
Set and Lighting Designs as Communication Modes in Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*

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Abstract

Playwrights in their attempt to communicate their ideas and visions to their anticipated audience or reader often make use of a series of dramatic elements and codes. Speech crafted into dialogues and monologues, music, dance, body language such as facial expressions, gestures, etc., alongside technical aids such as set, light, props and costumes, often form the thrust of these communication modes. This paper examines the use of set and light as dramatic communication modes in a play text. It explores the fundamental principles and functions of set and lighting designs in relation to the realization of a playwright's vision, with particular reference to Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982). The paper attempts to show how set and light as indicated in the text help in the projection of the playwright's ideas and visions to the audience with particular regards to the functional, aesthetic and symbolic conception and setting of the play and its characters.

Introduction

Drama is generally considered a performative art, even though certain types of drama, such as closet dramas, are not meant for performance but to be read and enjoyed for their literary/dramatic value. Very often, and for many reasons, it is not always possible to see a live performance of a particular play but through the reading of a play text, either as just literature or in preparation for a production, we can at least envision its performance with some degree of vividness. This imagined build-up can only be articulated as text by the playwright in the crafting of his dialogue and stage directions which often indicate or suggest the likely costumes, movements, music, sound effect, scenery, lighting and properties. Information on what may well be termed the physical landscape of a play are considered by many playwrights as relevant and

required to help the reader locate the characters and actions in specific environments/settings in order to communicate the idea that he or she is trying to convey. The playwright may thus indicate a single or multiple set, the level of illumination and time of day may be suggested, underscoring the significance of lighting and set as communication modes in terms of illuminating a set, mood setting, creation of atmosphere, specification of locales and role, etc.

The Playwright as Designer

Stanton & Banham (1996:289) view a play as a “literary composition in dialogue form with implicit or explicit instruction for the players...” The text of a play is basically dialogue, monologue and stage directions. Stage directions often indicate other media of communicating the playwright’s intentions to the actors, the director and designers through such elements as costumes, mask, actors’ movements, set and lighting, and these are clearly different from the dialogue. The first point of contact for a director and his design team, or even an ordinary reader of a play text, thus becomes the dialogue or monologue and the stage directions as crafted by the playwright with the aim of communicating a particular idea or vision.

Rosenthal (1972:59), in her assessment of the theatre as a medium of communication, observes that its enormous ability to communicate on many levels has three major elements. She identifies these as: “the playwright, who is anxious to communicate what he has to say as he sees it; the director, who has chosen this play and who is theoretically responsible - *in toto* - for the results; and us others, who will place the communication on the stage - actors and designers...” Expatiating further on the idea of the playwright as the grand designer of his communication impulse, she states that:

The play - the playwright’s play - comes first. I believe that everybody involved with a play should concentrate on the dramatist’s intentions rather than try to expand or change them. If the script cannot discipline all facets of production, the play is not worth putting on. (59)

The opinion as expressed here by Rosenthal points to the primacy of the playwright’s intention and vision in the analysis of a play text. Yerima (2002:12), agreeing with Rosenthal, also asserts that: “[s]o supreme are the playwright’s powers, he can even affect onlookers (*or readers*) to tears and laughter depending on his creative mind at the time”. Bernth Lindfors

(1973), in a seminar titled "Soyinka, When Are You Coming Home?" believes that the "playwright must convey a truth, a lucid social metaphor. He as a seer must not only be able to see, he must also be able to transfer his vision to others." How else can a playwright achieve all the aforementioned roles if not by deploying and exploring all available tools of his art to the maximum?

Reiterating further the importance of the playwright's idea in shaping the design concept of a production, Wolf and Parker state that:

... The significance of drama to the designer is evidenced by the fact that the major portion of a designer's training for the theatre is spent learning to interpret and expand the ideas of the playwright. (1996:3)

This means that the playwright's idea of set, lighting, props and costume designs as often indicated in stage directions, usually form the basis of the directorial interpretation and concept that later unifies production concept and style.

Lighting and Set Design as Modes of Communication

The theatre is a visual as well as an aural medium; however, the spoken medium tends generally to be dominant. Theatre's essence as an experience is hinged on the ability of performers on stage to convey a particular piece or range of information to its audience, failure of which a theatre is adjudged not to have taken place (Giannetti, 1996:230). The distinctiveness of the theatre as a medium of communication, Asomba (2000: x) argues, "is embedded in its ability to explore and employ ... supportive audiovisual elements..."

On this premise, he identifies sound, lighting, costume, make-up and set designs as some of the audio-visual challenges in articulating and communicating the playwright's vision to the audience. Asomba believes that "a character's environment is as important as the character himself as far as information retrieval is concerned" (xxvii). He thereby identifies set and lighting designs in their functions in identifying locale/period and atmosphere, setting the mood as well as being simply decorative as existent modes of passing specific information to the audience.

Jones (1941:17) also acknowledges as much when he describes set and lighting as "the perfect medium for expressing the unconscious in terms of the theatre." This is particularly true in view of the fact that *light* and

dark have been ascribed symbolic connotations since the dawn of humanity and artists generally have used darkness to suggest death, fear, evil, the unknown, while light usually suggests enlightenment, truth, security and virtue. This is obviously a pointer to the fact that even in our normal daily activities a lot is beyond speech in terms of accessing, processing and interpreting information about ourselves, other people and our environment; much of what shape our attitudes, moods, movements, emotions, costumes and even our comportment generally is often determined and or coloured by our physical and non-physical environments, some of which are elements like weather, colours, music, sound and shapes, such that what, for example, determines or differentiates a gloomy or dreary day, atmosphere, or demeanour from bright, cheerful lively one is sometimes dependent on some of these factors.

On this premise, it can be argued that theatre as "... a medium whose centrality is illusionary and often couched on the spectacular" (Oni, 2004: 40) has gone beyond the use of speech and the actor's body to disseminate its message. The accommodation, integration and appropriation of such visual elements, like set and lighting design, help to create a special world which, if fully and properly realised, transports the audience into a world that is sad, comical, pleasurable or even bittersweet.

Asomba (2000:17) further identifies suggestive set and lighting in the theatre as totally new theatrical arts "... whose possibilities are as infinite as speech itself". These practicalities and ascribed possibilities of set and lighting in the theatrical medium since the late twentieth century has further confirmed that set and lighting in the theatre have developed beyond their usual complementary roles to assume more prominent roles as alternative modes of communication capable of contesting with speech and body language in their functions. This, the renowned French architect and set designer, Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886-1945), must have also observed when he admits that set as a communicative medium must act its part by presenting the character before he even appears, by indicating his social position, his taste, his habits, his lifestyle, his personality, and must be intimately linked with the action (in Giannetti 1996:307).

The Aesthetic of Osofisan's Dramaturgy

Osofisan fashions his theatre in identification with and for the upliftment of the masses in their struggle for emancipation from injustice and the yoke of corruption in an oppressive society. His work reflects his belief in literature as an instrument for revolutionary change. Ogunbiyi (1981:37), in discussing the second generation of Nigerian playwrights, points out the craftsmanship of Osofisan thus:

Some of these writers have distinguished themselves as highly competent craftsmen ... One such writer is Femi Osofisan, well on his way to becoming one of the finest playwrights. His eight major plays to date ... are some of the finest works to come out of the contemporary Nigerian repertory. Eclectic as he is original, Osofisan has sought to squeeze out of old myths fresher meanings, in the belief that Man, in the final analysis, makes his own myth.

Sola Fosudo (2002:117) argues that the “overriding philosophy of Femi Osofisan’s plays is essentially revolutionary as it articulates commitment to social transformation”. This philosophy is often communicated not only through the use of appropriate dialogue, but also by suggesting the ways in which set and lighting could be used for the creation of atmosphere, locale and mood in his plays. In *Morountodun*, and also in some of his other plays, such as *Red is the Freedom Road*, *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Another Raft*, Osofisan often establishes a sense of solidarity and commitment to social transformation among the underdogs through the use of dialogue, music and dance, etc., but equally also through the strong use or suggestion of setting and lighting considerations. This is most effectively utilized in *Morountodun*, through the emphatic use of silhouette lighting effects (which Giannetti (1996:19) admits can be particularly soft, romantic and ethereal), and other such lighting effects for scenes that require identification of a group of characters with a common sense of purpose; for example, in Scene Eight, the harvest scene, the stage instruction goes thus:

[Caught in silhouette only, the peasants sing and dance to a clamorous song of harvest. As the celebration begins to die down, the DIRECTOR appears in a spotlight and speaks above the song:] (p. 40)

Osofisan distinctively portrays themes of irresponsible leadership, despotism, corruption and the consequent effects of mass oppression and

deprivation in his plays. He not only exposes the ills and corruption of contemporary Nigerian society in his plays, but also suggests alternatives and remedies to these ills, especially through collective heroism and struggle. In essence, once his intentions and visions as playwright are known through the employment of all identifiable communicative modes, such as set and lighting, then the director, his designers and the performers can easily understand his visions and then transmit them to the audience. A good example of this is in Scene One, where the stage instruction runs thus,

[Full light returns, flooding the entire theatre....Now we can read some of the inscriptions carried by the agitators ... The intruders are also chanting](pp. 6-7)

The entire theatre as the setting of this scene and the full lights can be interpreted by the director and his design team as symbolically connoting enlightenment and truth. That is, the playwright emphasizes the particular actions of the agitators by clearly allowing the audience to see them, and read the inscriptions on their placards in order to indicate the nature and purpose of their protest.

Morountodun, according to Eshiet (1989:27), “makes a clinical exploration and analysis of the processes whereby the masses are alienated from the wealth they create”. Class-stratification and the exploitative and insensitive nature and attitude of the ruling class to the plight of the rural masses are some of the themes explored in the play. The myth of Moremi, with its established setting in the Ile-Ife of the dawn of Yoruba civilization, helps to put the play in a social-historical perspective of struggle against oppression, with Moremi as the symbol of struggle which Titubi seeks to emulate in contemporary time. Lighting and set designs, as suggested by Osofisan in his stage directions, is fundamental in passing this message across to viewers through the eventual interpretation and expansion of his vision in the play text by the director and his designers in performance.

Set Design as Communication Mode in *Morountodun*

Set/scene design can be defined as the art of conceptualizing, planning and executing a suitable environment to house a dramatic action. Since the playwright does not create in a vacuum, it is only appropriate that his creativity is placed within a physical or geo-political

locale. The environment or locale for the dramatic conflict to occur and be dramatized is the setting. A setting often conveys an immense amount of information. This may be physical or psychological, political or sociological. Osofisan in *Morountodun* includes the design of a physical setting in his stage direction in Scene One:

[Stage opens on the Dressing Area marked out by mats and wooden frames, etc. of an evidently ambulant and somewhat amateurish theatre company. A bench, Tables and stools and possibly a table with a long mirror. Lockers ...](p.5)

This stage direction provides us with enough physical information to presage and guide the setting of the atmosphere for the subsequent actions and dialogue of the characters in the play. And in Scene Five, Osofisan already establishes a sociological setting in the reader's mind with the following stage directions:

[The Market square. MOREMI herself, sitting on a bamboo bench or stool, is only faintly defined yet. The scene is several decades ago, nearer the dawn of the Yoruba civilization at Ile-Ife. The manner of dressing and make-up should suggest this historical context ...](p.31)

The setting (as stipulated above) serves as an unspoken means of communication and it not only creates the physical and sociological milieu of the play, it also recreates the appropriate atmosphere and mood for the characters and subsequent actions. Osofisan also uses set design to establish the locale and action of his characters as in Scene Two:

[... Meanwhile, on stage, the actors re-arranging the furniture of their dressing area, singing a prison work song. The set now approximates to a prison cell. They salute the officer with the mock song of prisoners, and go out ...] (p. 16)

And also in Scene Nine:

[The set now represents a room: BABA's parlour in the village. Modest furnishings. Bric-à-brac ... Lights: We see a small wood fire, in a clay pot. By the fire, a small group of peasants. Two or three of them hold down a woman, only barely identifiable as TITUBI, on the mat. Her condition is as appalling as the others': only half covered, her cloth wrapper shredded and mud-splattered ... MOSUN holds a bowl of water.

Marshal, on his knees or crouching, takes out a knife from the fire.] (p. 41)

Exits and entrances are also indicated as an aspect of set design as when the entrance of the Deputy Superintendent triggers panic in Scene One:

[... Among the crowd, a moment of frozen indecision, and then --- panic. Everybody runs out, through various exits, in disarray, leaving TITUBI, and the director who is still on his haunches collecting the scattered money ...] (p.9)

The stage and its design as indicated by Osofisan also help in highlighting the audio-visual demands in the play production. In Scene Ten, Osofisan writes:

[To a brisk rhythm, reinforced by the blasts of a police whistle and the barking of a dog, the actors rearrange the set. It is now the office of the DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT. Furniture merely symbolic: a desk, a file cabinet, a governor's portrait, a table, chairs etc ...] (p.55)

Atmosphere and mood are set for action in Scene Three with the following stage instructions:

[Light comes on upon a scene overlooking TITUBI's prison cell. A number of petty traders from a ramshackle street market, with fruit baskets and trays, portable clothes' racks, tinsel jewellery and wrist watches, and other items common to the ambulant street traders of the West African cities ...]. (p. 17)

The above examples infer that even though language and other theatrical media indicate the point of view of the playwright in *Morountodun*, the implication of the above suggestions on set designs by Osofisan make possible that once his intentions are known, it is easier for the director, his designers and performers to transmit his visions to the audience through their production concept/style, and for an ordinary reader of the text to enjoy to an extent an imagined performance with a degree of vividness.

Lighting Design as Communication Mode in *Morountodun*

Rosenthal (1972:30) defines lighting design as the “imposing of quality on the scarcely visible air through which object and people are seen”. She identifies the dramatic intention of a particular moment as being the basic concern of theatre lighting in that lighting and its design expose the nature of the struggle in which the characters are locked, set the atmosphere for its development, and underscore the resolution of conflicts.

Oni (2004: 63-65) acknowledges the provision of illumination as the primary function of light, a function which has evolved to accommodate others such as composition of stage picture, mood setting, dimensionality, fluidity, style, selective focus information and theme reinforcement to support action on stage. Whiting (1961:22) identifies lighting as the trump card of a designer in the creation of atmosphere and as the most unobtrusive, most flexible and most expressive of all the crafts employed by a director to reinforce the work of his actor.

Light design as indicated in *Morountodun* functions as a means of illuminating the stage and enhancing the visibility of the performers and their props, as indicated in Scene One which ushers in Titubi and her mob of agitators. The stage direction goes on in detail, thus becoming a direct contributor to the stage action:

[Full lights return, flooding the entire theatre ... Now we can read some of the inscriptions carried by the agitators ... The intruders are also chanting](p. 6-7)

Light as a source of illumination is of great importance in the theatre not only because of its physical function of revealing forms and shapes but also because of some of its psychological implications which Oni (2004:20) summarizes as its customary association with enlightenment and knowledge, while darkness is often associated with ignorance and evil. The playwright's suggestive indication of full lights in the scene above can be interpreted as a kind of revelation to the audience, the message of the protest, its nature and purpose, as envisioned by him.

Furthermore, darkness in its association with ignorance and evil is reinforced in Scene 15 by Marshal and his men's suicidal mission. The suggestive short blackout indicated by the playwright is quite informative of the fate that befell all the men involved in such an ignorant adventure, the swiftness with which they were overpowered and killed

cannot be better articulated. The various blackouts in *Morountodun* not only often signify the end of a scene, but also help in the fluidity of transitions of the flashback scenes, and blackouts also aid Titubi's transition from one scene to the other.

Osofisan's employment of selective illumination helps focus the attention of the audience on the significant and the attractive, while quietly ignoring the insignificant and the distracting, thereby controlling the focus of the spectator. In Scene One he writes:

[As the officer leaves – BLACKOUT, except for a single spotlight from which the DIRECTOR now speaks.] (p. 16)

And also in Scene Eight:

[Caught in Silhouette only, the peasants sing and dance to a clamorous song of harvest. As the celebration begins to die down, the DIRECTOR appears in a spotlight and speaks above the song:] (p. 40)

And again in Scene Eleven:

[... As they pick up the song again, singing softly, lights go up on the DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT'S office. The characters are still in the same postures. TITUBI walks back into the office with the gun and addresses them.] (p. 66)

Lighting as an alternative mode of theatre communication provides an important shortcut to comprehension through its ability to establish time of day as well as cover lapses of time, as in the transition from Titubi's contemporary time to the historical time of Moremi in scenes Four and Five:

[... Light changes occur, slowly, dimming gradually on the cell and brightening simultaneously on a small market square ...] (p. 31)

And then in Scene Fifteen:

[As at the beginning of Scene Eight, dancing silhouettes celebrate harvest, and gradually disappear. Lights now come up. It is a fortnight later. The peasant women, again by the streamside] (p.71)

Lighting design also accents or establishes locale and/or marks change of locale as evident in Scene Nine:

[The set now represents a room: BABA's parlour, in the village ... Lights: we see a small wood fire, in a clay pot. By the fire, a small group of peasants ...](p. 41)

And also Scene Eleven:

[Lights come up abruptly in another scene, by a streamside ... The sense of their high spirits must be immediate with the lighting of the scene ...](p. 61)

Lighting also uncovers and elaborates undercurrents of actions and character motives, especially when there is no time to express these in words or the set itself restricts such important issues from being revealed by the actors. For example, in Scene Three when Marshal is planning an attack on the police station, the stage direction reads:

[... Lights fade on hands reaching out towards his bundle, which, now partly undone, is seen to contain weapons. Slow FADE-OUT.] (p.18)

And finally in Scene Sixteen, the stage instruction is:

[The stage cuts off in a general freeze, lights come on in the auditorium on stage, on opposing platforms; Moremi and Titubi are caught in harsh spot-light, looking at each other. BLACKOUT.](p. 79)

The properties of light such as intensity, colour, movement and direction as explored in *Morountodun* by the playwright, to a great extent, help convey, suggest and reinforce the dramatic illusion of atmospheres, moods, emotions and the aesthetic quality of the play, thus accentuating theatre's quality as a medium of illusion and spectacle.

Conclusion

Dialogue is an important tool of communication in a dramatic text for it serves as a clue to characterization, themes identification and in the development of plot, etc. But set and lighting designs, as developed and indicated by the playwright in his stage directions and later developed by the lighting and set designers, are also alternative modes of communicating to the readers and the audience the playwright's visions in a play text. The playwright thus becomes the first to conceptualize the attributes and physicality of his own characters, initiate the designs of his

sets, his lighting and costume, and the props. These then serve as the starting point for the director and the designers. The playwright's conceptions are significant since a script, according to Asomba (2000:p.xii), "is only a prediction of things to happen from the point of view of the playwright, while a theatre production is the complex art of making that script live in time and space before a live audience". This time and space may be viewed as a given or as a challenge, but both constitute the eventual premise for the work of the set and lighting designers in a performance. This much Femi Osofisan demonstrates in *Morountodun* with his suggestive conceptualization of set and lighting as alternative communication modes to convey his vision in the play.

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