

Making colours, remaking life: subversion in the writing of Femi Osofisan*

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I

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and the inauguration of colonial discourse analysis brought into theoretical focus the ways in which Europe has constructed other peoples and cultures as objects of knowledge to further the aims of imperial domination. What Said's analysis of Europe's construction of the Orient brought to the fore was that more than physical conquest, the more profound and lingering effects of colonialism were the *textual* conquest and subjugation by which Europe established a discursive hegemony over the 'other'.

While Said's work focussed on the unmasking of the operations of the European agenda in the Orient, writers and artists from Africa and other parts of the colonised world have always consciously or unconsciously, openly or surreptitiously, challenged this discursive domination by contesting the myths and stereotypes and indeed the image of other peoples authorised by Europe. This challenge and contestation have always been part of the history of resistance to slavery, colonialism and domination. Beginning with the narratives of the freed slaves through to the counter-discursive manoeuvres of the Négritude movement, writers from every part of the colonised world evolved various strategies for countering European representation of the colonial subject. These counter-discursive gestures, which have been collectively classified under the rubric of the Empire writing back to the *Centre*, have become one of the major themes of post-colonial discourse. Bill Ashcroft et al (1989) and most post-colonial critics conceive of the centre as located in Europe, in the metropolitan centres of power from which the 'Empire' was created and controlled. However, in the works of Nigerian playwright and dramatist Femi Osofisan, the idea of a metropolitan locus in which all power is located is de-centred. While acknowledging the historical significance of this centre, Femi Osofisan sees pockets of power in various kinds of 'Empire' authorised spaces and the major impetus of

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his work has been to question and challenge these. Beginning with *Oduduwa, Don't Go!* (1968) to *The Women of Owu* (2003) and grounding his vision of change in a dialectical reading and re-reading of history and political discourse, Osofisan manipulates the various heritages available to him as a post-colonial as well as post-négritude writer to speak to the challenges facing his broad society, and to scrutinise the practice of art in the 'Empire'.

I describe Osofisan as a post-colonial writer based on Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins definition which argues that post-colonialism is, rather than a naive teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, an engagement with, and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies (1996: 2). While this definition reinforces the idea proposed by Ashcroft et al (1989) that African writers generally continue to privilege the 'centre', a former colonial country in Europe and more specifically Britain and France, by engaging in a kind of counter-discourse, albeit in a subaltern's role, there is however another agenda that African writers pursue and which the definition omits to explain. African writers attempt to confront the various problems of underdevelopment, the threat of alienation and, more important, the erosion of ethnic identity among the people. But even more than being a post-colonial writer, Osofisan is a post-négritude writer whose work has proceeded beyond the rhetoric of Senghorian négritude which responds to the rhetoric of colonial discourse and that has been refined to respond to the post-colonial discourse. Négritude, as propounded and as practised by Senghor, Césaire and Damas, is a racist philosophy, or, as Sartre puts it in *Orphée Noire*, an 'anti-racist racism' but this is opposed to the idea of post-négritudism that seeks to identify with and promotes African cultures that are under the threat of erasure by colonialism, post-colonialism and non-African cultural incursions without conversely mystifying the African past. Osofisan's work, like post-négritude, critically examines Africa's heritage as a dynamic process that needs to be re-appropriated and foregrounded for the benefit of Africans. In plays such as *The Chattering and the Song* (1976) and *Morountodun* (1983), Osofisan challenges the recuperative bias of the négritude ideology which classified everything African as noble,

and proposes the presence of imperial or pseudo-imperial tyranny as the dictating current behind the popular African myths and traditional practices.

In *The Chattering and the Song*, Osofisan takes a story of power and ‘deliberately challenges a specific distortion of historical consciousness’ (Dunton 1992: 93). He uses the play-within-a-play technique to expose the fallacy of the received history of Alaafin Abiodun who reigned in the 19th century. Alaafin Abiodun is always portrayed as a benevolent monarch who brought peace and prosperity to his kingdom but Osofisan re-interprets the history to depict the despotic nature of Abiodun’s reign. Again, in *Morountodun*, Osofisan adapts the myth of Queen Moremi of Ile-Ife who sacrificed her honour and freedom to save the city of Ile-Ife from the incessant raids of a neighbouring community. Osofisan, while acknowledging the sacrifice of Moremi, interprets her actions as that of royalty who did not want to lose her prestige and is therefore willing to do anything to maintain the status quo, even while depriving the public their rights. As Titubi, the protagonist in the play, states: 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 (1983: 70).

With the eighties, Osofisan embarked on the demythologisation and demystification of the canons of neo-colonialism in dramas like *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1984), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1984), and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986). The first two examples belong in the category of the ‘magic boon’ plays where solutions to real life situations are devolved to the intervention of ‘magic’, or rather the Ifa motif, in the realisation of the theatricality. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, a play centred around the debate on the public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria, Osofisan advances the argument that it is really the whole society that is criminal. He suggests that there is no rationale behind executing armed robbers while neglecting fraudulent civil servants, corrupt law officers, politicians and profiteers, although he stops short of prescribing an alternative solution. Instead, he throws the argument back at the audience to resolve, a device he uses also in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*. *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* is about a group of out of work minstrels who are offered magical assistance that will

reverse their fortunes. The only clause is that they must use the power to help only those in need. Osofisan develops characters based on the politicians who were in power during the civilian regime that ruled in Nigeria between 1979 and 1983. As variously documented, the politicians were notorious for the high level of corruption and forfeiture of the mandate they were elected to defend. *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* captures the panic that ensued in the country after the military coup d'état of December 1983.

Farewell to A Cannibal Rage on the other hand is a play specifically written to encourage reconciliation after the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. In it, our dramatist employs folktales and idioms to caution the country about the hegemony of colonial legacy. In these plays, and others written around that period, Osofisan attacks the neo-colonial and colonial attitudes of his people while at the same time advocating a revolutionary discourse that involves the common people.

In the nineties, plays like *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1992), *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993) and *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle* (1995) reappraise issues of post-colonial/ post-négritude remembering. In *Yungba-Yungba*, Osofisan applies the theme of the sufferings of the poor under ruthless tyrants to Africa's long history of oppression. The popular demands for democracy on the continent are foregrounded in the agitation of a group of young girls for freedom of expression and choice. *Nkrumah-Ni!... Africa-Ni!* (1994), *Tegonni, An African Antigone* (1994), and *A Nightingale for Dr DuBois* (1998) situate the post-colonial and post-négritude discourses in the quest for a pan-Africanist nationalism that seeks to textually challenge and re-construct African neologism, tropes and the relationship of the 'Empire' to the centre, while also remembering the disjunction created by the binary division of 'us' and 'others'. *Nkrumah-Ni!... Africa-Ni!* examines the dialectics of pan-Africanism as propounded by the late Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah. *A Nightingale for Dr Dubois* continues Osofisan's examination of the continental question and the quest for African unity with an appraisal of Dr W. E. B. Dubois' work during his last years in Ghana.

Born Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan on 16 June 1946 in Erunwon, a little village in the western part of Nigeria, our author won a government scholarship to the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, after a secondary education at the Government College in Ibadan. In 1969, he obtained his first degree in French, after a further year's study at the University of Dakar, Senegal. While in Senegal, he trained with the Daniel Sorano Theatre Company. He also gained additional experience in acting and directing for both theatre and television through his affiliation with the Orisun Theatre, a professional company established by Wole Soyinka as an offshoot of the 1960 Masks. He then went to the Nouvelle Sorbonne in Paris (Université de Paris III) where he started the postgraduate studies he later completed in Ibadan in 1974. His first play, *Oduduwa Don't Go*, was produced when he was an undergraduate at the university. In the theatre however, Osofisan is a man of many parts. He has acquired a solid reputation as actor, director, songwriter and a major contemporary playwright. He is as a result frequently a guest or visitor of institutions and governments outside Nigeria. He has also taken his semi-professional drama troupe, *Kakaun Sela Kompany* on tour of the United States of America and Europe. His plays have also won many awards. Osofisan writes under his real name and some pseudonyms, the best known of which is Òkínba Laùnkó. In all, he has written, published and produced more than fifty full-length dramas for radio, television and stage, including *The Chattering and the Song* (1976), *Morountodun* (1983), *Another Raft* (1989), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991), *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle* (1995) and *The Women of Owu (An African Re-reading of Euripides' The Trojan Women)* (2003).

An understanding of the political dynamics in Africa is essential to the understanding of the structure of Osofisan's dramaturgy and his mythopoeic quest. The clamour for freedom, which started in the former Soviet Europe and spread to Africa, also affected the literary landscape with a variety of ideas, each promising an alternative to the political situations and 'the dance contests', the seemingly senseless successful relays of political leadership in the various African spaces. Many of these literary and dramatic creations have consistently questioned or challenged political constructs in the various pockets of power in Africa. Some dramatists have also developed, to paraphrase Wole Soyinka,

orisunitis millenicus,¹ a social circumstance not unlike people's mass protests to outwit suppression. According to Soyinka, *orisunitis millenicus* is a survival tactic employed for the various successes of both the 1960 Masks and The Orisun Theatre that performed political satires in Nigeria in the 1960s. Present dramatists have developed this tactic through an intertextual engagement with mythopoeic materials, using traditional myths to counter the erected or popular versions of the prevalent hegemony.

This recourse to myths and history to question political tyranny serves to distance and shelter the dramatist from the menace of present terrors on the continent. Femi Osofisan has clearly emerged as a revolutionary ideologue and the most consciously intertextual Nigerian playwright in its use of myths. He has often 'adopted a free wheeling iconoclastic attitude to antecedent texts and authors from which/whom he constantly borrows materials' (Garuba 1996) which he then subverts to satisfy his creative impulse. Garuba suggests that this inclination to challenge previous plays, orthodox historiography and conventional wisdom² is best done by engaging contemporary historical facts in an intertextual debate. Osofisan couches his dramaturgy in a web of music, dance, songs and rich dialogue to evolve an aesthetics he has often referred to as constituting 'surreptitious insurrection', especially in his constant 'dialogue' with the socio-political hegemonies in his universe. This strategy involves the manipulation of the mechanics and metaphors of playmaking and of performance in such a way that they do not directly expose themselves to immediate repression. Or, to render it in Olaniyan's phrase, 'uncommon sense', 'a concept that retains the dramatist's subversive agenda as well as its stealthy coding but is more descriptive, more accessible, less evaluative, and therefore infinitely more pedagogically resonant' (Olaniyan 1999: 112). This abrogating and appropriating of

¹ Wole Soyinka coined the term *orisunitis millenicus* to describe the spirit of performance at the production of *The Beatification of Area Boy* in Jamaica in 1996, likening it to the enthusiasm against all odds displayed by members of the original Orisun Theatre company in the 1960s Nigeria.

² Harry Garuba lists as among Osofisan's "displaced and disfigured" texts and historiography John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft (Another Raft)*, Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed (No More the Wasted Breed)*, the myth of Moremi (*Morountodun*), the life and times of Alaafin Abiodun of Oyo Kingdom (*The Chattering and Song*). And we can also add Osofisan's adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone (Tegonni, An African Antigone 1995)*, his reconstruction of the Rwandan genocide (*Reel Rwanda 1996*) and his adaptation of Max Frisch's *Andorra (Andorra Goes Kinshasha 1997)*. For Garuba's seminal discussion of Osofisan's intertextuality and the apt inscription of his dramaturgy into the whole post-modern discourse, see 'The Album of the Midnight Blackout and the Aesthetics of Levity' (unpublished).

the works of other writers and cultures sometimes lends a postmodern consciousness that questions and suggests new ways of interpreting ideas, to his dramatic engagements. Our dramatist's dramaturgy draws heavily on African myths and ritual forms, whose repertory he has raided and subverted to propose an alternative ideological position. He advances this position instead of the accepted historical function of legitimising political and religious orthodoxy. In the words of Olaniyan, Osofisan's plays are 'characterised by deft appropriation and re-interpretation of indigenous performance forms, a fine-tuned materialist vision of history, and a consummate dramaturgic sophistication and openness' (1999: 110). In essence, he has taken drama away from the shrine, metaphorically and symbolically, and brought it to the public square – the market (as in *Once Upon Four Robbers*) or the junction (as in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* – to the gathering of the masses. Osofisan subjects tradition to scrutiny and reinterpretation, using the embedded modes of thought and structure to proffer a counter-official version of myths and history. In virtually all his plays, he advocates radical social changes based on this ideological position. History provides for him a clarifying agent for the present, the critical exposition of which suggests ideas for a positive alternative future by unmasking the anguish created by the unmediated ancient formalistic myths or rituals in the society.

In an early essay entitled *Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos: The Humanistic Dilemma in Contemporary Nigerian Theater*, published in 2001, the dramatist observes that:

The dramatic heritage available to us has simply proved to be inadequate. And it is not only that the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect, it is also that the very metaphysical *raison d'être* of that machinery has been eroded with the advent of a new socio-political philosophy. The comprehensive repertory of myth and ritual, particularly of those primal rites of communal retrieval which survived as paradigm, and whose seasonal re-enactments helped to restore harmony in the race, face the prospect of attrition in the contemporary intellectual climate. The flux of social transformation stands unrelieved in the crisis of ritual (2001: 92)

In this piece in which Femi Osofisan meditates on the role of myth and ritual in Nigerian theatre and the guiding principles of his own work, he identifies the idealising and

mystifying qualities of myth as one of the problems which the contemporary playwright concerned with the dynamics of history necessarily has to confront. Since myths and rituals were used in traditional societies as tools for 'communal retrieval' and survive into the present as paradigms which transcend their historical origins, writers continually reproduce and represent them in their works, thereby according these tales a hegemonic power borne of insistent repetition. But these myths, Osofisan insists, have lost their efficacy in the face of the social transformation brought about by a new socio-political reality. In his plays, therefore, Osofisan seeks to break this hegemonic hold by using the myths and rituals only as metaphors, as paradigmatic sites from which to conduct an interrogation of contemporary cultural and political issues. The tales, for him, become raw materials to be interrogated and appropriated into the corpus of non-African performance traditions, conventions and cultural styles.

Fémi Osofisan is a revolutionary who uses ritual forms, that is, forms that are repeated, that have already been sanctified by time and usage. Therefore, what Osofisan is saying when he states that 'the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect' (2001: 92), is that the old rituals have proved inadequate to contend with modern realities. Individuals or families, known as 'carriers', played the society's scapegoat and ceremonially washed away the sins and diseases, leaving the community purged, until the following year. This is the subject of Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (1964). The society used rituals to purge itself, creating newness on that basis. However, Osofisan is saying that all these apparatus of myth and ritual can no longer, in the modern time, bring newness or revolution, or change our society.

While other playwrights like Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimi and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo are mostly content with recording or recreating, or reconstructing historical events, rituals and myths, Osofisan instils a revolutionary ethos into these forms. He is not simply recreating them in repeated unchanging forms; he is breaking the cultural and political hegemony that these kinds of rituals impose by re-interpreting them in new ways.

As a contrapuntal to Osofisan's ideology, for instance, in Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, Ola Rotimi, another Nigerian dramatist, tells the story British pacification of the Benin Kingdom in 1897. Rotimi, in the assessment of Chris Dunton, is obsessively concerned 'with the role of the individual leader' (1992: 15), in this case, King Ovonramwen. Rotimi is concerned with chronicling the tragedy of the Benin Kingdom and sustaining the hegemony of cultural and political hold of the king on the people. However, when Osofisan takes a story of power, like in *The Chattering and the Song* (1976), he re-interprets that story; he is not retelling the story in the manner of a chronicle. He deliberately 'challenges a specific distortion of historical consciousness' (Dunton 1992: 93). His ideological stance is diametrically opposed to the ideology of his contemporaries, being intrinsically entrenched in the belief that our present cultural and socio-political realities are distilled from the crystallised creations of the rich and the powerful, and that salvation lies in re-gingering the conscious awareness of the people.

With the older writers, myths go hand in glove with different rituals, and this is reflected in the dramas produced by writers like Ogunyemi (*Obaluaye, Ijaye War*), Rotimi (*Kurunmi*) and Wole Soyinka (*The Strong Breed, Death and the King's Horseman*). Whereas, Osofisan radically reconfigures the familiar history and myth in the light of contemporary realities to stress their dialectical dynamism, to suit his revolutionary view on the political forces of oppression, injustice and corruption, and, to 're-interpret history and myth for our own self-rediscovery' (Awodiya 1993: 47).

If the connecting line between Osofisan's plays and the use of myths and ritual forms appears tenuous, it can only be so at first sight; a phenomenon that can be attributable to various other influences on the dramatist. Osofisan, apart from growing up in a deep Yorùbá community, is a product of Western education, where he imbibed the cultural influence which later manifested in his writing. Scholars may therefore view Osofisan from the perspective of a university-trained artiste with a bias towards Western performance models while disregarding the equal, if not stronger, influence of the Yorùbá performance culture.

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