

Ritual, Tradition and Reconstruction in Contemporary Nigerian Drama: Femi Osofisan and Tess Akaeke Onwueme a Dramatic Analysis in Afrocentricity

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Winner of the first Association of Nigerian Authors drama prize in 1983, Femi Osofisan is a well-known playwright in Nigeria. He was born in a farming village named Erunwon in Western Nigeria in 1946. His father's death when he was yet four months old left his family in poverty. He was raised by his relatives, shuttling between grandparents and other relatives who could pay his school expenses. Following these early difficult years he attended University of Ibadan where he studied English and painting, wrote short stories, poems and edited the school journal. When independence arrived in 1960 Osofisan hoped that it would soon be followed with its promise of "planned decolonization". However from 1962 until 1966 the country was raged with political instability which came to an abrupt end with two successive military regimes that quickly fostered a civil war until early 1970s. While his country was going through hard times and new developments Osofisan took an interest in French, and began writing his early plays severely criticizing self-aggrandizing politicians. It was through Ibadan's intellectual atmosphere that he was exposed to the Negritude movement of the 1930's, initiated largely by French colonial students. During those days he took a close look at Frantz Fanon's observations of the Algerian revolution and found numerous resemblances:

"Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it." (Fanon, p. 210).

Besides his resentment of cultural estrangement which was a direct consequence of colonialism it was also his longing to define and revive pre-colonial African consciousness that motivated Osofisan in those days. He firmly believed that affirmation of the past, confirmation of one's racial identity and validity of its institutions over a super-imposed Western ideology would provide for an epistemological foundation aiming at independence from a Western, technologically based imperialism (Richards, p.xviii). Thus developed his initial encounter with the Negritude movement and its proponents, namely Aime Cesaire, Leopold S. Senghor and Leon Damas. Besides having studied the Negritude Movement, Osofisan also took an interest in the Mbari Club which started in Ibadan in 1961. A German anthropologist Ulli Beier and South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele took the lead in establishing the Mbari Club which brought together a group of western educated black poets, novelists, performers, dancers and musicians who envisioned pursuit of art as a sacred calling in which the individual was finally answerable only to the dictates of his imagination. The Nigerian writers Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark and Wole Soyinka were at the center of the Mbari Club's intellectual grandeur. Their work was observed as projecting an authentic African culture that rivaled the Eurocentric hegemony (Richards, p. xix). In addition to these two significant discourses, during his study of French at Ibadan he was also acquainted with role models for drama. For instance, Soyinka dominated the theater scene with his plays titled *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, (1958) - which was regarded the beginning of a mature English speaking theater. Soyinka established the "1960 Masks" company and directed *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi's Harvest*, which were both politically motivating plays. For John Pepper Clark the Mbari period of 1961-1966 was also a productive period: he wrote *A Song of a Goat*, and *The Raft*, which were produced by Soyinka's "1960 Masks" company. In his play titled *Ozidi* he brought to the stage an Ijaw epic that previously had existed orally as a saga told over a twenty-four hour period by one hardy narrator playing all the parts (Richards, p. xix).

In addition to these empowering influences Osofisan spent 1967 studying Francophone African theater at Senegal's University of Dakar. There he observed rehearsals at the famed Daniel Sorono Theater Company, headed by Maurice Senghor. Later he remarked that rather than acting, or staging techniques he was able to learn the integral relationship between writing and rehearsal. During the following two years Osofisan gained further insight in acting and directing for both theater and television through his affiliation with the Orisun theater established at the University of Ibadan. His post-graduate study in drama at University of Paris introduced him to a new understanding and interpretation of Karl Marx. However his thesis on Aime Cesaire was rejected by his advisor who refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of African drama. On his return to Nigeria he completed a dissertation on the origins of drama in English and French speaking West Africa, analyzing Yoruba deities and comparing classical African theater with its Greek counterpart.

Osofisan had grown up witnessing many changes in his native Yoruba farming village in Western Nigeria. These memories had an impact on him as he wrote *Farewell to a Cannibal*, *Rage*, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Esu* and *the Vagabond Minstrels*. In these plays he exhibits a critical perspective, a radical one, of exploitation, poverty, pseudo nationalism, and self-aggrandizing politicians. The Negritude writers' commitment to refute a Western ideology which denied the Africans their very humanity was another major point of reference for Osofisan as his early plays further dramatized his Marxist stance. However his most remarkable achievement is

his ability to stay in touch and in tune with the tradition he grew up with, the rituals of Esu and Orunmila in Yoruba. Agency of metamorphosis in the midst of disharmony, as promoted by Esu, the inevitability of chance and change, and the opportunities that are communicated after an exploration of the status quo is particularly the quintessential metaphor that highlights Osofisan's dramaturgy. Overall a variety of forces enabled Osofisan to shape his own unique vision of drama, based on a philosophical foundation that affirms classical Africa's contribution to myth, legend, folklore of the world civilization, long before Greeks started the secularization of theater through an adaptation of religious festivals. As a matter of fact Osofisan's work clearly reflects the impact of Yoruba traditions and its folklore. His pursuit of a "rendezvous with history" renders him capable of defining a different conception of art, and the artist's relationship to his society as inevitable. Osofisan joins the group of African/African American writers and thinkers who believe in art's functional, committed, and collective attributes. Originally Frantz Fanon and Amilcal Cabral provided the theoretical model grounded in a materialist validation of the oppressed masses (Richards, p. xxii). The goal of a liberation movement was not simply political independence from the colonial power but rather control over national resources for the benefit of the masses. Likewise art, literature, drama would need to start its operations from the center of the culture, located in its historical heritage and traditional values in order to educate masses. Art needs to reflect the society's values, it has to be collective and functional. These paradigms were later adopted by advocates of the Black Arts Movement in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement as they followed the model set forth by Cabral and others. Cabral argued that a nation would control its future only by cleansing itself of foreign ideological hegemony and return to the "upward paths of its own culture" (Richards, p. xxii). As a matter of fact his emphasis on cultural centeredness would comprise one of the basic tenets of Afrocentric philosophy.

In recent years cultural centeredness became such an important element in cultural/social studies that no analysis is complete unless its components are evoked. These are centering discourse in the historical oratures of the particular people; transcending Eurocentric negations of the people's culture; using the three fundamental themes of transcendent discourse which are human relations, human and supernatural relations; looking into the principal contexts of resistance, liberation and action as well as the mythofoms that inform the cultural expression of the people (Anadolu-Okur, p.113). A cultural analysis that would be formulated around these authentic elements is capable of generating a located insight, while it doesn't deny the contribution of contemporary to the precolonial. Rejection of western hegemony and its claims of "universality" liberates the particular people's culture from bondage and allows it run back to its essence, as large dusky rivers who carve deep trenches in valleys when they hasten to embrace the ocean. Osofisan rejected the Western hegemony over African values yet he placed it to a proper setting, where the language of the West served as a conduit to decipher for him what has been said by others who came before him. As his critics assert his dramaturgy yields to a multi-faceted interpretation: from Soyinka, Mbari Club and Brecht to Marxian dialectics, Fanon, Cabral, Yoruba philosophy, and Esu principle. His drama is set in reconstruction; ritual and tradition initiates re-interpretation and revalorization of both the old and the new. His rendezvous with history is a commitment he will never abandon.

On the other hand, Tess Akaeke Onwueme is the first and the only female winner of the drama prize given by the Association of Nigerian Authors in 1985 for the *Desert Encroaches*. She is also the first woman elected as the president of the Association. Her writing weaves an original

fabric of tradition, wisdom, longevity, youth, love, ties to one's heritage and to the land that bears the fruit. A dramatic rearrangement of the world, with women inducing and sustaining strength, bonding and solidarity, appear as a frequent theme in her works. Onwueme frequently touches upon poverty, powerlessness, class and rank divisions that separate people. She writes to examine the intersection of women's rights with tradition and ritual, particularly in her motherland, Nigeria. Triumph of love versus denial of individuality and life of self-fulfillment emerge as a recurrent theme in her writing. She indicates levels of oppression experienced by women in Nigerian society are not experienced by males. Onwueme asserts: "Somebody has to speak and somebody has to change. I feel that history is made, not by accepting history as it is, but by people re-writing it....". (Onwueme, p.11). As her contemporary Osofisan, Onwueme is in pursuit of social reconstruction; she considers writing to be "a dialogue between the writer and the society...People create social conditions and people can change social conditions for the better." (Onwueme, p.11). Her radical philosophy is quite similar to that of Osofisan in the sense that both playwrights aim at reconstruction through valorization of myth, ritual and tradition as their participation in making a culture centered is essential.

The predominance of oral tradition, and the traditional force of the proverb in African cultures does not only illustrate the power of the spoken word, *nommo*, but serves as an educational tool and emerges as a narrative strategy in her writing. For Onwueme art and aesthetics, literature and oral narrative is based upon art's functional, collective and committed attributes. Historical consciousness and epic memory dominate the plot of her plays. Her work brings the range and beauty of her native Igbo culture to an international audience, and it also establishes an aesthetic bridge crucial to the development of a multicultural educational environment, (Onwueme, p. 14). Where ritual and tradition intersects with the construction of gender - the construction of a "woman", - her narrative framework is pertinent to women all around the world. In her vision a re-arrangement of the world and its affairs need to take place in order to bring change; such a strategy includes stripping the world of male hegemony, of wars, of famine, class and race oppression, of environmental plundering. Instead cultural and intercultural coherence, communication, rescue and restoration, cross-gender collaboration and harmony is enforced in Onwueme's literary renderings. Her voice is a forceful one among other Nigerian writers; her distinction comes from sixteen plays (ten published) and several lectures, tours, international premieres, cultural reunions, choral/ritual performances, poems, narrations, readings. As suggested in the African proverb, "A child who asks questions never misses the road", Onwueme "asks" questions for a "better" road in her dramatic and epic journeys. As I mentioned before her dramaturgy is close to Osofisan in the sense that their aesthetic creativity is centered on the functional, collective and committed attributes of art. She too has been influenced by African as well as Western theater; yet rituals of her native culture dominate her plays. *The Broken Calabash*, *Parables For a Season*, and *The Reign of Wazobia* define her centeredness in historical consciousness.

In final analysis, both playwrights dwell on infinite possibilities that may ensue from an exploration of the past, and visions of the future which are capable of communicating a change. Bridging the gap between the impossible, restoring harmony and unity in face of fragmentation through initiation of traditional customs and the folk ways demonstrate the finesse and originality of their theatrical spectrum.

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