dimension of the individual peculiar strand of comic technique through which the playwright scoffs at the illusion of authority/paternal power. Despite the tragic atmosphere in *Tegonni*, the metafictional environment provides some breathing space for the audience through the comical splices. As revealed in the structure of the play, he attempts a deconstruction of plots in the original plays through a restructuring that is wrapped in his strand of metatheatricality, while nudging at perceived socio-cultural complexities. An essential feature of this framework is that the playwright could and did on occasion draw attention to the artificiality of his creation, whereby the play, which avers to be a representation of truth, is shown to be a simulated entity, through the deliberate shattering of the illusion of reality.

TEGONNI

it is instructive to say here that the play *Tegonni* by Femi Osofisan is remarkable in not only theoretically observable life, past and present, but also retheatricalising an alien play to suit the sensibilities of his Nigerian spectators. Osofisan arguably one of the front liners in the world of Nigerian dramatic arts, is known for his progressive stance against oppression and tyranny. His works have also betrayed sympathy for an advocacy of social change.

The fabric of his plays and other writings is usually critical of the disequilibrium in the social structure, thus always creating a conflict between the indigenous and imported cultures; an alternative tradition in popular literature, he says should be a model for a new society.

Incidentally, most critics are hard put to determine his philosophical bent. Some writers like Niyi Osundare, see his works as having tendencies ranging from liberal through the radical to the revolutionary. But others dismiss this reading of ambiguity, perceiving rather a Marxist leaning in the conflicts that characterize his plays.

As an ideological aesthete, Osofisan constantly experiments with forms and enduring artistry to embody humanistic social, philosophy. It is this search for forms that has taken him to the primordial sources of African indigenous performative provenance." (210)

This revolutionary tendency in Osofisan, and his advocacy for social transformation has in the words of Olu Obafemi (*Drama of Osofisan*, p.21, led the playwright to search for forms in the primal roots of African traditional *mores* and *lore*. However, his search for form is not only limited to the traditional African provenance, but also extends to the Greek world of Antiquity.

In other words, this advocacy is not for a total jettisoning of the western classics, but a blending of the curricula to reflect the richness of Africa's contribution to

the histories and epistemology of antiquity. Osofisan thus exhibits his creative ingenuity in the reconstruction of history, myth and consensus opinion in an attempt to create a more acceptable paradigm for the society. As also captured in Okoye (2011, p.323) Osofisan's dramaturgy "ostensibly adopts a materialist approach to received canonical narratives, both indigenous and western, subjecting them to a rereading that can be said to be, however, palimpsestic: leaving their original traces while he inscribes upon them new visions that are simultaneously similar and different". Greenblatt's "The Improvisation of Power" which he defines as "an ability to transform given materials into one's own scenario, and demonstrate... the European's (African's) ability again and again to insinuate themselves into pre-existing political, religious, even psychic structure of the natives and to turn those structures to their advantage (Stephen, 1980, p.227)", perhaps best situates the attributes which best describes *Tegonni*, as the Nigerian-African *Antigone*, which Osofisan has cloned, albeit through a different genre, with an effective management of theatrical devices akin to those improvised in the Plautine plays to achieve the same effect Plautus had on his audience both in antiquity as in contemporary times.

But besides the above, Osofisan's *Tegonni* lends itself to a different reading which echoes the words of Goff (2011) "that...the play deconstructs colonial and other types of authority, including paternal power and the domination of the male..." The self-conscious metatheatricality is the instrumentality he deploys in achieving this intent. *Tegonni*, the nineteenth century Yoruba Princess, is not only spiteful of some traditional no-go areas, but also rebels against the authority of the British colonial overlords. Her resistance is double pronged; for example, she does not only go against the traditional paternal power, by going into a vocation an exclusive preserve of the male, but caps it by dressing as Egungun masquerades with her female companions and contracts a barrier breaking marriage with Captain Allan Jones. In the second of the double-pronged resistance, she brazenly flaunts Governor Carter Ross's express orders against burying Oyekunle, an enemy of the colonial authority.

The concept of metatheatre is not only an attribute of comedy, but as aptly shown by Osofisan in *Tegonni*, it is even a cleverer object for facilitating the acceptance of a tragic play to the admiration of his audience. In other words, both strands of dramaturgy are equally useful agency in achieving the intent of the playwright.

Aligned with this view of Osofisan's dramaturgy is the statement Dunton, that "some of Osofisan's techniques are closely influenced by Brechtian theatre: for example, the deliberate

introduction, as the play proceeds, of disjunctions in style, tone, narrative flow; or the exposure by the cast of their own status as actors (Dunton, 1992, p.69)". As noted by

Crow, a pervasive feature of African contemporary drama is "the persistence with which playwrights' foreground the act of performance itself"; as revealed in his dramaturgy, is a "deep-seated pleasure in many African cultures in theoretically and comic, often satirical observation and parody of different kinds of behaviour at the everyday social level." This is characterized by his use of music, song and dance and an audience that demand and respond to very direct relations with performers skilled in the art of stimulating and manipulating audience response. (134)

In *Tegonni*, the prologue is no less strategic an instrument in the hands of Osofisan as he perhaps echoes Kirichenko (p.206), at the start of the play.

The prologue here is equally an invaluable intertext in the dramatist's attempt at creating a link between the fictional world of the actors and his audience. Osofisan's stagecraft is clearly seen in the self-conscious interchanges between actors and the director of the play:

Act: Man, is the play starting or not?

Act: why are we wasting time? The audience is already seated.

Dir.: I need white actors for the roles of Governor, his ADC, and the D.O.

ACT: well, how about me?

Dir.: I said white actors.

Act: And I said try me!...

Act: But use your imagination, man! Theatre is all about illusion, isn't it?

...

Act: A house of Dreams! So, just a little make up, I announce my role to the audience, and we are set to go!

The audience of course is part and parcel of the interchanges between actors and the director; more importantly, the dramatist here exploits the power of illusion as he creates the fictional world on stage, (in which actors can, short of bleaching their black skin white, pretend to be

white in order to live out their illusion around the spectators. "Of course! All are illusion here, and everyone in the audience has come to play his or her own part in a dream.

And dreams are where anything can happen". (14)

The dramatist here adroitly shows his mastery of stage craft as he

undeniably establishes the concept of “play as play” in the prologue. The audience is aware that the actors are a troupe of actors performing a play, and is given the impression that they can manoeuvre themselves in between roles, i.e. roleplay in the play. The picture of a performance is more vivid here as the Director invites the costume manager (CM) to hand out wigs to the swelling rank of volunteer “white” actors. This is further replicated in scene 12 where the audience again is made aware of the dual role of Antigone, who is not just an actor, but also a playwright; as she apportions roles to her crew, who had earlier complained of being weary of their earlier part as soldiers. The play opens with the playwright subverting the “aesthetic distance” contracting time and space, to enhance the theatricality of the play, as he creates an illusion of Yemoja the Yoruba water goddess arriving on stage with Tegonni as the incarnation of the ancient myth of Antigone on board (17). It is the day Tegonni is supposed to get married to Alan Jones, the white district officer in-charge of Oke-Osun. In the meantime, Carter Ross, the colonial governor, has ordered that Oyekunle’s body be brought into town and be laid out in front of the palace, not to be buried. Apparently, Antigone has journeyed through the long route of myth and history so that she can lend support to her fictional incarnation who, she is aware, would rebel against the Governor’s instructions concerning Oyekunle. In this metafictional world made by the dramatist, Antigone exists for Tegonni as a source of inspiration, a role she maintains through the duration of the play. The dramatic contrivance of a marriage between Jones and Tegonni is a further reference to the artificiality of the play; especially in the context of the nineteenth century Oke-osun, it was bizarre and was never to be. Even her staunch supporter, Baba Ishokun, the poet, who had helped her earlier when she took on a weird career in bronze-casting (a vocation exclusively for men), along with all citizens of Oke-Osun, consider this latest move an abomination. But then it is the arrival of the mythical Antigone in the third scene that introduces the play- within- theplay, interspersed with such devices as the self-conscious interchanges with the other actors. Believing she may have arrived late to the play, Antigone approaches one of the actors:

Ant: Greetings. Has the play started?

Fad: Who are you, and where do you come from. Ant: Please tell us first.

Fad: Well, look for yourself. (Indicating the audience.)

Ant: My name is Antigone. These are my body guards...I heard you are acting my story...

Yem: Your story! Sorry, you are mistaken. This is the story of Tegonni, our sister, Funny, the name sounds almost the same, but- ... (25)

This scene is reminiscent of all Roman plays which are seen as part of 'ludi' ("games") (Knapp, 1999, p.45); the actors in their self-conscious lines make it clear that they have come to perform or are performing a role: "We're metaphors. We always come in the colours of your imagination." And in response to Yemisi's invitation, Antigone says: "That's why we came in this shape, my friends! We've had long rehearsals of your customs. But go ahead we'll catch up with you." (25) Soon after the prologue the spectators realise that Antigone, besides being an actor, is also a Director in her own right, and she converts members of her crew into a detachment of the Hausa constabulary sent by the Governor to guard the body of Oyekunle. She is seen handing out roles to her crew: "it's not our story, we're from other times. It's just history about to repeat itself again". The spectators are constantly made aware of the unreality/artificiality of the situation and the dramatic creations in performance. Of course, the dramatist had earlier warned, that "anything was possible in a dreamland." Osofisan's, as much as the Plautine stage, is neutral (Slater, 1985, p.11; Styan, 1975, pp.180-81), not bound by time, space or realistic plausibility, thus able to manoeuvre within the illusory and non-illusory ambit of this play. This indeed, explains the structural elasticity of Tegonni. Osofisan has skilfully adopted an essential ingredient of illusion of reality through his infinitely flexible infusion of the present to the past and even the future. In the words of Styan, "the neutral stage allows an inexhaustible succession of dramatic images." This is obvious in his transmutation of the myth of the dead Antigone of 5th century Greece into the pulsating presence of the nineteenth century history of Oke-Osun in western Nigeria, among other metatheatricalities.

Ant: There is only one Antigone.

Kunbi: But that is impossible. She is from Greek mythology.

Ant: And so am I. From the Greek and other Mythologies. ... Antigone belongs to several incarnations.

Another instance of flexibility of Osofisan's dramatic space is further demonstrated in the surrealistic invocation of the 'spirit of stories' (94-95ff) to aid Tegonni's narration of the story of "The Tiger and the Frog", exposing the playwright's skilful manoeuvring of space and time. The message /communication is of course clearly embedded in the song's refrain:

"Ekun! Is not your friend"

"Run away oh, run away oh,

Don't delay oh, ay!"

Ekun! Ekun will swallow you!"

"Run-away oh, run away oh,

Don't delay oh, ay!"

By so embedding them, Osofisan is able to contrive a highly successful dramatic communication, thus creating a convention that is effective as a dramaturgical invention. The dramatist's deliberate footprints at strategic points in the play can be gleaned through these rather skilful metatheatrical devices. Sometimes when there is a need to resolve a situation he interrogates, as it was, the myth of Antigone.

For instance, when Tegonni seeks the advice of her friends on whether to apologise publicly as demanded by Governor Carter Ross, she is made to search for Antigone:

Teg: I came to find you.

Ant: I was expecting you.

Teg: Just now I spoke to the girls seeking their advice, you said nothing.

Ant: It's not my story... I'm just a metaphor from the past- ...

Teg: So why didn't you just stay where you were, a relic in the memory of poets?

Ant: You're angry. But suppose i tell you that i couldn't offer advice because i myself, i am no longer pure?

Teg: what's that supposed to mean?

Ant: That I am contaminated. This Antigone you see is not the one you know. Not the hero men remember, but one sullied by history. (125)

Osofisan here invokes the power of an elusive past to contrive an immediate reality, that is equally artificial; "you are angry, but suppose I tell you that I couldn't offer advice because, I myself, I am not pure?" Even then it would appear that the playwright was uncertain of his basis for proffering a solution to Tegonni's predicament. Introducing the illusion of Antigone, he proffers a reality which *ab initio* appears unattainable, because the self-confessed 'metaphor from the past' is 'contaminated' and has been 'sullied by history' and may in fact have become a 'riddle'. But inexorably, he tests the tenacity in the power of drama to resolve this 'riddle.' Antigone says: Give up, I would have said.

Because I've learnt from history, and I have grown wise.

Freedom is a myth which human beings invent as a torch to kindle their egos.

In the end it all comes to same thing, men and women slaughtering one another to the applause of deluded worshippers. (126)

This evidently, is the illusion created by Carter-Ross and his clique, which must be rejected by Tegonni and her friends. Strategically placed metatheatrical punctuations, such as “it’s not my story”; “Leave my story” “You and I have nothing to share,” in the play heighten not just the involvement of the audience but also the self-consciousness of the actors to the artificiality of their roleplay, a constant reminder perhaps that they are all playing a part in an artificial reality/an illusion of reality.

However, Osofisan deconstructs Tegonni’s metafictional world, when a couple of lines later, Antigone confesses jubilantly:

Come, my sister, embrace me! I was testing you. And now I find you’re a true believer, like me! Yes, it is true that many tyrants have marched through history. That for a while, people have been deprived of their freedom. But oppression can never last. Again and again, it will be overthrown, and people will reclaim their right to be free! That is the lesson of history, the only one worth learning... Ozymandias will rise again! But so will Antigone! Wherever the call for freedom is heard! (127)

The emphasis on the illusory power of drama is highlighted in the character of Antigone whose dramatic life has been mythical, based on illusion, thus further illustrating the capability of the power of illusion to be mimetic of reality.

CONCLUSION

There is no gainsaying that this study has shown Osofisan, ennobling the theatricality of his plays via the boisterous praxis of metatheatre, and in the same breath, casting a pall on existing societal contradictions. *Tegonni* reveals an atmosphere of socio-cultural contradictions, which, essentially, privileges Osofisan’s adroit recrudescence of an ancient mythological narrative, within our own field of experience, highlighting socio-cultural elements within our environment, conjuring a dejavu for an African audience, just as the ancient Greek audience were familiar with the Antigone narrative, properly situates the advocacy for an African Classics.

The ruse in Osofisan, on the other hand, is Tegonni’s resistance of colonial and traditional authority, (both of which are paternal authority) metaphorically, couched in the illusion of the reality of a mythical Antigone, who would provide a springboard for Tegonni’s escape from Governor Carter-Ross’ tyranny. Just as the playwright observes, “theatre is all about illusion...a house of Dreams...” This intertextuality of the play-within-play woven around Tegonni; the introduction of an ancient myth of Antigone and Tegonni’s barrier breaking marriage to Captain Allan Jones and other events in which Tegonni resisted the traditional paternal

authority, combine in deepening the metatheatricality of the play, inducing in the spectators an awareness of the artificiality of the performances on stage, as actors merely acting out their part in a 'dream'. 'The role-play of Antigone convinces Tegonni and she is persuaded that her experience is not only similar to that of the elusive mythical Antigone, but this experience would provide a solution for Tegonni's contemporary predicament. The use of this dramatic technique by the playwright calls attention to the paradoxical nature of drama, which persuades despite being created on nothing more than an illusion, thus demonstrating the domain of the power of true theatre.

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