

Radical Ideology in Contemporary Nigerian Drama: Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, Examined

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Abstract— Drama can be perceived and studied as a social phenomenon, constantly sensitive to and expressing new aspects of life, current demands and hopes, giving rise to new social attitudes and relationships. Thus, drama is conditioned by the ideological relationship among people, their ordinary social consciousness which perceives a reflection of contemporary reality vis-a-vis the dramatic interpretation of topical problems. Perhaps along the line of political and ideological relevance, the essence of demystifying, both the content and internal organization of drama to treat the social issues and conceptions which nourish it has become more imperative today than ever before. Over the last two decades, Nigerian dramatists have revealed an overt political commitment that has been described as 'radical' and growing tendency away from the conventional wisdom enshrined in the bulk of their plays. The development of a revolutionary approach to drama among Nigerian dramatists forms part of this growing radical tendency. It is in realization of this tendency that one is examining the theme of revolution in Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* to find out the extent at which revolution is used to achieve the social transformation of the society. The play depicts Osofisan's radical approach to historical and social realities and the urgent need for a social revolution that will give birth to a socialist state in Nigeria.

Keywords— Drama, Radical, Revolution, Ideology, Nigeria.

I. INTRODUCTION

Every theatre is political, whether overtly or covertly. Since politics does not exist in a vacuum but sprouts from ideological soil, it logically follows that there is no theatre without an ideology. This follows that since artistic content embodies ideology, that content determines artistic form, contrary to what the formalistic approach to art would want us to believe. The same style of theatrical presentation or representation like realism, naturalism or compressionism may be adopted by artists of different ideological leaning like Femi Osofisan has done with Marxism in the chosen text of this study.

Ideology has been defined by Williams (1986) as "the systematization of false consciousness and beliefs of a particular group or class in a society. Obafemi (2008), conceives of it as "the systematic formulation and projection of class or group ideas and beliefs that may or may not be true". It is also defined by Makarov (1983) as "the production, systematization and propagation of beliefs generally". In view of these varied definitions, it becomes rather too subjective to insist on a single most correct definition of the concept. Nevertheless, the summary avails us the opportunity to appreciate the fact that ideology forms the basis of any given theatre. This is because, the concept rests on the

systematization of ideas and strong beliefs which are beyond the private domain particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relations to the maintenance and reproduction of social power.

Such views, beliefs and ideas which constitute a system are aesthetic, religious, political, ethical and philosophical. Ideology mirrors the economic and political relations of any given society since it is one of the constituents of the society's superstructure. Our approach here makes it possible to draw a line between true and false ideology; between two diametrically hostile ideological camps which have correspondingly created two hostile philosophic aesthetic, economic and socio-political systems. One is the idealist ideology, which is non-scientific, metaphysical and retrogressive, while the other is materialist in a dialectical-historical sense, scientific and progressive (Eagleton, 1981).

It is to be noted that consciously, sub-consciously or even unconsciously, artists generally belong to one of these camps. This submission becomes incontestable once it is recognized that the artist has a particular system of beliefs and values which seek expression via the artistic media such as drama and theatre. Their affinity to any of the camps to the limelight not only through their own theoretical submissions but perhaps even more through their artistic productions which exhibit vivid ideological manifestations.

It is curious indeed to observe that the dialectical-historical materialist aesthetic (in the theatre specifically) does not hide its ideological and partisan predilection. Nevertheless, it is always cautious in its attempt to evade reductionism. In spite of the extremely complex dialectical relationship that art has with ideology, there is the need to emphasize that this aesthetics does not in any way equate art with ideology. While it correctly understands that the theatrical product is the reflection of the artist's ideology, it also recognizes that the expression of these interests take on forms. The artist's political, moral or religious ideas are integrated in an artistic structure or totality that has its own laws. As a result of this process of integration or formation, the artistic work appears to be endowed with a certain internal coherence and relative autonomy which thwarts its reduction to a mere ideological phenomenon (Dukore, 1974).

Although, Osofisan has always shunned dogma and ideological labelings whenever he is asked to define his political ideology, because according to him, all the labels have been abused and these ideologies have several misconceptions. Nonetheless, his ideological sympathy as a radical writer who advocates social change can be perceived

from his dramatic and non-dramatic writings. For instance, in *No More the Wasted Breed*, he challenges the old custom of using human beings as sacrifice to the gods. In *Once upon Four Robbers*, he argues that inequality in the existing social structure breeds robbers in the Nigerian society.

In line with his revolutionary philosophy as a radical writer and critic with an articulated commitment to social transformation, Osofisan reconstructs history, myth and consensus opinion in order to create a more desirable society. For example, in *The Chattering and the Song*, Osofisan purposefully reconstructs the history of the old Oyo Empire under the reign of Alafin Abiodun to suit his radical vision of a contemporary society. Similarly, Osofisan re-interprets the Moremi myth and legend of the past in *Morountodun* through the character of Titubi who plays the role of Moremi. Titubi's heroic impulse is spurred by the courage of Moremi who according to the legend had earlier ensured victory for the Ile-Ife people through her espionage mission. Thus, revolution dominates the themes of Osofisan's plays as he employs his characters to enact his vision of salvation of the society (Awodiya, 1995).

In this vein, it is observed that in spite of Osofisan's label-shyness, it is evident from his works that he is a Marxist writer who demands social change in favor of the oppressed and the downtrodden masses in the society. As a Marxist writer, he leans very strongly towards the materialist world-view and in this regard, socio-political issues are treated from the perspective of his revolutionary philosophy (Awodiya, 1995). A radical writer and critic with an articulated commitment to a materialist socialist and class perspective, Osofisan combines a radical ideology with recognition of the importance of cultural traditions.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The chosen theoretical framework for this study is Marxism. Marxist ideology is a political philosophy propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism hinges on dialectical and historical materialism, a theoretical base that discusses the development of class division within the human society. Marxism influence on drama and literature has helped to reshape the understanding of drama as a socio-functional phenomenon. The ideological thrust of Marxian dialectics is one aimed at overthrowing the bourgeois order and replacing it with a classless society. According to Gbilekaa (1988), "Marxist analysis of the society has been employed to release the people from the claws of the oppressor and even urge them to revolt against the decadent social order that oppresses them".

According to Arma Ayi Kwei (2007), "Marxism is a theory of the nature of history and politics as well as a presentation for revolutionary action to bring the industrial working class to power and create a classless society". In the same vein, Akpan (2005) sees Marxism as "a living body of thoughts and a set of real political practices which is influenced by changes in the world and aims at intervening to change the world".

Revolution which refers in Marxian term to mean the class struggle expected to lead to political change and the triumph

of communism or a forcibly overthrow of a government or social order, in favor of a new system, according to Marx and Engels (1974), is expected to usher in Socialism. Revolution can also imply a radical alteration of the existing economic and socio-political condition in a society. It involves a collective resistance and confrontation, by a group of people, to all the agents of oppression, exploitation and inhumanity. It is a strong desire to establish a new order and destroy the existing system with a view that a better society will emerge. This is why Vasques (2006) defines revolution as "a sudden radical or complete change; a fundamental change in political organization or in a government or constitution." It can also mean the overthrow of one government or ruler and the substitution of another by the people.

Revolution is often violent since the ruling class would not be willing to allow a destruction of the existing system for a new era where its interest may not be guaranteed (Fanon, 1980). Advertently then, revolution is an integral part of the Marxist ideology which vehemently supports the masses against their oppressors in the society.

III. ANALYSIS OF MOROUNTODUN

Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* is a historical play that re-enacts the farmers' revolt of 1969 in the old Western Region of Nigeria. The play explores and analyses the process whereby the masses are alienated from the wealth they created. It addresses itself centrally to class division and other themes such as conflicts arising from the exploitative social structure, the general disgusting moral abuse of the rural and urban masses, their courage, hope, betrayal and determination to rise above the limitation of the society.

The play is a re-enactment of the 1969 Agbekoya uprising—a massive revolution in which the ordinary farmers in the western region of Nigeria aggressively confronted the government. The farmers revolted against the state because they:

...tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise chicken, but must be content with wind in their stomach. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill (p. 66)

The government, through various agents like the marketing board, the sanitary inspectors and the tax men threaten the existence of the farmers who ironically are the producers of the nation's wealth. Unable to bear this anymore, the farmers under the leadership of Baba and Marshal decided to take up arms against the government.

The play opens with a theatre group trying to put up a play about the farmers' uprising. The director is on the stage, giving last minute instructions to the cast and crew members and telling the audience what the play is going to be about. In the course of doing this, Titubi (the spoiled daughter of a business tycoon) appears on stage, superbly dressed with lots of jewelry and make-up and wearing conspicuously the Moremi necklace; a little gold dagger, surrounded with nuggets— which was then in vogue. She walks in courageously and challenges the director of the play. She in fact attempts to disrupt the play, insisting that the play insults her class and so

must be stopped. The director explains to her that they are not insulting anybody but only performing a play, but she does not listen.

The police eventually arrive at the scene and Titubi is challenged by the police Superintendent to use her wealth and courage to save her class rather than harassing innocent and harmless people. Titubi then warns the Superintendent and reveals to him that she is the daughter of Alhaja Kabirat; the head of all the market women. When Salami realizes the daughter of whom she is, he challenges her ego by telling her that she is disturbing the people that want to perform a play on the stage instead of her to volunteer to help in fighting against the farmers who have risen in open rebellion and are marching down the city.

Titubi later volunteers herself to help capture Marshal, the leader of the peasants. She plans this with the police Superintendent and she is imprisoned. Her mother, Alhaja, comes to see her in the prison and she is forced to agree to the plan. Titubi in the prison sees herself as Moremi and determines to capture Marshal. The peasants, Marshal and Bogunde come to the city to release the prisoners and Titubi is released with them and follows them back to their camp. After experiencing the peasant farmers' suffering in the camp, Titubi commits class suicide when she abandons her rich class identity to identify with and join the peasant farmers. This is unlike the mythical Moremi, who fought for the government forces to ensure victory for her ruling class in the ancient Ile-Ife Kingdom against the onslaught of the Igbo warriors. Thus, Osofisan creates in *Morountodun* the Moremi myth to suit the exigencies of the contemporary Nigeria. He deploys the energies of the past to treat the forces of exploitation, oppression and injustice of the present society.

Osofisan also recreates popular myth for revolutionary purpose. As earlier said, he reconstructs the Moremi myth and legend of the past to suit his revolutionary view on the political forces of oppression, injustice and corruption in the contemporary Nigeria. In *Morountodun*, Osofisan yokes his legend with the 1969 popular farmers uprising in the old western Nigeria. In that year, the Yoruba peasant farmers revolted against the oppression and excessive taxation by the government of the region. The peasant farmers named their revolt 'Agbekoya', meaning 'farmers reject exploitation'.

In the play, the aristocratic Titubi, considering herself the present-day Moremi and egged on by the government agent Salami, infiltrates the peasants' ranks as a spy. But after being exposed to the peasants' way of life and experiencing their suffering, she in a twist of fate, renounces her bourgeois heritage and becomes ideologically transformed to the farmers' cause.

Titubi: I went, and I returned, triumphant. But I am not the same as I went away. A lot has happened (p. 60)

The ancient Moremi myth has thus been re-fashioned in the typical strategy of subversion which is a fundamental characteristic of radicalizing the familiar in Osofisan's dramaturgy. In the Moremi myth, Moremi served the ruling class, but in the refashioned myth, Osofisan makes the modern-day Moremi (Titubi) to serve the ruled. Titubi

denounces her legendary model Moremi, because she served the ruling class.

Titubi: I am not Moremi. Moremi served the state, was the state, was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not true that the state is always right... let a new life begin (p. 70).

IV. RADICAL IDEOLOGY AS ILLUSTRATED IN *MOROUNTODUN*

Morountodun is a radical and revolutionary play. It depicts the re-enactment of the farmers' uprising against the oppressive and exploitative rule of the government in the old western region of Nigeria. It is a play whereby the farmers rose to fight for their rights by revolting against the government and this is demonstrated through the different characters who serve as agents of revolution.

It all starts with the director on the stage addressing the audience about what the play is about:

If we could not speak about the war in the East because of stiff decrees, would we also be silent about the one in the west? And suppose another should start in the North? Well, we decided to go and rouse the people up by doing a play on the subject. We decided to do a play about it and take it round to all open places (p. 6).

This is a picture of revolution. The picture of revolution can also be seen when Superintendent challenges Titubi's ego by telling her that she is disturbing the people that want to perform a play instead of her to volunteer to help in fighting against the farmers who have risen in open rebellion and are marching down to the city and also when Superintendent is trying to convince Alhaja to agree to their plan by arousing her consciousness thus:

And one of these days, you'll hear the noise of shooting in your kitchen. Your market will be on fire. Your pretty houses, your banks and insurance houses, the entire street will be burning and there'll be nowhere for you to hide. No. There'll only be screams and blood everywhere and you'll be made to watch as six, seven men mount your daughter and ride her to death (p. 24).

The Moremi necklace in vogue which is shaped like a dagger is an instrument of violence which symbolizes the callous method used by the ruling class to dispossess the masses of their wealth. These symbols are fortified later as Kokondi observes thus: "last year, they were wearing blade, now, it's a dagger. Soon, it will be an axe" (p.50).

As revolutionary event involves a group of people or tribe fighting against oppression by the government in order to free themselves from either socio-economic or political bondage. Marshal and his people also fight against oppression from the government. This can be seen when he is telling his other members:

Tomorrow, when they think we are idling here, washing our wounds and hanging out our shredded hopes to dry, we are going to appear there, suddenly out of the air and hit them. Now that we have ammunition, Bang! Right where their heart is.

The very building which houses their commander and his odious officers... we'll destroy the place. Reduce it to rubbles forever. Let all prisons fall! (p.77).

Thus, in his passionate campaign against the diseased materialism of Nigeria's infantile capitalism, Osofisan is arousing the farmers' consciousness to rise up en-masse and fight against mass poverty and against all forces of reaction aimed at perpetuating the sterile government status.

Who does not want money? Stand, stand, stand. Fight to be rich for happiness .Oh fight for your right to rise in life (p.78)

He caps his agitation propaganda with a pungent incitement:

With good luck and stubbornness, with sweat, sweat and cleverness, De-ter-mi-na-tion! Ma-ni-pu-la-tion.

Oh fight for your share and do not care... (pg. 70)

This situation is a call for radicalism and revolution.

Titubi who fights against the ruling class and for the farmers' struggle is a radical reincarnation of Moremi, an earlier mythological Yoruba queen who opted for the status quo and infiltrated the enemy's ranks to save her people from defeat. However, the Moremi myth only serves Osofisan as a solid backdrop to fashion out his belief in the potentialities of radicalism and revolution by the masses. Such revolution/radicalism dynamically crafted in theatrical medium can motivate the downtrodden masses to rise en-masse to challenge and weaken the oppressive and suppressive forces of the bourgeoisie and official injustice.

V. CONCLUSION

Radicalism and revolution can be seen as fashionable tools through which the masses can uproot and displace any tyrannical government. These tools have been employed recently in some African countries like Egypt and Libya to remove tyrannical governments which do not receive the mandate and legitimacy of the masses.

The fusion of fiction and history with contemporary reality in this play is complex but recognizable in its multifarious details, hence the aesthetic viability of the whole process is assured. At least on the revolutionary dialectics and aesthetics, *Morountodun* demonstrates demystification and clarity confronting the neo-colonial realities of our contemporary experiences. The play supplies the necessary awareness of change as well as giving ideological direction to the revolution called The Farmers' uprising. The play reveals a Marxist vision which states that the proletariat, the comradeship of the downtrodden will achieve revolutionary change in society. In a Marxist framework, the playwright envisages collective action in the wake of mass political awareness.

If only on the level of proposition, Osofisan creatively argues that art must embody revolutionary aesthetics and be demystified in imagination and composition. He holds that

revolution is a seminar, biological necessity, which is organic and capable of regenerating itself. He believes that art as a part of social development must be committed to the social cause, that the artist must commit his art to social change. The play reflects Osofisan's potent use of biological metaphor for social revolution. His earlier appeal to writers to sow regenerative seeds in the community's flesh to go beyond merely reflecting the despair and incoherence in an oppressive society by offering an ethical progressive and revealing possibilities beyond the present is met in *Morountodun*, whereby political awareness is followed by collective action. The play reveals his experimental and dialectical treatment of history and myth by demystifying and adapting them for progressive, artistic and ideological effects. Thus the success of this revolt is a recreation of history.

Judging from the present ineptitude, corruption and mass genocide of the innocent people in Nigeria, resulting in human degradation, exploitation and mass poverty that have bedeviled the nation, there is no gainsaying the fact that social revolution is rife in the country. It is the only weapon that can deliver the people from oppression, injustice and dehumanization which the populace is currently passing through.

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