

REVOLUTIONARY IMPERATIVES IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S THE CHATTERING AND THE SONG AND ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS

Eziechine, A.O

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,
AGBOR, DELTA STATE

Abstract

Over the last two decades, African studies (Humanities and the Social Sciences) have revealed an overt political commitment that has been described as "radical" in their clear and growing tendency away from the conventional African writings.

The development of a revolutionary approach to art and theatre among young Nigerian writers forms part of this growing radical tendency.

Femi Osofisan is one of the few African playwrights whose works have continually manifested their author's sustained revolutionary consciousness. In this study, we are concerned with two of his plays namely, The Chattering and the Song and Once Upon Four Robbers. Both plays depict 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.

Introduction

The Chattering and the Song deals with a revolt led by a group of enlightened radical youths challenging the forces of rot, corruption and dictatorship, ending in the offer of a model for a new society that will replace autocracy in all its forms. This theme comes out positively in the central dramatic scene of the play which is also a play-within a play. Here Osofisan recreates, even rewrites the history of Oyo during the chaotic period of the rebellious Bashorun Gaha who overthrew the reigning Alafin and set up a reign of terror, killing all the princes of Oyo except Abiodun who was crippled in one leg. Abiodun grew up to challenge and overthrow this despot, re-establishing law and order. But as Moore (1976) rightly observes, Osofisan is against all forms of autocracy, however benevolent: for him, "heroism is a collective not a kingly virtue" Osofisan throws his sympathy with Latoye, the rebel, to demonstrate the essence of a social revolution that will liberate society from the yoke of oppression. Latoye defies the Alafin by summoning his creative powers to raise the consciousness of the oppressed, represented in the play by the king's bodyguards (acted by the musicians). Instead of portraying the aspect of history where the old the authoritative Alafin uses his magical powers to subdue the young rebel, Osofisan depicts the successful challenge to traditional tyranny.

The young friends, Yanji, Moka, Leje and Sontri constitute themselves into the farmers' movement which will carry out the inevitable social revolution and overthrow corrupt authority. These young intellectuals supply the necessary awareness of change as well as giving ideological direction to the revolution called the Farmers' Movement the movement of workers and peasants against aggressive

capitalism. The play according to Olu Obafemi, (1982). "reveals a Marxist vision which states that the proletariat, the comradeship of the down trodden will achieve revolutionary change in society" (122).

Individuals are just "mere threads in the loom of state" (54) This is vividly stated in the short epigram that precedes the Epilogue during the ideological indoctrination of Funlola by Leje:

Didun nile Oloyin...
 Say I am the thread
 And you the shuttle
 ... in the loom of state (49)

In a Marxist framework, the playwright envisages collective action in the wake of mass political awareness. Leje, in a discussion which is at once a courting exercise as well as the political indoctrination of Funlola, the artist of the ivory tower (this game repeats the riddling game of courtship between Yanji and Sontri at the beginning of the play), explains the futility of the search by the police for revolutionary heroes whom they could silence:

Funlola: You are the one wanted by the police!

Leje: The police are ignorant. What is a single man in a revolution, it will run its course, with or without those who served to spark it off. History will remember us.

Funlola: So why do you want me?

Leje: The movement needs all capable people. The whole world, you see, is a farm, and all hands must toil both to cultivate it and to eat out of its fruits. (54)

This speech clearly reinforces Osofisan's concept of collective heroism. Sontri's arrest cannot stop the revolution from happening because a revolution is not a one man show but a collection of people with the same political and ideological vision of society. Leje even sees victory in Sontri's arrest because he reasons that:

...we need anger to start a revolution even a great anger, but once it has started, it will get rid of us, unless we meet it with cunning and compassion.

Sontri's arrest will also win sympathy from the public for the movement. Humanists and crusaders of social justice and fair-play will frown at their incarceration.

Furthermore, Osofisan regards revolution as a seminal biological necessity. It is organic and capable of regenerating itself. As Gbilekaa (1979) put it.

An artist who devotes his work to the emancipation of his people will not wither, he will be renewed. The artist never dies when the ideas he sought to propagate live after him. As an individual, like Santiago in Earnest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, he can be destroyed but his ideas if they are worthwhile will stick like paper unto gum and will in turn be propagated by those who share his views. (82)

This is the message that Latoye (Leje) has for Alafin Abiodun.

Latoye: Yes, you will kill me but your hands cannot reach the seeds I have already sown and they are on fertile soil. Soon, sooner than you think, they will burst into flower and their scent alone will choke you... (37)

Again, in the epilogue, Leje uses the same argument to conscientize Funlola our artist of the ivory tower.

Funlola: Yes, what will happen?

Leje: Renewal, I always answer. No one who commits himself will ever be asked to break with his ancestral roots.

Funlola: Your faith must run deep...

Leje: Listen, that's how the tribe renews itself, that's how we all survive together.

Funlola: By giving our life to the cause?

Leje: By extending that life into myriad seedlings.

Funlola: To get involved?

Leje: Like putting on new roots. (54)

The committed artist is neither removed from his ancestral roots nor is he afraid of alienation because he is with the people. Being with the people as Olu Obafemi noted, entails going beyond the level of "merely reflecting the despair and incoherence in an oppressive society by offering an ethical perspective and revealing possibilities beyond the present (123). What we have here in the above exchange of discussion between Funlola and Leje is a potent use of biological metaphor for social revolution. The farm is the state to be transformed. The seeds to be sown are the masses to be enlightened on liberation.

The necessity for change is established in the prologue. Firstly, the parasitic and cannibalistic images that start off the play are a subtle exposure of the way the powerful prey on the weak. The fish falls prey to the frog as the hen falls to the hawk. Similarly, the stag devours the doe. These prey-predator images are a metaphor for the oppressors and a further suggestion of an unjust society that is torn apart by class antagonisms. These lavish animal imageries and the hunting vocabulary of traditional literatures illustrate man's in-humanity to his fellow man. This subtle exposition prepares the spectators' mind as to what to expect. In the final analysis, Mokan's patience and disguise compares favourably with the inexhaustible patience of the hawk that will eventually swoop on its prey when the prey no longer anticipate its attack.

What can be gleaned from these unpleasant predatory images is the playwright's dissatisfaction and disgust with a society that tolerates its privileged few bullying the dispossessed. A situation described by Gbilekaa as "not only socially and morally unjust but the society itself stands indicted for assuming such a casual and apathetic stance while humanity is wantonly debased."

Of particular significance in the play is the play-within-a play. Besides demonstrating the essence of revolution, it throws more light on the stuff that revolutionaries are made of as well as the rationality of their action. Abiodun grew up to challenge and overthrow the reigning despot only to become despotic, oppressive and unpopular. Michael Etherton (1981) however, has observed that "the play-within-a play is the rehearsal of a revolution."

In all, *The Chattering and the Song* is a successful critique of the Nigerian social formation that was intensified by oil wealth. It mirrors the contradictions, the eccentricities, in fact the near total collapse of social and moral consideration as well as the underground subversive movements of the post war era. By using Alafin Abiodun as a parallel to all autocrats, Osofisan has shown that history

is capable of repeating itself, even if people are not willing to pay attention to historical lessons. The concern to recover man's lost humanity in an unjust world has assumed the central theme in Osofisan's drama. Dehumanization though a concrete historical fact is not a product of destiny, it is created by man. The end result of oppression or dehumanization is violence. This is the message that Osofisan has for his audience in *Once Upon Four Robbers*.

In this play, violence comes in the form of armed robbery. Osofisan has used the contemporary armed robber phenomena as a metaphor to work out an analogy to enhance the genesis of armed robbery in Nigeria. This constitutes the fundamental theme of change and revolution begun in *The Chattering* and *the Song*.

Once Upon Four Robbers opens on a violent note. The leader of a group of a foursome robbery squad has just been violently executed by the bullets of the oppressors. This leads the other four Alhaja, Angola, Major and Hassan to reflect on their future and their gangster activities generally now that they are left without a leader to coordinate their nefarious and marauding activities. Osofisan sees these four desperadoes as the product of an unjust society. In the programme notes to the premiere production Osofisan describe the robbers as a tiny part of the Nigerian masses who have been brutalized by social stratification the existence of two extremely distinct classes in Nigeria. He attributes the violence of armed robbery to this social structure:

Take a look at our salary structures, at our sprawling slums and ghettos, our congested hospital and crowded schools, our impossible markets... and then take another look at the fast proliferations of motor-cars, insurance agencies, supermarkets, chemist shops, boutiques, etc. The callous contradiction of our oil-doomed fantasies of rapid modernization. (1)

This means that the dichotomization of society and its implications has produced the likes of Alhaja, Angola, Major and Hassan. In other words, there is joblessness, poverty, hunger and consequently armed robbery in Nigeria because a few privileged members have appropriated the people's labour, the nation's wealth, diverting it to their private pockets. By wallowing in indecent privileges, they impede the advancement of the people, perverting social justice and preventing them from attaining their aspirations of a bountiful life. This constitutes oppression and consequently violence.

With the prevailing condition, armed robbery becomes a survival tactic where there is no other alternative. Major tells Aafa the Shamenist: "It is hunger that drives us" (12). Survival becomes the catchword in the play. Alhaja has to give up herself to young army officers at the war front in order to survive. The four robbers are aware of the dangers of their gangster activities. Major tells the other three:

Face the truth man! Ever since this new decree on armed robbery, we've been finished. Finished! You can only walk that far on the edge of the blade. Sooner or later, the blade cuts in. (4)

Aafa also reminds them of their doomed state should they persist in armed robbery. But what is hunger to a hungry stomach? Besides, if these robbers are to abandon their trade, what would they take

to for a living? Of course there are a few jobs, yet these jobs are menial and the benefits attached to them so unattractive that they cannot sustain a man and his family. Again, if these robbers accept the jobs, they will still be exploited and paid a pittance because the rich also own the servants and thus treat them as chattels. In this situation, robbery by violence provides a more attractive alternative, in spite of the risks. Like Frantz Fanon (1967), who expresses the view in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the very fact of colonialism and imperialism imply violence, Angola, one of the robbers in the play, finds violence inevitable in a capitalist society where "too many people ride cars along the sore-ridden backs of the poor" (21). To restore primordial sanity, Olu Obafemi (1982) believes that "there must be a radical change in society; the weaverbirds in the earlier play must sing the song of social revolution if the *Bar Beach show* (a swift description of the Nigerian firing squad) is not to continue unabated."

The salient issue of armed robbery, a grave social malaise in post-civil war Nigeria, is the central theatrical metaphor in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. In the words of Olu Obafemi, "the enormity of this moral problem in contemporary Nigeria validates the claim of this playwright to social relevance in dealing with it" (124). The armed robbers in this play are the remnants of a tightly organized band whose co-ordinator's corpse has just graced the beach when the play opens. The law hounds those involved without taking a look at the unjust social system that produces armed robbery. The point of optimism in the play is that the economic structure of the country will change, thereby changing social relationships and consciousness as well as social mentality. The poverty-stricken masses of today will have the law (that is, the superstructure which includes force and ideology) once they control the means of production (the base). Major anticipates this social revolution while tied to the stakes where he is going to be "legally slaughtered." He tells the Sergeant:

Major: Yes. The day is beautiful. Your stomach proves it (laughter). But man is so fragile, so easy to kill. Especially if he robs and lies, if he wantonly breaks the law. Serg, today that law is on the side of those who have, and in abundance, who are fed and bulging, who have several concubines. But tomorrow, that law will change. The poor will seize it and twist its neck. The starving will smash the gates of the supermarkets, the homeless will no longer yield to the fear of your bulldozers (60)

That men's social relationship is determined by their economic (material) position, genetic bonds being only accidental, comes out in the discussion between Hassan the robber and Sergeant, his half-brother, who will order his killing. Their blood relationship no longer counts as they belong to different classes: Sergeant the hunting class, the wealthy and the powerful; Hassan the hunted class, poor and powerless;

Hassan: You know what is going on everywhere, what's happening to people like us, so how can you remain unmoved?

Sergeant: Who said I'm unmoved? I enlisted, didn't I?

Hassan: From one bloody corner to another, the world getting narrower, shrinking around us, to give a few more bastards more room to fart.

Alhaja: Go on Hassan, tell him.

Major: He enlisted. His stomach grows. As they fatten a sacrificial ram.

Sergeant: Quiet! I signed my life. I joined the Victors.

Alhaja: So keep running, beast of prey, among the hunting dogs (63).

The episode that follows reveals the consequence of an unjust social system. It wrecks youthful dreams of high moral ideals. The social structure, in an establishment that exists only for the privileged few, turns the masses into victims.

Saint Gbileka (1997), describes *Once Upon Four Robbers* as “a radical sociology of crime, an exposition of the struggle of the oppressed masses to liberate themselves from the tyranny of the wealthy class.” (94) In high lighting the causes of violence, particularly armed robbery, Osofisan has given it a dialectical treatment. He has juxtaposed the arguments of the robbers with those of the hunters (oppressors) in order to provide insight into socio-economic conditions that drive men into unpremeditated crimes. With this device, he expects his audience to judge for themselves in the referendum at the end of the play.

In the final analysis, it is society itself that is put on trial at the end of the play. The central thesis of the drama as Gbileka points out is: “seeing that state capitalism itself is a crime and an accomplice to the whole phenomenon of armed robbery, do we have the moral justification to condemn these armed robbers? Are they really to blame?”

This is not to say that Osofisan is in support of armed robbery. What he is against is the loss of respect for human life through these wanton murders. These wanton murders have debased and reduced humanity into a bestial level where men are slaughtered like rams at ramadan. The opening lines of the play show the playwright's disgust at public executions.

Angola: What do you think they'll do with his body?

Hassan: Eat it, the cannibals. Share the meat among their wives and children.

Alhaja: (Sobbing) My husband!

Angola: Of worse. With that cloth tied over his face they denied him even the privilege of bleating (2).

Osofisan questions this wanton destruction of life because capital punishment is not the best way of checking the menace of armed robbery. In spite of the numerous cases of public executions of armed robbers, more and more robberies are committed. Thus, the solution to armed robbery is not in executing them publicly, the solution lies in the overall economic system. Once it is changed, armed robbery would stop. It is towards finding a solution that the audience is invited to conscientiously participate in this debate.

According to Muyiwa Awodiya (1988):

the major objective of Osofisan as a playwright, is to catalyze the evolution of collective consciousness among all black people in an effort to liberate themselves from economic and socio-political oppression inherited from the colonial experience. (224)

The play, *Once Upon Four Robbers* demonstrates the struggles in different ways of the poor masses, the unemployed, the market women and the underpaid, to release themselves from the shackles of

oppression and exploitation. The playwrights treatment of the historical conditions that produce the violence unleashed on society by armed robbery is dialectical: he confronts the hunters, represented by the Sergeant and his squad, with the strong arguments of the hunted, the armed robbers. In the process, we are invited through this confrontation to see how man's social being and the way he organizes his material life, conditions his thinking. The market-women, who are at each other's throats to make enough money to keep their families, clamour at the end of the play for execution of the armed robbers. Yet they also belong to the same class the exploited. The argument of the play clearly suggests that to change man's social behaviour and attitudes, precisely to curb armed robbery, the whole body politic must be changed.

Finally, in our analysis of these two plays we have seen that Osofisan is a radical dramatist whose major objective as a playwright is to raise mass awareness to a positive revolutionary alternative to social decadence, through his plays.

Works Cited

Etherton, Michael. The Development of African Drama. London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1981.

Gbilekaa, Saint Radical Theatre in Nigeria. Ibadan: Caltop Publications (Nig)Ltd., 1997.

More, Gerald. "Against the Titans of Nigerian Literature," Africscope, 1976, Vol. 7.

Muyiwa, Awodiya. "Femi Osofisan's Theatre" Perspectives on Nigerian Literature, 1700 to the present Vol. One, Lagos: Guardian Books (Nig) Ltd., 1988

Obafemi, Olu. "Revolutionary Aesthetics in recent Nigerian theatre" African Literature Today, No. 12, Eldred Jones (ed.) Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books 1982.

Osofisan, Femi: The Chattering and the Song, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1977.

Once Upon Four Robbers, Ibadan: Bio Publication, 1980.