

Book Review

Chima Osakwe, *The Revolutionary Drama and Theatre of Femi Osofisan*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, 94 pp, ISBN: 978-1-5275-1596-3, Price: £59.99

Tochukwu J. Okeke

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

The Revolutionary Drama and Theatre of Femi Osofisan by Chima Osakwe is a discourse on selected works of Femi Osofisan which, according to the author, grew out of his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Toronto. The book looks at four of Osofisan's plays that treat the issue of class revolt. These works are: *Morountodun*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* and *No More the Wasted Breed*. Each of these works deals with the themes of corruption, oppression, class struggle and the eventual emancipation of the oppressed in very peculiar circumstances. Osakwe presents Osofisan as a second generation Nigerian playwright "driven by Marxist ideology", hence the nature of revolution in the selected plays and other works of the playwright. The featured plays, like those of his contemporaries as seen by the author, call "for the immediate transformation of Nigeria's repressive social-political order" (p.1); this Marxist ideology being the characteristic of works that came after the nation's Civil War.

The selected plays are chosen as the prominent revolutionary drama of Osofisan. Hence, to Osakwe, the idea of revolutionary drama is "drama that seeks through the conscious manipulation of content and technique to empower the underprivileged, whether as an individual or a group, to gain socio-political and economic rights and privileges or overthrow an oppressive political system or repressive institutions of civil society". (p.1) Osakwe enumerates the oppressive systems that need to be overturned to include "patriarchal family system, the caste system,... feudal politics..." amongst others. In the selection of the plays, the author consciously groups them into two categories based on the nature of the

revolution that took place in the plot narratives. This categorisation presents the violent revolutionary and the non-violent types. The selected plays therefore “capture the spirit and mood of Osofisan’s revolutionary theatre”. Osakwe’s treatise presents *Morountodun* and *The Chattering and the Song* in the category of the violent revolution while *Aringindin* and *the Nightwatchmen* and *No More the Wasted Breed* are in the non-violent category.

The plays are analysed as text and in performance thus the author brings some new understandings and interpretations to the plays. Indeed, Osakwe’s analysis of Osofisan’s plays gives further insight into the nature of the playwright’s writings and political/social ideology. Lending credence to the belief that the playwright is of the Marxist ideological bent, the author draws some excerpts from interviews he had with the dramatist. Using the selected works, Osakwe puts forth the argument that Nigerian leaders should be held responsible for the oppression of the people. He is also of the opinion that the subjugation of tyranny or elimination of despots will surely lead to the “socio-political emancipation” of the people. In driving home the nature of revolution that Osofisan advocates in *Morountodun* and *The Chattering ...*, Osakwe draws allusions to characters in writings from other climes with similar Marxist ideology. For instance, Titubi, the protagonist in *Morountodun* and the major situation in the play when the farmers rose against the oppressive laws of the State is likened to the confrontation between the Brazilian government and the underlings in Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel, *The War of the End of the World*. Titubi is presented as someone who has committed what Osakwe calls “class suicide” by coming down from her exalted position as a daughter of the rich to align herself with the peasants in their struggle for self-determination and emancipation. She is therefore likened to Maria Quadrado in Llosa’s work who took care of the sick in the cause of the struggle as Titubi does in her role(s) in *Morountodun*. Osakwe also draws a correlation between *Morountodun* and Ousmane Sembène’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, calling attention to the “kind of solidarity” between the male and female subaltern characters as are presented by Sembène in his work. Consequently, the oppressed characters in the play “simply reject the status of second-class citizens” (p.12) and have come together to fight a collective cause.

Similarly, Osakwe presents the second play, *The Chattering and the Song*, as a call for a struggle for freedom as in Khushwant Singh’s novel, *Train to Pakistan*. He likens the character Latoye to Iqbal in Singh’s work. In analysing *The Chattering...* the author presents Osofisan as a realist, one who does not believe in magic as well as someone who in his writings is “unfaithful to historical sources” because he (Osofisan) does not

believe in "individual heroism" but rather in "collective efforts". This is also part of the playwright's Marxist ideology as proffered by the author in his analysis of the play. To Osakwe, the playwright presents in *The Chattering...* the "education of the masses" which is "very crucial for the liberation of the underprivileged". (p.32). Osakwe sees in the play an attempt by the playwright to eliminate class structures where the elite sees itself as "infallible and worthy of celebration by the people whose humanity it has grossly debased".

Stylistically, Osakwe observes that Osofisan uses very flamboyant language embellished with proverbs, idioms and riddles. He also employs imagery and metaphors which give the words beauty, power and energy such that in *The Chattering...* Abiodun's "dictatorship could not halt the revolution" (p.40). However, in spite of his eulogies on the works under review, Osakwe has some reservations about the playwright's Brechtian style of presentation. He contends that the flashbacks and alienation effects took some steam off the intended revolution that the plays set out to achieve in the psyche of the audience. He questions the reason behind the adoption of the Brechtian method when the audience could easily identify with characters that they feel some emotional attachments to.

The second category of plays - the non-violent revolutionary type - "rely on some level of violence either through a subtle elimination of the symbol of oppression (*Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*) or verbal argumentative confrontation (*No More the Wasted Breed*) in order to win liberation for the oppressed" (p.45). The book presents *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen* as a play in which Osofisan was "writing the living history of the people". (p.48). Osakwe sees the characters and situations in *Aringidi* as being "rooted in contemporary reality" (p.48). The characters in the play are identified as individuals in Nigeria's chequered political history hence he describes it as "political theatre". The Baale, to Osakwe, signifies the "indigenous system"; Kansillor stands for the "Western-styled democracy" while Arigindin represents "the military dictatorship" (p.50). He calls the reader's attention to the use of metaphors as seen in the choice of the setting; a market. The market is a place for "communal gathering" and a "veritable site for interrogating the myriad of socio-political forces that account for Africa's unending crises of development in post-independence years" (p.59). The author observes that the playwright altered the ending of the play in an updated version to ensure collective participation where no single individual will take credit for the success of the revolution.

In the examination of *No More the Wasted Breed*, Osakwe notes that Osofisan "interrogates the carrier ritual so as to redeem the humanity of

the oppressed". (p.60) The playwright is thus presented as a liberated mind that challenges some moribund traditions. Osakwe places *No More the Wasted Breed* side by side with Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and sees in the former a call for the liberation of the mind. He cites the Osofisan model of societal cleansing as holding that "It is not right to use for your communal rites of cleansing people who have not contributed in polluting the society..." (p.58). In Osakwe's view, the play advocates that the people should hold the rich responsible for the problems in the society. And bringing the gods on stage, presents Osofisan as a writer that does not believe in the sacredness of the gods. The playwright is one who "is not calling for an outright elimination of Yoruba customs but a progressive modification of tradition in the interest of social justice" (p.64).

Osakwe's analysis of Osofisan's four plays submits that the theme of revolution runs through all of them and that the tool of collective renewal "lies with ordinary men working together to realise their dreams of freedom from economic and social exploitation" (p.65). *The Revolutionary Drama and Theatre of Femi Osofisan* offers a deep insight into the nature of the playwright's art. It shows the playwright as earning the accolade of being the most produced dramatist of his generation of Nigerian playwrights because he deals with contemporary themes and the characters and situations in his plays can easily be identified with contemporary realities. The author is therefore justified in labeling Osofisan a revolutionary playwright because he has used historical facts and mythologies to deal with political events in Nigeria and Africa. This work is most apt because it affords the reader an opportunity to understand Osofisan's ideological leanings as the review of the works were done from multiple perspectives. This critical work will remain germane to students, scholars and theatre practitioners, especially directors and producers who wish to stage Osofisan's plays.