

Myth, History and the Marxist Polemics in Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*

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Abstract

The paper is a critical appraisal of Femi Osofisan's artistic fusion of the Yoruba myth of Moremi, a legendary figure in the history of Ile Ife, Nigeria and the history of Agbekoya uprising to depict his Marxist ideology. The paper is also an archetypal-historical critique of Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*. The paper notes and discusses the playwright's reliance on and employment of the archetypal heroism of Moremi and the archetypal revolution, valour and courage demonstrated by the leader of the Agbekoya uprising to protest against oppression and economic exploitation of the poor and the downtrodden in the society. There is an obvious juxtaposition of the capitalist ideology of the survival of the richest in the society with the Marxist advocacy for the equitable distribution of the resources of the land. The paper finally locates the play as a socio-economic satire on the alienation of the masses, class stratification and the gross oppression and dehumanization of the poor in the society.

Keywords: Osofisan, *Morountodun*, Myth, History, Satire, Marxism

Introduction

The adaptation and reconstruction of myth and history to suit the imperatives of the contemporary social realities is a 20th century phenomenon. This is copiously utilized by modern playwrights to depict, in a symbolic way, the dilemma and the predicament of the modern man. Both the classical and Elizabethan drama, which emphasizes the concept of tragic hero and tragic flaw are regarded by the modern playwrights as the theatre of the oppressor, whereas the modern drama is referred to as the theatre of the oppressed.

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This is because the tragic hero is made as the pawns in the hands of the gods who in the eyes of the modern playwrights are oppressors. This is the hallmark of the Epic theatre of Brecht which Osofisan tries to follow as against the dramaturgy of Grotowski and Absurd drama.

Osofisan (2000) in his article entitled “Some Notes on Development and Culture” opines that Literature and History are potent weapons in the hands of artists. Such tools help the artists to project to the society certain mentality of decency, enlightenment and ethical conduct and all other virtues and values which translate into refinement and insight and without which no society can claim to have a touch of civilization. Such values are also needed in order for the society to experience cultural liberty.

According to Osofisan, “what we need is to free and empower our people’s immense imaginative powers, to turn them into fearless and adventurous explorers in every sphere of activity” (10). For instance, the Oedipus myth of Sophocles according to Buchanan (1984) is interpreted “as a parable of the struggle between humanity and divinity and the ultimate dissolution of humanity’s pretensions to autonomy.”

To the modern artist, man is responsible for his destiny. Wole Soyinka for instance in *The Strong Breed*, *Camwood on the Leaves* and *The Bacchae of Euripides*, according to Adejumo (1987), “emphasizes mythic themes to engage in a struggle for self-liberation.” Femi Osofisan, one of the most articulate and distinguished playwrights and dramatists in Nigeria employs myth and history to make his drama relevant to the contemporary society.

Discussion

Osofisan utilizes drama as a veritable platform to condemn the ruling class for oppressing the poor and the downtrodden. His deployment of myth in a subversive manner is to create awareness and campaign vigorously for the liberation of the masses from the oppressive aristocratic class. This is what Osofisan (1993) means when he says that

The primary virtue of literature seems for me to lie in its subversive potential, that explosive charge which lies hidden behind the façade of entertainment and which must be controlled and made to explain for the use of our people, of mankind, like the canalizing of atomic energy.

Literature must be used to play its role in the advancement of our society, in the urgent struggle against neo-colonialism and the insidious spread of fascism. We believe that literature is a weapon, but we are not calling for mere propaganda. Literature shapes awareness and hence should furnish the right perspective... We believe that man can change his society. If we make the right decisions, there is no reason why we should not be able to move our society from its present chaos. This is one of the duties fundamental to literature. ... And one of my own goals has been to try and interpret history and myth for our own self-rediscovery (21-22, 47).

Osofisan (1980) had earlier expressed this similar vision when he said that

We must begin to confront history at its empirical points. We must move our people away from superstition, and help them to analyse objectively, and hence master their immediate material condition. We must look at the immediate situation, at the problems that concern us here and now. (76)

Osofisan therefore uses Art purely as a “subversive weapon to bring sanity into the decadent and chaotic society. In fact, this view had long been expressed by Osofisan (1977), even before he came into the limelight as a celebrated artist. He asserts that

That community must be persuaded out of its head-long course of self-destruction... For in a time of incoherence who else but the artist in his role as prophet could map out the visionary paths of tomorrow and hence restore our faith in life. (*Literary* 23)

Osofisan is a stable and composed artist. He sees himself as an artist on a rescue mission. His assignment, therefore, is an urgent one. He is not only committed to sanitizing the society of today, but as a prophet, he is bent on charting out a reliable course through which a better tomorrow can be established.

The foundation should be laid today so that the people can hope for a blossoming future. He possesses enormous potentials and talents to achieve this goal. The life of an artist is worthless, if he cannot use his varying potentials to help the society.

Osofisan, in Laniyan (1983), buttresses this view when he says that: I think the dramatist, like any other intellectual has responsibility to use his talent to help in the process of development. We are all, after committed to this society. We all have something at stake. We all live here; we've got parents, children growing up here. All our future is committed here. So we will only have the kind of society that we build. Hence, it seems to me inevitable that all of us must use whatever talent we've got to help the society in which we live. (145).

In achieving this according to Awodiya (1995), He radically revises and reshapes familiar history, myth and legend in the light of contemporary realities in order to stress their dialectical dynamism, and imbue them with fresher meanings. Furthermore, he exposes the ills of the society and provides the audience with his vision of a new social order (57).

In *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), the themes of oppression and autocracy become very obvious in the central dramatic scene of play-within-a-play in part two. Here, Osofisan brings history to the stage. He recreates and reconstructs the nineteenth century oral history of Old Oyo in Yoruba land, Nigeria during the oppressive and anarchical reign of Bashorun Gaha who deposed the reigning Alafin and established a reign of depostism. It was said that he killed all the princes of Oyo except Abiodun because he was crippled in one leg. By the time Abiodun grew up he saw the need for him to challenge and dethrone Bashorun Gaha and bring sanity into the empire.

The story becomes a good material for Osofisan's use to achieve his vision. In the play-within-a-play, Sontri acts as Abiodun, Funlola as Olori, and Moka as Aresa and Leje as Latoye. In the playlet, Abiodun is depicted as an autocratic leader. The whole playlet reveals the oppression of the masses in the hands of the despotic rulers. It also shows the gap between the rich and the poor and the determination of the masses, represented by the young revolutionaries like Yajin, Moka, Leje and Sontri to revolt against the oppressive systems in the society.

The focus of Osofisan in *Morountodun*, a play that is structured into sixteen scenes, is oppression and economic exploitation of the poor and the downtrodden in the society.

To realize this, Osofisan employs the Yoruba myth of Moremi, a legendary figure in the history of Ile-Ife Nigeria, a woman who single-handedly fought the Igbo raiders and discovered their secrets. Moremi, during the adventure, vowed to offer her only son, Oluorogbo to the river Esinmirin if she could win the battle against the Igbo raiders. Osofisan portrays the heroine of *Morountodun*. Titubi, in the image of the mythical Moremi and puts the conflict in contemporary historical period.

Osofisan artistically relocates within the Moremi myth the Agbekoya Farmers' uprising which occurred in 1969 in the Western Region of Nigeria during the Premiership of Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola. It was a mass revolt by farmers, the poor and the unemployed in the society against high taxation and the dwindling low prices of Cocoa. The protest was quelled with arrest of Tafa Adeoye, the leader of the agitators. This was possible because of policewoman who joined the forces of Adeoye as a friend and later handed him over to the law enforcement agents.

With this success, the farmers' cause is betrayed. The role of this policewoman is similar to the role assigned to Titubi and very unlike Moremi's heroic feat to save Ile-Ife from the Igbo marauders. It is at this point that Osofisan departs from the Moremi myth. For instance, Osofisan substitutes the State for the Ile-Ife people and the Agbekoya peasants for the Igbo army. Instead of the inter-tribal war between the Yoruba and the Igbo, Osofisan turns that into intra-class struggles within the Yoruba ethnic group. That is why Osofisan (2001) says,

The leading figure in my play, Moroutodun is a female, and young, and originally from the elite. But the decisive factors in her positive orientation come from the peasantry, from the nurturing ideals of the old women of the farms as well as the comradeship of the fighting women at the warfront. It is because of this ideal that I feel the urgency to revise the prevailing historiography, to give voice to the voiceless, and make visible those who have been kept conspiratorially in the margins of history. Too much of our attention has been given to warriors, to the sons and siblings of Ogun, as if they alone who make history (21-22).

The Director Narrates

I'll try and give you a rapid summary of our play tonight. The play, as you will soon see, starts in the year 1969, the month of September.

That year, if you remember, the civil war was raging in the east of our country but this play has nothing to do with that. It deals with another war, the one that was later to be popularly known as the Agbekoya uprising, in which ordinary farmers, in the west of this country, rose up and confronted the State. Maybe you remember? Illiterate farmers, whom we had all along thought to be docile, peace-loving, if not even stupid, suddenly took to arms and began to fight against the government... We decided to go and rouse people up by doing a play on the subject. (5-6)

Osofisan successfully establishes and uses Moremi as the archetypal character for greatness and heroism in *Morountodun* while he employs the Agbekoya uprising as the archetype of revolution and armed confrontation. According to Oloyede (1989), “this background is employed to enhance Osofisan’s perspectives on both the mytho-historical events and the contemporary issues” (25).

The fusion of myth and history in *Morountodun* by Osofisan to protest against certain contemporary socio-economic realities confronting our society has made Niyi Osundare (1980) to make this comment on the play: “*Morountodun* is a complex and multifaceted play. Here is one magnificent swoop; Osofisan carries on his theme from history, mythology and contemporary reality” (147).

Osofisan, in an interview with Babajide Ogungbade in 1982, explains his pre-occupation with myth and history in *Morountodun*:

In *Morountodun*, you see, I tried to celebrate the common farmers, it is their life that is important to me, the women there and so on, this what I mean, that history, is the interpretation given by a certain people at a particular time to events... All culture is history different circumstances in their own environment, and fashion out systems in order to survive; they work out the best ways to live through difficult time... People now are trying to go back to old ways in order to be authentic. But you see, we tend to forget that those old ways were arrested within their particular time to serve particular people. These are ways which we must modify. (131, 133)

The play as we have seen opens with the Director announcing the theme of the play which has to do with class conflict based on the Agbekoya uprising. This is to arouse the audience into a social and economic consciousness.

But suddenly noises grow and the actors freeze and the Director cannot continue with the play as he “is soon violently pushed back by a shouting, near-hysterical mob, consisting mainly of women bearing placards, and some handbills” (6) led by Titubi, the spoiled daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, a wealthy woman.

With the presence of the agitators, the Director’s play is disrupted. But instead, Titubi takes over the stage and becomes one of the casts. With her on the stage, the plot of the play is changed. That is why the Director says “we came here to do a play, a simple play. But History – or what some of you call Chance or Fortune – has taken over the stage. And it will play itself out whether we like it or not” (16)

The police Superintendent, in his bid to arrest the perpetrators of the riot, attacks the Director and takes him to be the leader of the uprising. He later tongue-lashes Titubi and attempts to arrest her for leading a revolt. The Superintendent expresses the failure of the Establishment to put an end to the revolt because the leader of the uprising is elusive. Unless he is captured, the war will continue. Titubi like the legendary Moremi promises to capture Marshall the leader of the uprising within two weeks. She therefore allows herself to be captured by the police and detained in the prison along with the peasants. Titubi finds enough inspiration from Moremi. She puts on the “Moremi Necklace” inside the prison.

With the new position of Titubi who is determined to defend her upper class and the Establishment; a new play is thus set in focus. According to Fatoba (1996):

The ground for a new play is established – a play of direct confrontation between the main characters, the peasant class and the upper class. The upper class no longer requires the disgruntled services of the Superintendent marginalized from its resources, neither do the peasants need the Director as their spokesman; both class surrogates wait at the sidelines with occasional appearance and comments as a new play unfolds before our eyes. (90)

While in prison, Titubi realizes the extent of damage her class has done to the poor. Right there, she joins in the struggle to fight capitalism and injustice meted to the poor. As the armed peasants led by Bogunde break into the prison cells and release Titubi, Titubi resolves to force the Establishment to come to the negotiating table with the peasants.

The play is thematically structured in such a way that the ideological focus of the playwright which is basically on class struggle is drawn essentially along the economic perspectives. Right from the beginning of the play, it is very easy to identify the first capitalist ideological perspective which tends towards the survival of the richest and the second, which is the Marxist advocacy for the equitable distribution of the resources and wealth of the land.

The rich in this play become richer at the expense of the sweat of the peasants. The peasants are exploited by the rich. The poor consequently languish in squalor and poverty, while the rich and the capitalists in the society, typified by Alhaja Kabirat and Titubi, before her transformation flaunt their ill-gotten wealth and perpetrate injustice and economic exploitation on the poor masses.

Titubi openly flaunts her wealth on her arrival at the theatre with her followers. She attacks the Director, the audience and the members and boasts of her economic achievements and status:

Look at me. Go on. Feast your eyes. Am I not good to look at? *Ebn?* So what is wrong with being rich? So there's a peasant rebellion. And then? What have we got to do with it? Is it a sin to be rich? *Abn 'abn!* It's disgusting!... And enough of pretending not to notice! We didn't ask anybody's father not to be rich, did we?... So in what way are we responsible for the farmers' uprising? *Ebn?* What does our being rich have to do with it? Or is it only when we wear rags that we qualify to breathe the air? Tell me, Mr. Director? (Slaps him)... You want to say you don't like money, *abi?* (An assistant opens out her handbag. She dips into it and brings out a handful of currency notes, which she begins to paste disdainfully on the forehead of the DIRECTOR, who is now covered in sweat.) Money! See, you're shivering already at the touch of it... Yeeesss! I have money and I can enslave you with it? I can buy all of your ringworm-infested actors if I choose... aaahhh. (7-9).

In another confrontation between the Superintendent and Alhaja, the mother of Titubi, the Superintendent accuses Alhaja, the capitalist and her group of being the brains behind all the peasant revolts through their oppressive and capitalist tendencies.

Superintendent: Listen to me. The peasants out there are no more than a thousand strong. Let's say, even two thousand.

Two thousand men, armed mostly with crude dare guns, matchets, bows and arrows. What's all that before the awesome apparatus of the state? So why have we not been able to crush them?

Alhaja: Are you asking me?

Superintendent: You should know, Alhaja. After all, these rebels are of your own creation, you who are used to feeding on others.

Alhaja: Look here -

Superintendent: I'll tell you. The peasants are strong, and seemingly invincible, because they are solidly united by the greatest force in the world: hunger. They are hungry, their children die of Kwashiorkor, and they have risen to say no, no more!

Alhaja: It's a lie! No one has ever died of hunger in this country! I am surprised at you, a police officer, carrying this kind of baseless propaganda...

Superintendent: They claim that you and your politicians have been taking off the profits of their farms to feed your cities, to feed your own throats and buy more jewels and frippery. And so, at last, they are coming for the reckoning. (23-24)

The plight of the poor is further revealed in the play-within-a-play in which Mama Kayode, Wura and Molade berate the government and its agents for the dehumanization of the peasants and the unjust treatment meted to them each time they try to assert their individualities. For instance, the peasants send countless number of letters to government highlighting their grievances. In the word of Wura "the letters multiplied, the letter-writer grew pregnant" and according to Molade, "But not even a note of acknowledgement" (63) as "the Council officials grew more daring and ruthless" (64).

In order to punish the peasants for their incessant protests, "Bribery rates went up; kick back and kick forward hit inflation. Tax assessments began to gallop like antelopes" (64). That marks the beginning of the uprising.

Actually, the grievances of the peasants have been summarized by Mama Kayode, who is speaking for Baba in answer to the Governor's speech mimicked by Mama Kayode too:

Our roads have been so bad for years now that we can no longer reach markets to sell our crops. Even your Excellency had to make your trip here by helicopter. Your Council officials and the "akodas" harass us minute to minute and collect bribes from us. Then they go and build mansions in the city. Sanitary inspectors like Mister Bamsun are bloodsuckers. Your Marketing Board seizes our cocoa, and pays us only one third of what it sells it to the "Oyinbo". We have no electric, and we still drink "tanwiji" from the stream. Many of our children are in jail for what you people call smuggling. We protested and your police mounted expeditions to maim us and reduce our houses to ashes. (65)

Ajayi (1996) is right therefore in saying that "the economic factor is presented as the panacea to all problems" (102). The economic base of people is very important for it affects all aspects of the people's lives. If the economic base is destroyed, the total life of the people is in ruins.

People like Alhaji Buraimoh and Lawyer Isaac who should be fighting the cause of the peasants allow themselves to be bought and used by government to exploit their own people. That is why Baba accuses them when he says:

That's what we told you to help us expose at the Inquiry. We said you should demand that all the officials be probed and made to declare their assets. And what happened? They merely reshuffled the Council, and made you, Alhaji Buraimoh, its new Chairman. You came here, demanding our cooperation, and when we refused, you brought the police back. (52)

Marshall, the leader of the agitators adds to Baba's allegations: "So you led the policemen from house to house, identifying the so-called agitators. You had a mask on, but your voice, Alhaji... we recognized your voice" (53).

Both Alhaji Buraimoh and Lawyer Isaac accept that they are guilty. They are like Chief Isokun in *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, Aringindin in *Arindingin and the Nightwatchmen* and Orousi in *Another Raft*. All these people betray their people in their respective communities.

But Osofisan does not spare the betrayal of Alhaji Buraimoh and Lawyer Isaac as they are mistakenly shot by the government troops. That is the price one pays for betraying one's people.

But Titubi, because of her transformation, refuses to identify with the mythic Moremi who was an agent of the State. She tells the Superintendent: "I am not Moremi! Moremi served the State" (70). To Alhaja, her mother, she says: "for there's no way you can win a war against a people whose cause is just" (70). Pricked by her conscience, Titubi chooses to be on the side of the oppressed. She sacrifices her wealth at the expense of assisting in setting her people free from bondage. Like Yajin in *The Chattering and the Song*, who forsakes her rich family for the love of the rebel Sontri or like Akanji in *Red is the Freedom Road*, who forsakes filial love, for the sake of the love for his people; Titubi flings away her mother's wealth and opts for the liberation of her people.

In order to achieve this, and create a new world order, Osofisan calls for unity among the peasants against the economic exploitation of the bourgeoisie. Their unity will enable them to fight and win through a peaceful revolution as against the option of war which is very destructive. At this point, Osofisan adopts the resolution of the Agbekoya uprising to resolve the conflict in the play. That is why Baba tells Marshall to let them give peace a change and sue for a truce: "We declared a truce with the police. On our honour. Tomorrow we're supposed to hang our weapons" (76).

So, just as Agbekoya uprising was resolved through a negotiation after all the killings, the main conflict in *Moruntodun* is resolved through negotiation too. It is the sincere belief of Osofisan that peace can only come through dialogue and negotiation and not through war. That is why Ibitokun (1995) says that:

Osofisan has an organicist dialectical view of human society. Any society which remains like a stone will dish out obnoxious values to its people. A society must therefore demonstrate its internal dynamism for change. (96)

The resourcefulness of Osofisan in handling the dramaturgy of *Moruntodun* has enhanced a great deal the success of the play.

The playwright has successfully welded together myth, history, religion, illusion and disillusion into the theatre to produce a drama based on Marxist polemics. Iji (1987) supports this view when he says that

Osofisan attempts to resourcefully manipulate many resources of stagecraft in presenting what can be conveniently termed his pedagogy of the oppressed, wherein he also tries to articulate very aggressively, his gospel of the poor, at the same time laying the foundation for an anticapitalist ideology. Using the dramatic medium of communication as an idealistic tribunal, his handling of myths and anti-rights, theatre and anti-theatre, he attempts to weld the historical and the ahistorical, the religious and the irreligious through the platform of Marxist polemics. (84).

Writing on the socio-economic relevance of *Morountodun*, Eshiet (1989) opines that

Morountodun makes a clinical exploration and analysis of the process whereby the masses are alienated from the wealth they create. It addresses itself centrally to class-stratification and other satellite themes such as conflicts arising from the exploitative social structure, the prurience and arrogance of the privileged class, its kleptocracy and general philistinism, the obscene abuse of the rural and urban masses, their courage, hope, betrayal and determination to rise above the limitations of their society. All these are dramatically worked out as the playwright relates character to circumstance and History. (27)

Osofisan achieves his vision in the play through his creation and handling of the play's aesthetics of protest such as myth, history, audience participation, humour, the use of elements of magic and incantation as an attempt to demist the subliminal elements of the theatre, so as to give way to dialectics through the use of traditional elements. Other aesthetics of protest used are the propagandistic features like the use of handbills and placards, the domestication of English language and play-within-a-play. The play, *Morountodun* among the dramatic works of Osofisan is one of the most successful socio-economic satires.

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