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**Performance in his Blood: Performative Rhythms in Femi Osofisan's
Writings**

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Abstract

The drama genre has benefited much from autochthonous art forms. One notices that the transition from traditional drama to the modern form of literary expression has left many African playwrights battling with the challenges of rendering indigenous thoughts, ideals and oral traditions in written forms. Drama deals with man's experience which is the raw material for the playwright who is above all else a member of his particular society. He absorbs the culture of his society, takes in the language, observes the environment, discovers its peculiarities and oddities and tries to reproduce them in his writings, especially in a format that connects with the aesthetic and social values of his audience. Femi Osofisan is one African dramatist who has developed a unique theatrical technique that easily addresses both the aesthetic and social yearnings of his embattled contemporary Nigerian society by resorting to the indigenous idioms of his native Yoruba society. This perceptive 'orality in literacy', or the deployment of performative rhythms in practically every of his literary engagement, is evidently the reason he is reputed to be the most popular and the most frequently performed dramatist in Nigeria. This paper identifies and examines Femi Osofisan's performative strategies in three of his plays, *Twinkle Twangle a Twynning Tayle*, *The Engagement* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, and one of his critical essays, an inaugural lecture titled *Playing Dangerously: Drama at the Frontiers of Terror in a Postcolonial State*. In these instances I demonstrate how he uses these strategies to immerse his audiences in 'total' African theatre experiences.

Introduction

African artists have over the years utilized oral forms of performance in entertaining, informing and educating their audiences. In addition to these, they also use their arts to make social commentaries; satirizing vices, appraising virtues, correcting ills, condemning evil acts and commending good deeds. Even with the introduction of Western formal literary expression, these artists, while embracing the new form, continue to explore the wealth of African socio-cultural practices and beliefs in shaping their creative expressions. The drama genre particularly exemplifies this functional marriage of the literary and indigenous signifying forms. The challenge before African dramatists in this marriage, indeed for all African writers, has been how to embody their people's thoughts, beliefs and ideals in a written form. This challenge often leads them to the African past "with the aim of unearthing the rich culture, philosophy, folktales, poetry and other art forms which the colonialist had tried to bury under the guise of colonization" and recreating from them "a new set of living values" that answer to the demands of their contemporary societies (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2002: 275). In this project African dramatists have devised a technique which fulfils the role of art in practically every human society. For instance, Ola Rotimi argues that "the educative role of drama in society is a fact that has been accepted from classical origins to the present" (1982:25). In this wise Ahmed Yerimah maintains that "both the playwright and the society form a team" (2002:18). It is the society that provides the playwright with the raw material for his product, which is turn meant for the consumption of the society. The playwright easily absorbs the culture of his society, and tries to reproduce aspects of it in his writings. Whatever ideology he parades is rooted in his environment and the fact of his belonging to that environment. According to Adolf Vasquez, "artists, as members of society, create in accordance with the particular type of relations they have with that society" (1973: 42).

From the standpoint of this interdependency between the artist and the society, this essay examines the works of Femi Osofisan, using socio-cultural and historical evaluative indices to account for the predominance of features of oral performance in his works. Three plays – *Twingle Twangle a Twynning Tayle*, *The Engagement* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, as well as his inaugural lecture – are analyzed to establish that Osofisan infuses elements from traditional oral art forms into his writings for the purpose of engaging his audience in an atmosphere reminiscent of

a 'total' African theatre experience. A reading of Osofisan's plays shows that he is a playwright who believes that he owes society the responsibility to make his work relevant and intelligible. His plays echo the works of Yoruba folk opera artists such as Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Oyin Adejobi, Akin Ogungbe and Duro Ladipo who championed a highly professional but non-literary theatre in the period of transition from the oral to literary forms. This group developed a popular Yoruba folk opera tradition, which utilized songs, dances, improvised dialogue, sculptural art and mime in their performances. As Charles Bodunde (2002:12) observes: "The conventions realized at the various levels of the aesthetic engagements of these artists provide the influence for contemporary Yoruba writers. The content and form of the works of these new artists, show a strong link with these aesthetic antecedents" (2002:12).

Femi Osofisan is clearly one such artist who has shaped and moulded his artistic perception and creative impetus from indigenous Yoruba oral folk resources. Even as Okinba Launko the poet, Osofisan explores the elements inherent in Yoruba oral tradition. By the technique of intermingling elements from oral tradition, such as songs, dances, music, chants, folktales and parables, with the socio-cultural imperatives of African contemporary social existence, Osofisan is able to actively engage his audience both aesthetically and functionally. Rhythms of orality reverberate throughout his works, merging the mythical with the philosophical, the radical with the conservative, the folkloric and symbolic with here-and-now reality. He manipulates cultural idioms not only to evoke a sensually rich atmosphere, but also to provide a thematic engagement as well as an emotional disengagement that aligns his dramaturgy with the Epic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht. This performative idiom ranges not only through his plays, but also in his critical works; not just in his avid deployment of songs, music, myth and folklore, but also in the rhythmic pulsation, linguistic register, metaphor and aphorism characteristic of the dialogue in his dramas. His critical essays, newspaper articles, novels, poems, short stories and conference papers pulsate with performative rhythms replete with imagery, symbolism, metaphor and other essential elements of African communal performance aesthetics. It is not surprising therefore that Osofisan's plays have enjoyed maximum production patronage in Nigerian theatres and beyond. The performative rhythms in his works make his plays a "must watch", even when they carry revolutionary messages; and his critical essays, a "must read", or even more so "a must listen."

Using three of his plays and a critical essay, I proceed in the following pages to identify and analyse what I have so far described as “performative rhythms” in Osofisan’s works.

Performance in Osofisan

Osofisan’s plays echo the peculiar rhythms of indigenous African daily experience which is habitually performative. Occasions are celebrated with pomp and pageantry and in most communities there is always something to celebrate. This provides the opportunity for people to lose themselves in the world of performance. Osofisan exploits the elements inherent in these performances to the fullest in crafting his masterpieces. Music and songs are combined with dialogue and mimesis to evoke the essential elements of African communicative aesthetics – images, aphorisms, metaphors, folktales, idioms, and symbolisms, as well as the expression of indigenous African thought, speech, lexis and terse syntax. In exploring the music, song, dance and folklore of the cultures that exemplify not just the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria, but practically entire African societies, Osofisan is able to employ his plays as parables to address the social, political, cultural and economic problems which have plagued post-colonial African societies for decades. This clearly shows a dialectical engagement on the part of a man determined to retain the rich cultural heritage of his community, and from it fashion a new set of living values that strive to make sense of the trying existential experiences of his contemporary society.

Some of the characteristic features of Osofisan’s indigenous Yoruba language are recurrent in the rhythmic flow in many of his writings. His language is poetic, discursive and sensuous and captures the tonal inflections, mood swings and metaphorical embodiments of his everyday African social transactions. Olu Obafemi observes in “Osofisan’s experimentation with the language medium” a “modification of English to accommodate Yoruba metaphorical and idiomatic usages, and the impressive, full range utilization of the indigenous linguistic resources and provenance of traditional African drama” (1995: 14). Folkloric techniques are often employed in his writings as vehicles to advance the dramatic action and in the process, make critical commentaries on the society. In a preface to *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, Osofisan demonstrates his commitment to performative dramaturgy when he declares: “let the actors answer that question with the melody of their movements ...” (2003:11). Having set the tone thus, the entire story of *Esu*

and the *Vagabond Minstrels* subsequently unfolds through singing and dancing. Actions are propelled rhythmically with songs reinforcing dialogue, and even some times replacing dialogue, so that as the audience gets lost in this dramatic parable set in the folkloric world of gods and out of luck adventurous and desperate humans, they witness the fulfilment of the playwright's prefatory pledge to them "that these plays at least will be performed in a context of delight, with song, dance, and spectacle to please and enrich you" (2003:11). Osofisan makes good his promise to the extent that the magical power which the Minstrels obtain from Old Man that is capable of altering their circumstances in life proves to be none other than good old song and dance which must be performed by both the wielder of the magical powers and the afflicted person. As Old Man instructs:

Let each one find a suffering man, someone unhappy, and sing to him...
and make him dance with you... As you sing and dance, whatever his
suffering, it will end! (p. 33)

Even in a tragic political satire like *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, Osofisan still abundantly employs songs and dances, and even the popular folktale about the Elephant and the Tortoise. Indeed, folklore is such a common feature of his plays that, from *The Chattering and the Song*, through *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, to *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle*, Osofisan employs folklore to keep the audience entertained while remaining at an emotional distance from the action. Songs and folklore in *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen* serve to break empathy in order to draw a parallel for societies under the grips of megalomaniacs posturing as messiahs. The songs and dances performed at the end of the play are purposely introduced to ignite people's hopes and prepare their minds for a future free from oppression and intimidation. In his observation, Awodiya maintains that

Femi Osofisan has a devoted attachment to, and an extravagant admiration for the use of music and song to enrich his drama ... other than their aesthetic functions, music and song often become the medium of social criticism on the state of the Nigerian society. (1995:179)

Osofisan's drama has a compelling pull not just for the African audience but for audiences who appreciate the totality of African cultural experience. In *Twingle Twangle, a Twynning Tayle*, the contradiction between wisdom and the power of force in society's interactions is

dramatically projected. The use of time, space, myth, music, dance, song and folkloric stimulations to anticipate the principles of contradictions between two opposing attributes of man, namely wisdom and force, already marks the play out as a performance-sufficed piece. Here, Osofisan's drama is based on society's perception of the reality of life. The twins, Taye and Kehinde, represent the symbols of human virtues and vices, and their socio-political interactions with others expose the audience to the existence of parallel lines between good and bad, force and wisdom, patience and impetuosity, peace and war, and this ultimately becomes a metaphor for the contemporary society that relies on the paradox of contrasting forces. In *Twingle Twangle* Osofisan explores the Yoruba view of the concept of twins and the myth surrounding their birth. The twins, despite their differences, remain symbols of solidarity to one another and sources of joy to their parents. This is given exposition through their *oriki* (praise chant). The society sees the multiplicity of their being as a symbol of good luck and spiritual wellbeing, especially as they are seen as having the supernatural power to influence fertility. Taye and Kehinde are prepared to undertake a five-year adventure before they can attain manhood. The story of the play is the experiences they gather in the course of their journey. Osofisan finds the myth, adventure, individuality, rivalry and solidarity inherent in the lives of the twins a veritable platform for the projection of moral lessons. *Twingle Twangle* is a fictional and dramatic re-interpretation of the myth of Ogun and Ifa, using the parable of the twin as the medium of interaction. In this play Osofisan is able, through Taiwo, to show clearly that his lot falls with the performance milieu. In the course of his adventures we see Taiye using the potency of songs, music and wisdom to captivate the people of Ereko and also defeat his co-contestants in the hot soup drinking contest. Taiye outwits the other three contestants - a military officer, a professor, and a business man - by performing songs and dances which enables him to buy time for the stew to get a little cooler. This earns him the hand of the only daughter of Elereko in marriage. On the other hand, Kehinde, who on arrival at Etido is initially received with music, dancing and joyous exuberance by the townspeople, quickly sets out to alter the mood of the town by discouraging merriment and indoctrinating the people on the need for wars. At the denouement of *Twingle Twangle*, Osofisan's dramatic stance becomes apparent. When Kehinde leads the people of Etido to war against the people of Ereko ruled by Taiye, feasting, music and dancing are employed as effective

means of gaining victory over Etido, and by this the lesson of the play becomes impelling.

In keeping with his ideological stance, Osofisan's deployment of music, song, dance and folklore into his works is a means of ensuring spontaneous audience participation and audience/performer interaction characteristic of indigenous African performances. The songs, music and oral narrative techniques that abound in his plays derive from a radical re-interpretation of history, myth and legend, which make them compelling to all audiences irrespective of their social and cultural identities. Coming from a background of moonlight stories and riddles usually organised around a story teller or a narrator, African audiences especially find his plays captivating. As Awodiya observes:

The songs evoke response from the audience who either shake their heads or tap their feet or make unconscious body movements. The music and the songs are very scintillating and compelling in their rhythmic bearing. (1995:181)

Many of Osofisan's plays actually start off with music, singing and dancing. And these then usher in dialogue. For instance, *The Engagement* (2002) starts on a gay mood with Medayekan singing lustily as he tries different tunes on his drum:

Mo sise sise mo pade owo
I toiled and toiled till I found wealth
Mo sowo sowo mo pade ola
I traded and traded, till I met well-being
Mo roko rook mo pade ade
I farmed and farmed, till I found kingship...
(p. 40)

This introduction sets the pace for this hilarious comedy of an engagement gone awry, where songs and rhythms are intertwined with unfolding actions so much so that dialogue, action and songs are inseparable. We see Elemude employing metaphorical songs to communicate his marriage proposal to Ronke. In fact, the entire proposal and the dispute arising from claims that Elemude had unwittingly made in his submissions to Ronke, were effectively transmitted through songs and chants thus:

Elemude: Yes a cockerel meets a hen! And then, the cockerel sings, like this. (He sings).

Iya apa mi to yeyere

The feathers of my wings open out

Ese mi to ta gangan

My feet stand out on tip-toe ...

Igbadun ni ...

It's all to thrill you, my dear hen

All for your pleasure...(p. 47)

And in response to the land claims, Ronke counters:

Ronke: it's a lie! A big lie... it's in their oriki too....

Awa I' omo a fele jaran

We are the offspring of those

Ti njegberun oko

Whose long cutlasses claim farms by the hundreds

O betun, O besi,

We cut to the right, and to the left Ojewa, O jehin ...(p. 49)

And later, at the denouement of the play, songs are employed to move the relationship between Elemude and Ronke to a conclusive stage thus:

Ronke: We'll be happy... The Cockerel has met the hen at last! Will you sing with me?

Elemude: Yes! Yes! (p. 67)

Osofisan, through his dramatic style, encourages audiences to participate rationally in the unfolding episodes, rather than becoming too involved in the story and emotionally attached to the characters. In his drama, ideas and didactic lessons are important. Through the use of songs, folklore, music, orature and other traditional elements, the audiences are kept aware that they are watching a play. His drama is a departure from mainstream Western realistic drama. For him, critical issues should be discussed on a platform of entertainment through songs, music, dance, chants and folklore, while utilising those same elements for the radical transformation of society. Through these interactive strategies, he presents opposing sides of every issue - archetypes or stereotypes - and invites the audience to take sides.

In keeping with his ideological leaning, Osofisan seeks to reposition traditional African didactic art forms to literary performative relevance.

In his 2006 keynote address at the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists Conference (SONTA) he laments: "Nobody wakes the young people up with Oriki any more; nobody sings them to sleep with a folktale; they no longer participate in the old festivals and ceremonies" (2008: xxiv).

Criticism as Performance

Osofisan's critical essays vibrate with performative rhythms, and when such papers are presented by Osofisan himself, either as lead papers, keynote addresses or even inaugural lectures, they assume epic theatrical dimensions. Osofisan's inaugural lecture titled *Playing Dangerously: Drama at the Frontiers of Terror in a Postcolonial State* is one good instance of his habit of 'performing criticism.' By incorporating such indigenous and contemporary performative devices as song, joke, poetry, parable, irony, idiom, wit and rhythm he engages his audience in a dramatically charged literary exercise. Through the elements of oral performance, he entertains his audience, involves them, and in the process, serves them the bitter truth. Hear him, as he dictates the pace and tenor at the very beginning of this inaugural lecture: "Cho-o-boi ! Cho-o-boi ! Cho-o-o-o-boi! Thank you. Now I believe we are off to a good start." And then he announces that despite the boring habit of inaugural lectures "I promise, there will be no boredom today" (2001:101). Affirming the performative character of his discipline he states, "playing is our business" (p. 102), "above all these, we tell stories. We invent enchanting narratives to open the doors of your imagination to excitement and magic, to ecstasy, to epiphany" (2001:103). Thereafter he proceeds with his pledge not to bore his audience with "tedious intellection" but rather to "fill the evening with fabulation"; to entertain the audience "with stories rather than abstruse cogitation" (2001:103), by beginning his presentation with a folktale interspersed with a sung refrain which his audience eagerly participates in singing. The folktale transports the audience to the realm of the metaphorical, the symbolic, the folkloric, and finally brings them back into the present matter of the inaugural. In the process he tells two other folktales, "Ijapa the Tortoise in 'No-Argument Town'" and "The Tiger and the Frog." Deploying other performative strategies, such as gestures, facial expressions, wit, laughter, interactive devices, he is able to, at the end of his lecture, make his audience withstand and even digest his nonetheless 'tedious intellection' and 'abstruse cogitation.'

In a keynote address at the late Ezenwa Ohaeto Memorial International Conference at Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka, in 2007, titled “Wounded Eros and Cantilating Cupids: Sensuality and the Future of Nigerian Literature in the Post-Military Era”, Osofisan once more demonstrates that he is a writer totally committed to the dramatic imperatives of African social interactions. In this paper, one begins to vibrate to the performative rhythms right from the title. In tandem with the romantic setting of the subject matter, the audience is gradually exposed to, and guided through the world of the Nigerian writer to the accompaniment of poems, chants and oral narratives. Here is an example of a chant from an Ijala poet he performs to strengthen his argument, but which no doubt adds spice to the presentation at the same time as it acts as a vehicle to drive his message home:

I salute the penis that stands²
Upside down without dripping
I salute the vagina that stands
Inverted without bleeding
Iyamapo, please, I beseech you,
I do not intend to slight you.

His critical works are thus signposts of epic style radicalism. His clear descriptions, logical arguments, philosophical postulations and engaging dramatic devices, are all designed to reawaken a collective consciousness in all suffering people. Whether one is reading his critical works or watching them in “performance”, Osofisan’s utilisation of cultural icons and terms, through the imposition of African linguistic culture and background, ensures that there is never a dull moment.

Conclusion

The artistic success of Osofisan’s dramaturgy hinges on his appropriation of flexible dramatic forms which incorporate elements of oral tradition. His use of folktale, song, chant, music, dance, ritual, ceremony, myth, rhetoric, history and other indigenous oral devices as evocative dramatic strategies is an effective method of reaching and engaging the audience intellectually and emotionally. The effect of the union of drama, music and dance is the resurgence of a participatory theatre which readily appeals to the African psyche. Through story telling techniques and other traditional African dramatic forms, Osofisan

is able to elicit responses from his audience and mobilise them to participate actively and imbibe the lessons contained in his works.

Notes

¹One of such scholars is Ola Rotimi. For further reading, see his "Much Ado about Brecht". *Nigerian Theatre Journal*, Lagos: Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists, 1984. 12-20

²Note that although the Yoruba version of the song is included in the text, I have chosen to use the English version only.

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