

PLEBEIANS' ABILITY: EFFECTING SOCIOLOGICAL CHANGES THROUGH MYTHIC RECREATION AND UTILIZATION IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S *MOROUNTODUN*

Stephen O. Solanke, Ph.D
Department of English,
Faculty of Humanities,
Ajayi Crowther University,
Oyo, Oyo State,
Nigeria.

Introduction

Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan, a contemporary and Marxist-oriented Nigerian writer, goes by the pseudonym of OkinbaLaunko. Known as a novelist, playwright and essayist (Adeyemi 2012), most of his works like *Kolera Kolej* (1975), *Twingle-Twangle A-Twynning Tayle* (1992), *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (1999), and others are foregrounded in a "critique of societal problems and his use of African traditional performances and surrealism [. . .]. A frequent theme his novels explore is the conflict between good and evil. He is in fact a didactic writer whose works seek to correct his decadent society" (Wikipedia 2013). This same thematic focus extends to *Morountodun*, the play-in-a-play text under consideration in this paper.

The text is a documented analysis and dramatic discourse based on the revolt of ordinary farmers against the high-handedness of the Nigerian Government in its taxation policy and implementation amongst other social ills. The factual and recorded revolt, the Agbekoya Uprising of September 1969 (*Agbekoya* in Yoruba language - one of the foremost Nigerian languages - means 'Farmers Reject Suffering or Oppression'), shook the government to its roots. In reacting, the government showed its callousness, rigidity and oppressive tendencies towards the common man by physically attacking the farmers.

In writing this factional play, the playwright seeks to attack the political corruption, taxation imbalance and national injustice entrenched in the psyche of the government and its operators. In the post-independence euphoria of 'baby' Nigeria in the 1960s (the country got her independence from Britain on October 1, 1960), the national and regional governments became spendthrifts as they were peopled by corrupt politicians. Theirs was to siphon the treasuries, as it was the duty of the people to supply their needs. Corruption was, therefore, rife and a way of life. Osofisan in *Morountodun* seeks to examine aspects of this national disease in the form of taxation and its attendant effects on the common people, lack of roads and infrastructural development, corrupt government officials, oppression of the people and other hydra-headed socio-political problems. According to him:

In the plays which I have written onto the bleeding pages of this troubled age, I have sought, advisedly by suggestive tropes, to deny consolation to the manufacturers of our nation's anomy, and at the same time to stir our people out of passivity and evasion. (1997: 24)

The farmers are able to walk out of their “passivity” and talk to and with the government. Collating the gamut of their problems, Baba (the head of the farmers) is reported by Mama Kayode (a feminine-warrior character), in the text, to have stated in his reply to the Governor’s speech:

Our roads have been so bad for years now that we can no longer reach the 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 your people call smuggling. We protested and your police mounted expeditions to maim us and reduce our houses to ashes. (Osofisan 65)

The society is stratified into the proletariats and the bourgeoisies. The government taxes the people to the extreme without a concomitant development in their lives. The bourgeois, represented by Alhaja Kabirat (the head of the market women) and her spoiled daughter, Titubi, do not see a need for any revolution as they are rich and comfortable. They forget that in their own uncaring and selfish struggle to become rich and prosperous, the common people have been sucked to the bones. This situation creates the class struggle exemplified in the clash between the farmers, the society and the government. This is an everlasting mythic struggle. The German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) succinctly phrases this situation in *The Communist Manifesto* (co-written with Friedrich Engels): “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (Marx & Engels 1848: 2011). Though this quote might have referred to highly industrialized societies (as the authors were concerned with such in their write-up), these farmers, (in an agrarian society), embark on an armed struggle after all democratic and communicative avenues fail to move the government and the bourgeois class.

Tools and Levels of Oppression

The farmers, who are the underdogs in this dispute, have been oppressed at various levels through different avenues and by different government officials. There are the socio-economic and political levels of repression by the government itself. The social lives of the farmers are curtailed as they lack the funding to alleviate their sufferings and upgrade their general lives. These commoners rely on the provisions of good roads and transportation to ferry their produce for sale in the towns. These are not provided and the Governor himself gets to the people through a helicopter (for lack of good roads). If the farmers can get to the town, they are cheated out of their profits: not only by the ordinary buyers but also by the government-accredited buyer, the Marketing Board (Osofisan 65).

The farmers, basically, do not have a say in government decisions in issues that concern them. They are at the receiving end. When the “over-fed” Governor visits the farmers, he is, therefore, seen as an outsider (just like ‘government’ is regarded). And because the oppressed farmers could not see their reflections (as poor and undernourished people) in either the governor or the government, the governor is described in adjectives far removed from the ordinary lives of the farmers:

His cheeks were shining. My God, I remember, he was so handsome I was afraid to look.

The governor's voice was sweet, you could almost drink it. And at first it was difficult to follow his words. They seemed to come from a church organ. (Osofisan 64)

The government's tools of oppression are based on psychological and socio-cultural indices. The psyche of the farmers is toyed with: the belief that they are common and illiterate is supposed to foreground their stupidity and pliability (Osofisan 6). The lack of tax from the people hits the government, which offers no incentives to the people except the governor's sermonizing that the farmers must continue to pay their taxes (Osofisan 65). It is believed that the farmers cannot think for themselves, and therefore can be led by the nose. This proves to be otherwise.

Various government officials and offices become tools and avenues of oppression: the sanitary inspectors, the police, the council officials, the *akodas* and the Marketing Board. According to Mosun, a female character in the text, "All our properties were public property while the inspector was here. If you argued, you went to work free of charge for the government in the white college" (Osofisan 63). The "white college" here stands for prison. The police, in its true colour, as the bludgeoning arm of the government, is used to maim and kill the people. Because the people protest against high tax assessments, the council officials increase the payments and "Tax assessments began to gallop like antelopes" (Osofisan 64). The *akodas*, the local enforcement officials, harass the people for bribes. To cap it all, the Marketing Board is unrighteous in its financial dealings with the farmers, cutting more profits to its side than to the farmers. From all angles and through all government avenues, the people are short-changed.

Effecting Changes through Mythic Recreation

To re-examine and redress the above negative status quo, Osofisan re-creates the primordial Yoruba location-settling problem and solution (origin myth) as encapsulated in Moremi (a female member of the Yoruba pantheon). These are contemporaneously enlivened through the new textual actions of Titubi. Taiwo affirms:

Osofisan, arguably one of the frontliners in the world of Nigerian dramatic arts, is known for his progressive stance against oppression and tyranny. His works have also betrayed sympathy for an advocacy of social change. The fabric of his plays and other writings is usually critical of the disequilibrium in the social structure, thus always creating a conflict between the old and the new. . . (122-123)

The old myth is processed and revived in the modern myth of Titubi (mystified in a newly created and hope-inspiring Morountodun). The old myth epitomizes the geographical and origin settling problems of the Yorubas (in Nigeria) especially in their battles against the Igbos (another group existing in contemporary Nigeria) who hounded them, dressed in raffia (to portray their supposedly unearthly origin). Moremi gave herself to the discovery of their unique origin, dress and fighting prowess. For this, she became honoured as a member of the Yoruba feminine pantheon. The new myth-seeking and textual Titubi strives to re-enact Moremi's heroic exploit but with a mind working towards a diabolic convolution and conclusion. She would get to know the farmers, especially their leader, and betray him to the police. She seeks, like her social class wants, to break the insurrection. With this, the old myth would have been subverted and manipulated to a negative use. Osofisan, in a mind-shattering, psychological play on the psyche of Titubi, makes her the bent arrow: that which was sent on a journey with a message

but reacted upon and destroyed itself. This is reflected in one of Chinua Achebe's major characters, Ezeulu, in *Arrow of God*(1964).

Faced with the reality of the farmers' suffering, Titubi participates fully in their wars and becomes a protector, campaigner and advocate of their struggle for freedom. She is confronted with mind-disturbing and troubling questions:

That was when I began to ask questions. Questions. I saw myself growing up, knowing no such suffering as these. With always so much to eat, even servants feed their dogs Yet here, farmers cannot eat their own products for they need the money from the market. They tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise chickens but must be content with wind in their stomach. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill ... It could not be just ... In our house, Mama, we wake to the chorus of jingling coins. And when we sleep, coiled springs, soft foam and felt receive our bodies gently. But I have lived in the forest among simple folk, sharing their pain and anguish ... and I chose ...

For without knowing it, the shame of my past had come flooding my eyes.(Osofisan 66)

Her mind does a comparative analytical discourse between her own world of comfort and that of the barefaced needs and poverty of the farmers. Her change is a startling occurrence as it baffles the police (DSP Salami), her family (Alhaja) and the farmers (their leader, Marshal). In this transformation, the myth of Moremi metamorphoses, changes focus and theme thereby alluding to that of Titubi (*a la* Morountodun). The myth of Morountodun becomes a relevant issue in the modern day of freedom struggle: a mind ready to change, affecting not only itself but its environment, and issues surrounding the development of the people. Titubi's engagement and participation in the struggle typifies a changeable future in the life of the common people. Through her and her marriage to Marshal, the social classes co-join while the future becomes certain as "In the end peace came, but from the negotiating table, after each side had burned itself out"(Osofisan 79).Osofisan's idea, like that expounded in *The Communist Manifesto*, is that the capitalist or the bourgeois class would one day be eradicated by a joint worldwide working class revolution. A classless society would then subsist. Only the proletariat class can make up its mind to bring this situation to fruition. Osofisan recognizes this:

But still, you must not imagine that what we presented here tonight was the truth. This is a theatre, don't forget, a house of dream and phantom struggles.

The *real* struggle, the real truth, is out there, among you on the street, in your homes; in your daily living and dying(Osofisan79)

The text serves as a mouthpiece for the common man. In his world, the government neither cares nor sees him. He is left to fend for himself. The only contribution needed from him is his tax (which is the only way through which the government can 'help' him!). In choosing to be a witness to and a recorder of these textual but real events, Osofisan utilizes literature as a tool of social utility. Merwin acknowledges this in his reference to poets (and writers as a whole):

It is possible for a poet to assume his gift of articulation as a responsibility not only to the fates but to his neighbours, and to feel himself obligated to

try to speak for those who are in circumstances resembling his own, but who are less capable of bearing witness to them.(142)

Osofisan succeeds in implanting and impacting in the audience the seeds of revolution against injustice perpetrated on the common man to the advantages of the ruling and bourgeois classes. As stated by Director, he and Osofisan “decided not to be silent. We decided to go and rouse people up by doing a play on the subject. We decided to do a play about it, and take it round to all open places”(Osofisan 6).

Mythic Utilization Through Characterization

The characters are typifications of Yoruba ancestry portrayed, largely, through a generally re-tuned and redefined characterology as envisioned by Osofisan. Majority of the characters become heroes through their mythic sojourns: from everyday life into the mythical world of the play and the mytho-historical antecedences displayed. The playwright opines that mythic heroes are not limited to the royalties, the bourgeois or the wealthy (Campbell 2008). His heroes are the common people and “illiterate farmers, whom we had all along thought to be docile, peace-loving, if not even stupid”(Osofisan 6). In their transformation towards mythic heroism, the farmers’ lots demand that they move from their home, Wasimi (‘(A Place to) Come and Rest’ in Yoruba language), at least five times in the heat of police attacks. These continuous physical movements signify inward and spiritual metamorphoses. Through them, the farmers become creative, unified, and focused in their struggle. For them, the struggle is spiritual and all encompassing:

Mama Kayode: ... We’re fighting to live

Mosun: Water fertilizes the earth, blood the spirit of the race.

Molade: We struggle, our dirges wash us clean

Mama Kayode: We’re older than pain and betrayal

Wura: Older than your politicians and your rulers

Mama Kayode: We own the earth, we are the earth itself.

Molade: And the future is ours. Is for our children.(Osofisan 67)

Titubi’s mythic sojourn starts with her change of clothing to reflect her new status: a downgrading from the spoilt child of Alhaja to that of a commoner albeit a betrayer in the making. This metamorphosis happens in a prison. For her, there is the imprisonment and temporary freezing of her past and her world of comfort: the idea is that she could return to retrieve these. According to the Direction:

The CORPORAL goes out and returns with a prison gown. TITUBI steps aside and changes into the gown. The CORPORAL collects her old clothes, including her jewellery. But she refuses to remove the necklace. (Osofisan 15)

(Bold mine)

She goes on to be initiated into the temporary character she would role-play for the farmers. This re-orientates her mentality and psyche. However, it does more as she becomes concretized and supportive of the farmers’ movement (when the situation calls). The necklace she sticks to and which bears the Moremi insignia, a dagger, earths her belief, actions, and emboldens her transference into the mythical.

For Moremi, the playwright seeks to clarify issues from a textual but omniscient point of view. Like Titubi, she also moves from her comfort zone into a world of uncertainty: royalty to a willing war-prisoner. Her initiating rites are of different levels: religious, social and personal. Her spiritual rite of passage is performed by the priests as part of her mythic sojourn and initiation. After the religious and ancestral fortifications, her age-group, Yeye-Oba, (Mothers of the King) arrives, first to change her

resolve but later to encourage and immortalize her proposed actions. For her, their song becomes a dirge forcing her to query them: “am I gone already to the land of our ancestors that you accompany my corpse with such lament?”(Osofisan 34). To them, her sojourn is unto death whereas she sees it as a harbinger of good tidings and a better future. Finally, she fights and lies so that her emotion and love for her husband, Oronmiyon and son, Oluorogbo, do not sway her. It is after all these that her heroism becomes entrenched and “suddenly she freezes, to become her legendary statue”(Osofisan 39).

Majority of the characters and specific events are extremely relevant and symbolic to the development of the mythology the playwright strives to (re)create. Baba, the oldest amongst the farmers, is the nominal, moral and, to an extent, the spiritual leader of the struggle. He is the link between the forgotten past with its ideals, values and ideas and the on-going but precarious present. In the trial of AlhajiBuraimoh and Lawyer Isaac, his is the only dissenting voice (arguing that these betrayers must not be killed). His opinions, judgments and conclusions which are regarded as old fashioned and strange to all, especially Marshal (the farmers’ war-general), are found relevant to contemporary situations.

Marshal is Baba’s contrastive but complementing character. He is rash, younger and disdainful of after-effects. As the military general for the farmers, he challenges, at every possible step and decision, the opinions and conclusions of Baba. He is combative, fitting his role and position as a war leader. In the end, he becomes or makes himself, unconsciously though, the scapegoat through whose death freedom becomes a reality.

Titubi (Morountodun) becomes the epitome of the long-standing Yoruba myth of Moremi. While Moremi represents the past, Titubi stands for a present day myth and what can be when a myth is modernized and structured to fit the everyday life of the people. In her was previously seeded the ill-advised vision of the ruling elite for overthrowing the farmers’ populist struggle. Through her unprepared-for-metamorphosis, she becomes a fighting tool on behalf of the farmers.

Each character was different before the struggle and the war started. With and through the events of the war, each crosses the groove of initiation supplanted and replanted from and into different situations and environments. Baba, an ordinary farmer, becomes a leader in war; Kokondi, a mammy-wagon driver becomes a fighter; Mosun, an abandoned child a female warrior; Wura, a rejected mistress, a female warrior; and Marshal, a child of the poor, a war-general.

Mythic Utilization Through Symbolism

Within the textual events are hidden meanings and symbols symptomatic of the playwright’s and the text’s thematic foci. The union of Titubi and Marshal is inconceivable at the beginning as one is a betrayer and the other, a distrusting individual: both on opposing philosophical sides. In their marriage, based on permission given by AlhajaKabirat, lies the future of the society. There can be a unified and egalitarian society if the ruling and bourgeois classes would allow it. Societal classes can live in harmony, not minding their differences.

The movement from war to marriage, marriage to war and war to peace, especially in the lives of the farmers, symbolize the unstableness of life occurrences. Each event must be considered before being allowed to fructify. Each occurrence is hydra-headed spanning from an individual action and disgorging into different, general deltas. A symbolic example is the disobedience of Marshal and his group. In refusing to listen to Baba who asks for a day’s respite from the wars for consultations to take place before attacking the Central Police Station, Marshal and his group perish to the last man. Here, Marshal overreaches himself by throwing aside traditional homage, respect, ideal, values and norms epitomized in

Baba. In the playwright's mind, the types of Marshal are not fully needed in a future peaceful and justice-free world.

Peace and dialogue must always be given a chance, at any conceivable space and time. This situation, as portrayed, is a replica of what Olaniyan terms "uncommon sense" prevalent in the works of Osofisan:

I have reconceived this as "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 [...]. Uncommon sense stimulates awareness and self-reflexivity, which produce a plenitude of options, an indispensable catalyst for admission of errors and for self-criticism. (77)

Conclusion

In *Morountodun*, Osofisan utilizes available icons to reach into the past and to create a new, useful and relevant myth for the present. This is to effect changes in the on-going dispensation of justice, oppression and political rascality as exhibited by governments, their officials and the so-called elite. Examining *Minted Coins* (1987), an Osofisan poetic anthology, Ogede posits and one cannot but agree with him:

Despite the depth of social and political decay, Osofisan sees a ray of hope in the bleak atmosphere. In fact, he ventures that the salvation will come out of the arrest, exile and even execution of the artist/thinkers. (337)

Each individual must strive to become "the clay" with which the future of his or her destiny or that of his community would be remodelled for no god would fight on anyone's behalf (Osofisan 34). This is buttressed by Gotrick, who submits while writing on another of Osofisan's work, *The Women of Owu*: "The Yoruba pantheon and the Greek pantheon alike are characterized as being very human. The numerous gods behave like humans beings, being subject to many failings and follies" (87).

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