

**Osofisan's Dramaturgy and the Revolutionary Streak:
The Concept of Messianism in *Morountodun* and *Yungba Yungba and
the Dance Contest***

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Abstract

This study sets out to examine the revolutionary streak in Osofisan's dramaturgy. With particular reference to two of his plays, *Morountodun* and *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, the female protagonists Titubi, Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo are appraised as revolutionary characters. A comparative analysis of both plays reveals points of divergence and convergence. The study also explores Osofisan's craftsmanship in his use of the satirical and propagandist moulds. Here, aspects of his creative skill in lampooning the social ills of his society are addressed. Emphasis is on his use of witticism and parables to articulate his visionary and radical positions in both plays. The study attempts to ascertain how these elements are utilised by the playwright to expose the plight of the people and his methods of sensitising them to take positive actions toward ameliorating the social problems. The study reveals that in situations where censorship has a gagging effect, laconic methods of gaining freedom of expression is a distinctive mark of creativity.

Also discussed is the messianic image of the revolutionary hero or heroine found to be prevalent in a number of Osofisan's works. A study of the chosen heroines reveals the messianic image of Osofisan's vision. From the responsibility, commitment and passion of the revolutionary characters, the playwright's commitment to his art and society is inferred.

The term 'revolution' describes any drastic change relating to a system of government, a method or condition. During the Greco-Roman era, and also in the Middle Ages, there was the tendency towards a strict adherence to established value systems and a resistance to change. But with

Renaissance Humanism came the belief that radical changes in government apparatus may not necessarily be retrogressive and could sometimes be a necessity. From then on, spanning the American and French Revolutions of the 18th Century and up till the present, the term 'revolution' in politics has continued to imply a radical departure from any previous pattern. Such leading exponents as John Milton, Immanuel Kant, Hegel and Karl Marx believe that the advancement of mankind must necessarily be provoked by revolution: hence their endorsement of it as the only viable means of creating a new order. More often than not, revolutions are offshoots of opposition to reactionary forces of society, as agitators and reformers close ranks. Revolutionary leaders are, therefore, those who put in place structures that instigate and implement reforms and these may be social, political or religious in nature. Because revolutionaries, more often than not, face stiff oppositions in their bid to spearhead new orders, violence tends to be a recurrent phenomenon in revolutionary actions. It is, however, not in all cases that revolutionary actions take the path of violence. Revolutionaries of different shades abound and are found in all walks of life. Of particular interest are revolutionary writers who eschew physical violence but who are today rated among the most volatile, as aptly conveyed in the maxim 'the pen is mightier than the sword'. Femi Osofisan, a Nigerian writer, can be seen in this light.

Like Bertolt Brecht, most of his plays are propagandist and satirical in nature. With a great sense of commitment to his society and his art, Femi Osofisan consciously crafts his plays to act as catalysts; to instigate positive social changes in the Nigerian State. Drama has to do with the imaginary recreation of societies, people, events and ideas, all of which are ingeniously structured on conflicts, and upon such recreations graphic lessons are drawn. From the purview of artistic recreations, drama in pluralistic dimensions may reflect on the past, present or future with the purposive mission to entertain and educate its audience. Entertainment apart, Osofisan's dramas tend to be didactic. Quite often, he is obsessed with the idea of awakening his audience to the horrors of their existence in relation to the odd realities of such social ills as corruption, despotism, nepotism and other fraudulent practices. He thus attempts to sensitise his audience and to instigate reactions necessary for the collective transformation of individuals toward positive ideals. His plays are, as a result of this, directed at attitude change – a kind of ethical revolution. This, at its best should inspire a social consciousness that will fashion individuals that are more responsive, more critical and more inquisitive. Perhaps ingrained in his psyche is the idea that a wholesome regeneration or rebirth

may follow a reorientation of the individual mind. He speaks of this kind of 'newness' expected of such rebirth through one of his characters in *The Oriki of a Grasshopper* (1986): "But my hope is that the time will come when a new generation will replace us, and wipe everything away" (p.36). Osofisan is so obsessed with this vision of a new order that it has become a recurrent allusion in many of his plays. Old ideas and concepts are overshadowed by the 'new' in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1982), as reflected in the imagery of "the setting sun and the rising sun". Through yet another character in *The Oriki of a Grasshopper*, Osofisan harps still on the idea most paramount to him – change:

it's not the past that bothers me,
can't you see? It's the squalid present,
turning and turning upon itself,
refusing to move on, to go for
(p.18)

The idea of change and a positive move forward is re-echoed still in *No More the Wasted Breed* (1982). Here the vision of rebirth is provoked by the resurrection, as it were, of Saluga. The image of 'newness' is thus superimposed on Saluga, a mortal whom the goddess, Elusu, strikes dead for his frankness and daring but is later vindicated and raised back to life by Olokun, the god of justice.

From a moralistic stance, Osofisan has from the beginning been unequivocal about his revolutionary motives as has been most eloquently revealed in his plays. Quite often, he makes no clear cut distinction between the 'morally good' and the 'morally bad' characters. Borrowing a leaf thus from social reality where 'good' and 'evil' cohabit in a principle of oneness and are bonded in a common ancestry of humankind, his characters interact without disparity in a common space. Here, all are equally yoked and equally committed to the society. Indices of this vision of a collective consciousness to restore or institute a new order pervade Osofisan's plays. Much as he does not advocate violence, he does not also subscribe to passivity in apathetic garb. From a holistic perspective, therefore, Osofisan's plays parade both good and bad individuals in active or passive states, struggling against all odds. For their action or inaction everyone stands guilty in the *Osofisanist* dynasty where only the messianic antidote is necessarily prescribed to will the desired turn-around. The messiah of Osofisan's vision is the selfless, audacious and dynamic fellow who, having overcome his/her inertia is challenged to motivate revolutionary actions. She or he must possess, above all, an impeccable character, probity, and

indeed a readiness to sacrifice time, material wealth and indeed his/her life if need be, in the pursuance of an ideal. The above background of the playwright's revolutionary vision shall serve as a springboard in the ensuing discussion of female revolutionary characters chosen for this study. They are Titubi in *Morountodun* (1982), and Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo in *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990).

Morountodun is based on the myth of Moremi, the Ife Queen, who not only risked her life to free her community from the incessant incursion of marauders but sacrificed her only son into the bargain. The play, drawing its inspiration from the myth, is woven round the farmers' revolt, the Agbekoya uprising in Western Nigeria. Thus, in a battle between the 'exploiters' and the 'exploited' Titubi, inspired by her role model, Moremi, is determined to call a truce between the parties through an ingenious scheme in which, as impostor, she must treacherously betray the peasants, a group that poses a threat to her class. The battle is between the peasant farmers and the government; as the text reveals, "illiterate farmers whom we had all along thought to be docile, peace loving if not stupid, suddenly took to arms and began to fight against the government!" (p.6). The pertinent question here is, who is the exploiter and who the exploited? At the beginning of the play, the playwright attempts a schematic division by naming one group "townspeople" and the other "village people", the first representing the government's and the second the farmers' factions. Although two factions are established, one learns within a short time that the dividing line is more imaginary than real for it is a battle between kinsmen; seeing that all have a common ancestry. This is affirmed in the following lines: "Farmers dying, policemen falling, soldiers going and not returning. Were they not all our kinsmen?" (p.6). What conflict may have brought about this seeming division? This is traceable to bad government; here represented by the ruling class of wealthy, educated, powerful but corrupt persons, typified by Titubi, Alhaja Kabirat, Alhaji Braimoh and Lawyer Isaac. The illiterate farmers, on the other hand, represent the spirit of the ruled and exploited, marked by 'powerlessness' that is imposed by ineptitude and credulity. Once they overcome their inertia, revolutionaries emerge to challenge the morality of a corrupt government. In an attempt to rout the insurgent farmers, the government team comes up with a plan to infiltrate their camp. The beautiful Titubi, a wealthy and fire-brand Amazon seemed the right match from the superintendent's perspective:

Your daughter has the best credential for this kind of Job. She is willing to do it and she's richly endowed. Pretty, sensual, daring, caring and with quite a reputation with men if my information is right. (p.25)

Although Titubi at this point possesses an appreciable proportion of the messianic attributes, her image remains a far cry from the *Osofisanist* ideal of a messiah. With wealth acquired through exploitation and power secured through money as well as her notoriety, Titubi falls short of the ideal heroine. This is aptly echoed in her vain and conceited speech: "Yeeesss! I have money and I can enslave you with it ... If I choose..." (p.9). To attain that state of glory relating to the famed messiah of Osofisan's creed, therefore, she must first transcend her materialistic ideology, undergo a transformation intended to preen her clean of the beclouding 'dirt' and 'murk' of the capitalist decay vividly delineated in the text. At the beginning of the play, Titubi, in an unsolicited move, assumes a centre stage position in leading a mob to disrupt an advertised show. Obsessed by her pedigree of wealth, power and the filial tie of Alhaja Kabirat, matriarch of the commercial world, she is propelled to take the reins of leadership, spearheading the mob action in the opening play-within-a-play. Thus, with pride she declares, "I, Titubi, daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, I am stopping this play tonight" (p.9). Wealth, on its own, is not a bad thing. Titubi herself momentarily examines her conscience and asks, "what is wrong with being rich?" (p.7). Nothing indeed is wrong with being rich; rather it is the image of the possessor of wealth that imbues wealth with the quality of right or wrong. Put into good use, wealth is a powerful facilitator of revolutionary actions. In fact, the lack of it may pose a serious impediment to a messiah who is from the backwoods. At the supposed enemy-camp, with a prior objective of acting as a government spy, Titubi is staggered by events sharpening her awareness to truths hitherto unknown to her, to re-invent her image. Influenced by the simplicity, humane and non-materialistic orientation of the village folks, Titubi's worldview transforms to reveal the colours and plumes of the typical *Osofisanist* messiah. Marked therefore by idealism, an aggressive but invigorating crusading spirit, and exorcised of all hypocritical encumbrances, Titubi, in her hybrid status, flowers into her heroism. For Osofisan, the messianic spirit is never partisan. Thus it operates from a neutral stance and ensures that all actions are geared toward the common good. In a state of rebirth, Titubi acknowledges her new knowledge:

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 ... And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill ... It could not be just. (p.66)

With a changed orientation, the new Titubi challenges the morality and the justification of her action at every turn. When it dawns on her that the apathetic ruling class or government forces she aligned with is the inimical sort, riddled with vices, she comes to terms with the truth as she declares: "It is not true that the State is always right..." (p.70). This revolutionary woman, in a major turnaround, abandons her prior role as spy by turning the trigger on Salami, her supposed master and sponsor: "Keep still Salami. My hands are jittery on the trigger, and I won't like to kill you in error" (p.70). Salami, at that moment the visible embodiment of the State, is shocked at this turn of events. In Titubi's memorable and apt submission, "there's no way you can win a war against a people whose cause is just" (p.70), lies the lesson for all.

The second of Osofisan's plays to be looked at is *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990) which was awarded the Association of Nigerian Authors' (ANA) Drama prize in 1993. The playwright, in his authorial note, indicates that "the recent upsurge, all over the African Continent and beyond, of democratic forces, is the immediate inspiration for *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*." The assessment report of the 1993 'ANA Literary Award' reveals that the play "is an effective political allegory, employing the parable of the dance competition for a pungent satiric gibe at the sit-tight leadership of our times, steeped in the miasma of brazen corruption, crass ineptitude and ruthless dictatorship" (p.4). However, the play's main import is the consciousness of rapid development, awareness and general apprehension for the future. Particularly, it draws attention to the multitudinous assemblage of highly precocious youths brought about by the accelerated learning of the New Age, their thirst for change and their eagerness to propel such changes if need be. Thus, there has been a rising global phenomenon of revolutionary forces, sporadic upsurge of agitations and virulent attacks on government maladministration. This problem, which Osofisan in his author's note refers to as "this fever of freedom", is "the struggle all over Africa, between self-perpetuating regimes and democratic forces". To re-state his stand on the emergence of new orders, he concludes:

There must be hope out of all this; there
must be hope! A new generation, with

vibrant and restorative ideology must step
forth and take control...
(Osofisan, Author's note)

In *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* Osofisan presents a community of dancers with the word 'dance' serving as metaphor for the vast range of talents or skills of the people. Through the congenial partnership of dance, song and drum, the playwright weaves his plot round a communal upheaval set in motion by a revolutionary force – Yungba Yungba. This leads to the uncovering of a decade of maladministration run by a despotic usurper, Iyeneri. Iyeneri, the incumbent priestess earlier enthroned for a tenure of one year, refuses to leave office for a new priestess at the end of her time. Instead, she alters the rules to suit her purpose, which is the perpetuation of a life-long career in priesthood. After ten years of fiery and selfish rule, an opposition group, Yungba Yungba, emerges. The group, with Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo in the forefront, launches its attack, threatening anarchy and disorder if the community fails to heed its cry for democratic governance. Serving as watchdog for the community, they call for immediate reinstatement of the rules for selecting a new priestess, and also the instant abdication of the post of priestess by Iyeneri, to make room for another. Artful Iyeneri, hoping to outsmart the whiz kids of the New Age, is entrapped in her own bait as her devilish plans boomerang.

This discourse on the revolutionary streak and the messianic tendencies in Osofisan's dramaturgy in this segment is centred on the Yungba Yungba faction, most especially on Ayoka, the "voice" of the group. Going by the Yoruba background of the play, the term "yungba yungba" is synonymous with 'sweetness'. Through such simple designation, the image of sweetness is not only evoked by their presence but is absorbed into their very being, revealing in this group the fundamental vision of their mission – to bring back "sweetness" to the land. Thus, assuming the paradoxical image of "sweetness", "hurt", that phenomenon derived from bitterness or rancour, and which precedes such physical revolutionary actions, undermines the pain associated with it. Fired therefore by the spirit of justice and fair play, democracy and the general will of the people, Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo, the audacious three, set out to challenge Iyeneri, the symbol of despotism, nepotism, avarice and tyranny. The Yungba Yungba group is the younger generation, those waiting for their cue to act or otherwise force their way in. The mood of the Yungba Yungba faction is established in the following lines in the text:

It is your turn now to step aside! For

we want to move, and we shall move!
We younger women, we believe we
can change things here, turn things
around, and we are going to. (p.31)

Ayoka, a prominent member of the revolutionary trio, is from a very humble background and is reminded as much by the reproaching remark from her mother, Ma Ayoka, who does not see, to use her analogy, why “a mere house pigeon” would go mixing with “peahens”. Emphasising further, she says:

You can't see, can you, that you don't fit?
Look at your companions, the girls you are moving
with! Both from the big families. (p.31)

But Ayoka, seeing this as running counter to her mother's earlier teachings on the issue of freedom, responds

The issue is freedom. You it was who once
taught it to me. When the issue is freedom, both
the pigeon and the peahen are involved.
(p.31)

This reveals that social responsibility is a shared burden and all must be equally committed, irrespective of class or factions. Both ruler and the ruled, must be equally committed in the building of a good and virile society.

There are obvious points of similarity and points of departure in the female revolutionary characters discussed in the two plays, *Morountodun* (1982) and *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990). Women are used as agents of positive revolutionary actions in both plays. However, the female revolutionary character, Titubi, operates in a predominantly male setting while the Yungba Yungba group operates in a woman's world of an all-female cast of characters. It is remarkable that all female revolutionary characters in both plays, in their fearless and resolute dispositions, display elements of bravery and independence of mind; indispensable qualities of leadership. Again, both plays borrow images that describe ‘sweetness’ from their Yoruba backgrounds to evoke the euphoria of happiness seen as the aftermath of a revolutionary action. This is reflected in Titubi's new name ‘Morountodun’, which means ‘I have found that which is *sweet*’, and in the name of the revolutionary group ‘Yungba Yungba’, which means

'sweetness'. Although both plays tend to recognise wealth as an invaluable ancillary tool for facilitating revolutionary actions, it is not so much a necessary condition for the messianic image. First, Titubi wears the image of a wealthy despotic woman giving wealth a dirty image. This however changes with her rebirth as her wealth from that point assumes a utilitarian image in service to humanity. Ayoka, referred to as the 'voice' of the group, is from a poor home. Although she possesses the messianic attributes and sacrifices her time and energy to propagate the cause, she lacks the 'money power' to facilitate the Movement. However, she is fortunate to have allies in the two others, Dunbarin and Laboopo, both of whom come from wealthy homes as echoed in the imagery of "the big families". Ayoka's spokeswoman status in her being named the 'voice' of the group cedes leadership role to her person over and above the other two. It is remarkable that *skill* rather than *wealth* is used as the decisive marker for leadership considerations here; otherwise, Ayoka's poor financial standing might have been a delimiting factor. Thus, in spite of its invaluable facilitating role in the revolutionary process, material wealth is not the first thing to seek.

Titubi and Ayoka appeal to us as women of similar qualities - both steeped in stoicism, courage, independence and assertiveness, although separated as they are by class. This suggests that revolutionary characters are not the sole preserve of any one social class. The indices first sought after in the messianic character are such innate attributes listed above, including as well, experience and power, while material possession assumes only a secondary place. Also evoked in *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* is the idea of the old giving way to the new as earlier pointed out in *Morountodun*. Representing the old order are the old women, Iyeneri and Ma Ayoka, who are considered spent and so must give way to the new generation of Yungba Yungba, the spirit of the New Age. Titubi, on the other hand, in a kind of rebirth, is transformed as she dispenses with her old image and in celebration of this is renamed Morountodun. This idea is also evoked in the images of 'aged' and 'young', 'women' and 'girls', each pair revealing a movement from one to the other - the older to the younger - with batons changing hands.

Osofisan's skill in juxtaposing historical elements and mythical or legendary characters in his plays is worthy of note. This attribute helps to situate the plays, but also helps to close the gap between art and reality and, by extension, build a closer relationship between the plays and their audiences. Thus, audiences may begin to see in the plays an extension of their own realities and therefore be better motivated to act or react. The

Moremi myth and the Agbekoya uprising are examples of such juxtaposition in *Morountodun*. The second play, *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, is a parody of some sort. It satirises the political instability of the Nigerian State. The dance metaphor notwithstanding, the audience will eventually see beyond the metaphorical symbol of dance as glaring analogies to their own situation stare them in the face. This technique of establishing an affinity between sign symbols in the drama world and those of social reality may have a mesmerising effect on the audience who may be so carried away that they may begin to feel like they are a part of the play's action. But because the play is mere artifice which, at curtain call or final blackout, dissolves like a mirage, the audience would need to be sensitised beyond the mere giving of applause to the play or its performance. No wonder Osofisan tactfully plants in the director's speech the following lines in *Morountodun*:

Yes, that's History for you... 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... (p.79)

One salient point which must be made here about the messianic image of Osofisan's protagonist is the towering demand made of him or her to remain steadfast through thick and thin. Without much latitude given, the messiah is not allowed to exhibit any measure of imperfection, but rather to remain a model hero; a messiah par excellence. Were he/she to falter in any way deemed contrary to expectations, no excuse whatsoever is to be accommodated and the necessary penalties must be paid irrespective of the stature of the individual concerned. Although the messianic female characters treated here do not falter in the context of the plays, it is pertinent, however, to note that examples abound in some other works of Osofisan where they do. Sontri, in *The Chattering and the Song*, is one such role model. As a revolutionary character, Sontri should not have fallen victim to the very things he preaches against. By seducing his friend's fiancée, he undermines his cry for justice; and this defeats his sense of purpose, hence the law of retributive justice follows its course. Also, through the play-within-a-play in *The Chattering*, Osofisan comments further on the law of retributive justice. In this case, Alafin Abiodun exterminates the house-hold of Bashorun Gaha for corruption but becomes worse than Gaha himself. As a result, Latoye rebels against Abiodun's regime by turning the people against the Alafin. As the people seize Alafin

Abiodun, Aresa, his chief security guard, makes a final speech which reflects the playwright's opinion on the matter of justice as stated below:

We worship Osanyi, god of secrets but if he stands in the path of justice we haul him into the stream. For all those who seek to unbalance the world, to arrange it only according to their own greed, there is only one remedy, Abiodun! Death. (p.46)

That an erring god or king may be sanctioned and on top of that be faced with eviction from the idyllic world of Osofisan, speaks so much of the playwright's ideological position. Responsibility, commitment and passion remain the hallmark of the messianic character of Osofisan's vision.

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