

THE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A READING OF SELECTED PLAYS OF FEMI OSOFISAN

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Abstract

The major pivot around which the art of literary creativity revolves is life. A work of art can neither exist in a vacuum nor can it be divorced from the myriad of socio-political factors or social realities that negatively or positively influence the worldview of man. These factors can either be political, historical, biographical, or sociological. What this entails is that literature derives its main essence from life, as the creative writer is provoked to present the losses and gains, the ills and virtues, of a society with a view to highlighting or sensitizing the people to the solutions of these problems. A work of art also entertains as it educates. *This* confers on literature the ability to influence human beings psychologically, spiritually, and physically depending on the sensitivity and/or the world-view of the writer. This paper explores how Femi Osofisan sees politics as a tool of social organization in his dramaturgy with a critical study of six of his plays: *A restless Run of Locusts* (1975), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Who is Afraid of Solarin* (1978), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1982), *Morountodun and Other Plays* (1982) and *Mid-Night Hotel* (1986).

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In literature, human beings are afforded the opportunity to learn from the past to improve the present so as to better the future. According to E. Babatunde Omobowale:

Two things at least are indispensable to the creation of a veritable work of art. The first is that it is a representation of life whose creation is propelled by a host of other factors. Second, it is created to serve a pragmatic purpose, which is usually didactic in nature (Omobowale, 3).

One may then be justified to say that literature serves as a means through which the links between the past, the present, and the future are highlighted as a way of facilitating a positivist oriented growth of society. According to Chinua Achebe:

Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print gives us a second handle on reality; This enabling dimensions of make - belief gives the same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us. (17)

Inferentially, this definition views literature as a multi-faceted field of research whose dynamic nature derives from the fact that literature, as an imitation of life, actually reflects life. In the words of Omobowale, "literary creativity confers on the writer the ability to undertake a labyrinthal exploration of different spheres of human endeavor in order to bring life into existence from multiplicity of angles" (3). Literature as a reflection or refraction of society confers on the creative writer the roles of a chronicler, a social critic, and visioner. Thus, in the present reality, literature is being restored to its pristine position as a central cognitive recourse in society, as well as it's most faithful and comprehensive interpreter.

African drama is essentially representational. It is a body of work through which one can understand the twists and turns in African development. It is always eager to present the vivid picture of the African condition in a socio-political terrain. Furthermore, apart from revealing the lines and contradictions in the present African societies, the modern African drama is a potent means of recording African experiences in its numerous dimensions. Therefore, it has always been a realistic medium of expression of the different developmental stages of the African social consciousness. The modern African drama therefore could be seen as a realistic literature.. Essentially, African drama today is mostly politically. As a matter of fact, the second generation of African playwrights are conscious of the economic, social, and political crisis that plague African nations, espousing in various dimensions. the evil in the dehumanizing conditions of hunger, poverty, insecurity, unemployment, diseases and squalor, mis-management of public fund, etc., that African nations currently wallow in. Committed playwrights have variously made this the focus of their artistic creation with a view of tracing the causes and providing solutions to the problems. The major concern of this paper therefore, is to explore how Femi Osofisan sees politics

as a tool of social organization in his dramaturgy. For instance, Osofisan in *A Restless Run of Locusts*, view politics as a mindless machine that is ruthless in its operation and which is unrelenting in its demands. He presents the evils of fraud, thuggery, intimidation, and murder as the hall-mark of political realities in African nations, and to be specific, Nigeria. Osofisan presents Sanda as an idealistic young man who decides to avenge a wrong doing but who finally gets consumed in the process:

Sanda:

Listen, Iyabo, it was not my fault. From the moment I took my brother's place as candidate, I lost my freedom. I became an instrument to be used and tossed around by the party. (45)

He laments further:

What could I do? Look, try to understand. There is no room for the individual conscience in politics. There is only the Party, the collective grab and greed. The hundreds of hungry rapacious hands fighting like jackals ... they make the decisions, and they'll stop at nothing to get what they want. .. (45)

Sanda finds himself a captive of the party's ideologies as individual will is highly ineffectual in the face of the collective will which is most anti-people. A captive and a prisoner of the party, but it is obvious that he is a willing prisoner. He doesn't have the slighted idea of what the party stands for, yet uses its services. His major motive for going into politics is to revenge his brother's death. But he later finds this mission not as easy as he feels. Driven by this mission, Sanda changes from the idealistic young man, who has won the love and devotion of Iyabo, to a reckless, blood thirsty, savage politician. Chief Kuti describes the relationship between the Party and the Politician thus:

The Party! Who is the Party but a group of swindlers and bankrupts like me, all fighting to grab something for themselves! Do you think the Party mints money? (16)

Chief Kuti, in the foregoing, gives a vivid account of what Nigerian politicians in the world of Osofisan were and are up till the present moment. The major drive which they vigorously pursue is how well to loot the public treasury and stack in bank accounts abroad the common wealth of the masses. Revelations at the various anti-graft bodies in Nigeria: Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), are all pointers to this unfortunate development that Osofisan has written off since 1975. In line with dastardly act of corruption is killing at will. Politicians shed the blood of innocents for rituals, and some

wasted just to get opponents out of their way. Life means nothing to them all because of money and power. Osofisan sees the politician as nothing but a merchant of death and destruction. This is summed up by First Elder in *A Restless Run of Locusts* as follows:

Every day of your campaigns have brought fresh woes and new wounds, has brought another grave to another home. The palace is flooded with the tears of the stricken ... no place is safe again from your thugs; no market, no road, no home. You ride the town like pestilence, like a run of. .. locusts (30) Above are the words of agony for one of the emissaries of the Oba to Sanda. It explains the unfortunate corner the ruled has been boxed into by the rulers. While thuggery and killing take the center stage in *A Restless Run of Locusts*, rigging is the main evil condemned by Osofisan in *The Mid-Night Hotel*. The gubernatorial candidate of the Nigeria for Paradise Party, Headmaster Alatise, is defeated through massive rigging. The electioneering process witnesses a great level of fraud and violence so much so that it is described by Petro naira Bend as, "this war you call election which is coming fast like a huge conflagration" (7).

Furthermore, the level of corruption that goes on in the name of politics is highlighted by Hon. Mrs. Ashibong, popularly known as Awero, in *Mid-Night Hotel*. She lures Pastor Suuru, her husband's friend to Mid-Night Hotel for sexual favors so as to win certain contracts. According to her, that act of corruption is a regular practice, as such she educates the reluctant Pastor Suuru:

For Christ sake, what's wrong with you? I'm telling you it is regular practice in Parliament. All the male MP's are doing it, even to their nieces and cousins! Everyone in our Contract Awards Committee is taking members of the opposite sex somewhere or the other before jobs are given out. They call it sampling the goods. (21-22)

The most ridiculous of behaviors, according to Awero is a regular practice in Parliament. In all the political characters presented by Osofisan, none can be said to have redeeming feature because the Nigerian political landscape is so dominated by crooked and deceitful politicians, which Osofisan believes must change if his country is to experience any form of development. Hence, his exposing these bad traits is to foster a level of change, and value appreciation of political leaders. Nigeria did not hide her disgust in the crop of politicians she has, which is not limited to any particular political party, but which cut across all parties, as it stands out as the major feature of all the political parties in the country. Osofisan has an incisive vision which he deploys to the service of oppressed humanity. His central themes in most of his plays border on the fact that the machine of oppression in human life is created by human beings and can only be

demolished by human beings. The problem of the masses has been a major thrust in all the plays of Osofisan. His commitment to the theatre is primary because, through drama, he is able to associate himself with the exploited and the underprivileged so as to achieve social revolution. Osofisan lives in Nigeria, a country where two broad classes exist, the rich and the poor. The economy of the country is controlled by the bourgeois who equally control the super-structure of the society. In this context, the wealth of the land is the exclusive preserve of the ruling class as they determine who gets what and more often than not, the wealth finds its way in the pocket of the rulers and their immediate families at the expense of the ruled and poor masses. The teeming masses live in penury and wallow in poverty while the ruling class steal and stack abroad the wealth of the land.

Most often, the government forces the oppressed masses down the abyss of distress and lack, the interest of the masses is of no concern to the rulers. This vulnerable condition of the poor is usually exploited by the rich who sees the poor as tools to be manipulated to achieve their selfish ends. Osofisan abhors this type of system with passion. He believes in equal distribution of wealth without which no society can make progress. In most of his plays, Osofisan carefully weaves his themes around that of class system, corruption, and crime, the result of which ends in violence. He always sets his characters in a struggle against the ruling class to demand for their rights. This form of struggle that is readily branded 'anti-government' always meets with stiff resistance from the rulers. In *Morountodun*, poor citizens do not have rights over their legitimate properties. The case of Titus and the Sanitary Inspector is a case in reference. This is seen in the play-acting between Mama Kayode and Molade below:

Mama Kayode: . . . where are you going?
Molade: To Mama Laide, sah.
Mama Kayode: In this rain?
Molade: It's my wife. She's in labour
She needs help. . . .
Mama Kayode: What's that in your hand self/
Molade: you mean this umbrella, sah?
Mama Kayode: Hen-Hen that's what you call it, this
Dirty, smoky, cob-infested jagbajantis.
I bet it's

Mama Kayode assumes the role of the Sanitary Inspector while Molade acts the part of Titus in this play-acting. Titus is a representative of the oppressed class while the Sanitary Inspector belongs to the ruling class. Titus revolts against this injustice but ends up in jail for refusing to give out his umbrella which is accused of "soiling the rain" (63). The property of the masses belongs to the public, and any form of resistance by the masses is

effrontery against the 'ruling class which ultimately lands the victim in prison with hard labor. To protest against this type of absurd social order, the masses write several petitions to the government which are never acknowledged. This is evidenced in Baba's speech to the governor in *Morountodun* (65). It is when this type of peaceful protest fails that, the masses result into violent revolution. This form of revolution by the oppressed is what Superintendent Salami, in his conversation with Alhaja in *Morountodun*, express thus: "Allah is always on the side of those who do more than just fold their arms and watch" (25). In this statement, Osofisan solicits revolution in solving political quagmire, contraption, and oppression instead of relying on divine intervention. He believes that the masses are and must remain agents of change and revolution in the society. The collective resolve of the oppressed masses in *Morountodun* turns the tide in favor of the oppressed class. In *The Chattering and the Song*, through Latoye, Osofisan canvasses collective will power as the needed oil for the wheel of revolution as against individual struggle. Latoye speaks sense into the Guards that are supposed to be agents of the ruling class and converts them into the struggle. The Guards join the revolution:

Guards: Freedom!

Latoye: Freedom! The King has called you to eat.

Eat him. (45).

Osofisan in *The Chattering and The Song*, projects his determination to re-interpret heroism and signify economic relation between the rulers and the ruled as what must be re-addressed through revolution against feudal impositions. The play is crafted in the history of the peaceful reign of Alaaafin Abiodun after the fall of Basorun Gaa. Gaa, a very ruthless leader, influences the enthronement of five kings in his life time and he's also connected to the death of four of them. Alaaafin and his chiefs represent the ruling class while Latoye symbolizes the poor masses. Hence, we see the poor masses in the following excerpt confronting the ruling class:

Latoye: ... but in your reign Abiodun, the elephant eats, and nothing remains for the antelope. The buffalo drinks and there is drought in the land! (45)

In the play, Alaaafin Abiodun becomes power-drunk. The masses suffer a great deal and decide to fight back, this they do through the formation of Farmer's Movement. The asses rise up against the reign of Alaaafin and the leader, Sontri is arrested. However, it is too late to stop the revolution as Sontri proclaims as he is led away in chains:

There is nothing you can do to stop birds from singing. Mokaan, the revolution is already on wing, you cannot halt it. (47)

In the same vein, Leje, as he tries to make a convert of Funlola, says:

Once a movement begins, in the search for justice, it will run its course, with or without those who serve to spark it off (53)

Osofisan seems to start the notional consciousness of Farmer's Movement in,

The Chattering and The Song and brings it to a full swing in *Morountodun*.

The seed of the peasants' revolution that erupts and consumes the ruling class in *Morountodun* is indeed planted in *The Chattering and The Song*. Osofisan, in these two plays addresses a period in history when resistance was the only solution. However, much as Osofisan advocates revolution as a means out of oppression, Marshal lost his life to the war or his refusal to sit at a round table negotiation with the government. He chooses the part of violence as against peace and has to pay with his dear life.

Osofisan sees money as playing a dominant role in politics, whereby political offices have become cash-and-carry. In Nigeria today, the politics of "god-fat her-ism" has taken the centre stage. Unless a politician has a successful gladiator backing and bank-rolling his expenses, he's as good as a loser. Politicians loot treasury everyday because they know they can buy their ways back into offices. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan requests whether it is right to kill a group of defaulters when those that sit in judgment to determine their fates are worse, stealing in millions in their official positions, yet pronouncing death sentence on those that steal peanuts. He sees crime and armed robbery as a product of bad leadership. The robbers are produced by the politicians as they equip them with sophisticated weapons and use them as tools to rig their way into power. These thugs are immediately disowned after election. These armed thugs immediately graduate into armed robbers as soon as they win or lose elections because they would no longer be relevant. In pursuit of their own brand of politics, the robbers take up arms against the government in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Politicians in *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* and the robbers in *Once Upon Four Robbers* are virtually the same with very little modifications. While the robbers rob with arms and ammunitions, the politicians do their own robbing with their pens.

Femi Osofisan is a playwright with a unique concern for the plight of the poor and the down trodden in his society. He believes that the bane of people's freedom is bad leadership. He also believes that Nigeria and Africa at large has more bad leaders (who are indeed worse than armed robbers) than good ones. Osofisan sees the masses as the root of the society, the earth

to be tended and not to be devastated. He believes that any government that maltreats the masses has devastated the earth upon which his existence is hinged and thus must be made to pay dearly for it. The poor forms the basis of the existence of rich rulers, hence the poor masses should be ready to rise up to fight injustice and bad governance whenever it manifests. An overview of Osofisan's plays show that the masses are indeed more powerful than the rich because God has given them numerical strength over the rich. The poor need to know this; they should also be bold to call their leaders to question whenever the need arises.

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