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Playing to Reconcile: Osofisan's Theatre and the Nigerian Polity

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Abstract

While assessing the social function of literature in the society, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren observe that there is "a considerable difference between theory and practice, between profession of faith and creative ability" (1956: 98). A number of creative writers of African descent have attempted to promote the relevance of African art to its society through an exploration of functional and communal qualities of literature. With cognizance of the fact that African literature is written predominantly in European languages, African writers are faced with the challenge of retaining their African identities even in a foreign tongue. This dilemma, of reconciling a foreign language with an African identity, is one of the biggest challenges to African writing. As the leading playwright of the third generation of Nigerian dramatists, Osofisan has indeed addressed this challenge in unique ways. In addition to this, he has had to reconcile several other conflicting national issues. In this respect, Osofisan's theatre becomes a bridge between theory and practice; between the profession of faith and creative ability. This paper examines Osofisan's theatre as a mediator between the artist and his craft; the Nigerian polity and the citizens; the indigenous culture and contemporary development. It submits that Osofisan's playmaking principles promote reconciliation at these and other levels in the Nigerian polity.

Introduction

It is most likely that the title of this essay, "Playing to Reconcile", raises certain anxieties in the minds of readers. Reconcile what? Is there a quarrel? Between which parties or persons? These are legitimate queries, for the reason that the very reference to the idea of reconciliation presupposes the existence of differences or conflicting interests. It is also legitimate that I swiftly answer the questions in the affirmative. There is a quarrel; a very serious quarrel at that, and at various levels. I have stated elsewhere that:

Reconciliation is not necessary where all is peaceful, where regions are friendly, where parties are mutually satisfied and where co-operation and progress abound. The need to reconcile arises when diverse interests are sought on the platter of selfishness; when parties avow to take vengeance on one another; and when a bold mark of socio-political dichotomy is created, and sought to be maintained.(Udo, 2003: 147-148).

Such is the enormity of the quarrel that must be resolved through reconciliation. However, as the sub-title suggests, this essay focuses on the role of Osofisan's theatre as an instrument of reconciliation in the Nigerian polity: the artist in the Nigerian contemporary society needs to reconcile himself to his craft; the people must be reconciled with their indigenous culture and belief systems; political differences must be reconciled among various groups and geo-political regions. The Nigerian polity is inundated with differences that demand productive reconciliation if it is going to steer itself safely away from the course of imminent catastrophe.

Modern African literature is characterized by a preponderance of contradictions owing to the indigenous and socio-political pluralities that populate the continent. In his creative enterprise therefore, the African writer is faced with the challenge of 'speaking from both sides of his mouth': of expressing his indigenous culture in a foreign language; of accepting the psychological monster of slavery/colonialism and relaying what gains he had procured from that experience; of the joys of self-governance and the woes of unstable and oppressive leadership. These and many more constitute the 'opposites,' the contending factors which the African artist cannot but confront and seek to reconcile.

Osofisan's Creative Impulse

In a lecture at the University of Leeds fourteen years ago, Osofisan admits:

True, our continent is bedevilled by all kinds of problems, some of horrendous proportions; true, there is much brutality and violence on our streets; true, there is widespread misery and squalor in many homes; and true, the relationship between several of our governments and the people they claim to serve is that of naked terror and abuse.(Osofisan, 1996: 12)

As a leading playwright of what has come to be described as the second generation of Nigerian writers, the generation following that of Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara and others (those rightly considered as the first generation of modern Nigerian writers), Osofisan emerged as a writer out of the unsavoury milieu of Nigeria's post-colonial disillusionment. Some of the socio-political difficulties into which Osofisan emerged include: unstable political order, social deprivation, economic exploitation, squalor in the homes and streets, coups and counter coups, constituting what was indeed a terrorized atmosphere. Under such negatives, the citizens' moral standards are threatened by materialistic ambitions. The polity becomes poisoned by ethnic and religious differences culminating in socio-political antagonism due to the desperation of its citizens to gain opportunities and prominence. The Nigerian playwright must therefore recognise the need to represent conditions that speak directly to the needs of his peculiar environment. This kind of sensitivity to the needs of his environment explains Osofisan's creative impulse; one that is born out of an admixture of several experiences, for, as Omafume Onoge succinctly argues, "modern African literature was born in a hostile milieu" (1985: 22). The artist's mind must retain its vision of both instructing and entertaining, even in the midst of opposing factors. In spite of these negatives, Osofisan asserts that:

Beyond the savageries, beyond the wanton cruelties, are acres and acres of generosity, of the purest compassion. Indeed ... there is continuous, unrelenting resistance going on all the time against the negative forces in our society. And because of this resistance, the flame of hope will continue to burn for us, and our future can never be either completely bleak, or void. (1996: 12)

Resistance to oppressive social and political conditions did not begin with Osofisan's creative efforts. It had been in place, defining and moderating the African writer's imagination. In the first generation of Nigerian writers, one observes a genuine interaction between the Western and the indigenous traditions. This was the characteristic expressed by the very famous expression of Clark in his dedication to *A Reed in the Tide*, one of his poetry collections: "two hands a man has" (Clark, 1965: vi), a statement which sought to define the dual creative consciousness among his generation of African writers. With two hands, a 'man' must find a point of reconciliation between the Western 'hand' he has learnt and which has grown to become a legitimate feature in him, and the

indigenous 'hand' he acquired at birth, which represents him as a distinctive variety among the global species. With the full consciousness of this, Osofisan's theatre tries to bridge the gap between the artist's 'two hands'.

In addition to recognizing and seeking to reconcile the Western and the traditional ideologies in playmaking, Osofisan recognizes and addresses the peculiarities of his immediate Nigerian environment in his art. He creates to address "the specific urgencies of the age in which the artist operates [which] are crucial to the shaping of his statement, to the partisan contours of his commitment" (Osofisan, 1997: 11). Obviously, his society (the historical period of the Nigerian polity in which he writes) does not require mere rhetoric or promises of electioneering campaigns by deceitful politicians. It does not require religious fanaticism and excessive trust in the gods and goddesses who live only to exploit human and material resources. The specific urgencies of his age require immediate and result-oriented attention to the welfare of the citizens. It requires a collective and pragmatic approach to the provision of food, shelter and social amenities in order to affect the life of every citizen positively. To achieve these and more, he understands the uniqueness of his nation and therefore seeks to portray in his theatre that nation that must re-unite and reconcile itself to its history and grow above the animosities that cause incessant regional and ethnic antagonisms among its citizens. He portrays in his theatre the need to eliminate religious and social barriers if the polity must grow to achieve its lofty goals. But, to realize these aspirations, the people must, first, come to terms with their natural environment. Hence Osofisan's reliance on his indigenous oral forms as modes of dramatic expression is, in his words, borne by "an understanding of the life of our nation as an organic and self-conscious entity [which is] of primary essence to the understanding of its literary and dramatic projects" (Osofisan, 1997: 11).

By this understanding, the need to re-establish, re-shape and re-present history becomes urgently necessary. In the course of doing this, the legitimate duty expected of good artistic representation of history is to make literature fill whatever potholes the historian must have left, either deliberately or by some oversight in the course of recording history. In other words, art (and, for our purpose here, Osofisan's theatre) becomes that bridge or a linking route to bring the polity at a dynamic confrontation with its history – the aim of which is the emergence of a new positive awareness.

While a comprehensive study of Osofisan's dramatic impetus may not be possible within a limited scope such as this, suffice it to identify the levels at which the playwright's theatre seeks reconciliation between the artist and his craft, the indigenous and the foreign, and the theatre and its audience (art and the people). The subsequent parts of this essay will examine these themes.

The fusion of the intellectual and the rhetorical traditions permeates virtually all of Osofisan's plays. His drama is a product of mutual influences of the African (particularly, Nigerian) traditional society and the Western society acquired through learning. For instance, the play *Another Raft* (1988) is a continuation of that branch of literature, which, like Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, concerns itself with travelling and discoveries. The crewmen in both plays, consciously or unconsciously, reveal themselves to themselves – a device through which the plays lead the audience through a voyage of exploration and discoveries. The tempest which rages and sinks the ship in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is an art – a display of Prospero's magical art and control over nature. In his craft in *Another Raft*, Osofisan's art takes cognizance of the Yoruba oral tradition as an indigenous supernatural factor to bring his audience into that confrontation with the need for cleansing, which is a necessary requirement for nation building. The central concern of the play is announced by the three Yemosas who promptly warn that what the audience is about to watch is only an art and can be best understood by their imagination. Thus, the audience no longer expects to see a physical object on stage representing either the sea or the raft. What the playwright uses are mere mats with which he prompts the imagination of the audience:

YEMOSA ONE: You see, we need a raft here for our story, on which some of the characters will soon be making a journey. But who has ever heard of a real raft inside a building like this? (*Laughs heartily*) No, there's no need to deceive you, you are all intelligent people. Those mats, that's all you'll see. Just plain make-belief. Look at them, fill the rest with your imagination, and with no difficulty at all, you'll see a raft floating on the waters! (*Another Raft*, 3)

The intellectual import in the passage is enriched by the rhetorical tradition. Since the play is revising the Nigerian political destiny as presented in an earlier Nigerian play (J. P. Clark's *The Raft*), the audience is cautioned that, "it is the fate of our nation that is at stake" (3). Hence, as the crewmembers in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* discover themselves and

their physical environment, the ones in *Another Raft* reveal, both to themselves and the audience, the various misdeeds they have committed in their official capacities. They are obviously disunited in purpose and crafty in intent. Their being adrift is therefore not in doubt but, unlike *The Tempest*, the raft is rescued only by the collective will of the surviving crewmembers who cease to lean on the supernatural but put into action their physical strength to row the raft to the shore. By that demonstration, the contemporary Nigerian polity, in its political journey, must rid itself of corruption, disunity, unnecessary sacrifices and trust in the gods (who may exist only in the people's minds). The urgencies of the age are unity of purpose, honest service, diligence and commitment. The nation's destiny is in our own hands and not in the hands of the gods. A similar message is posited in *No More the Wasted Breed*.

Again, that play is a revised presentation of an earlier play (Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*), for the purpose of, among other things, emphasising the need for integrated and collective effort in saving the society from doom – a prevailing socio-political necessity. The play reworks the concept of ritual cleansing as a means towards societal progress. In Soyinka's play, Eman is of the 'strong breed', those pre-ordained to undertake the perennial and often fatal mission of carrying the boat of the people's sins down the river. By so doing, the society, cleansed and salvaged, continues to survive. In *No More the Wasted Breed* Biokun, a reminder of Eman, eventually becomes conscious of the futility in accepting his role as a carrier through Saluga's confrontation of Elusu, the goddess of the inland waters. The drama invokes the active memory of the audience on what has earlier been presented in *The Strong Breed*. In that play, Soyinka's carrier, Eman, is of the less privileged class in the society. In the play within the play, a historical fact reveals that the choice of Eman by the gods is acceptable because he was born of the ancestral line of previous carriers:

OLD MAN: [to Eman] ... Ours is a strong breed my son. It is only a strong breed that can take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it. I have taken down each year's evils for over twenty years. I hope you would follow me. (*The Strong Breed*, p. 103)

Eman does not only accept the role of a carrier, he does so with considerable pride, following the footsteps of his ancestors. He is spiritually and psychologically fortified by the wishes of the gods who have prepared him for the task. As a messiah who must bring salvation to

the rest of the people, he stands to cleanse the society by sacrificing himself.

It is in protestation of this messianic and self-destructive mission that Osofisan reworks the religious belief in *No More the Wasted Breed*. Biodun's consciousness is awakened and he admits that:

BIOKUN: Only a happy people pay homage to their gods. We fed you with the best of our seasons, praying for peace and abundance. But instead, you brought us the white slavers, who carried off our best men to the far plantations. To anguish and humiliation ...(*No More* ... pp. 107-8)

The gods have failed in their responsibilities, aided and abetted by their priests (here represented by Togun) whose preoccupation is to subject their fellow men to sacrificing their lives and material things unto the gods. Understanding that machinery of exploitation, Saluga confronts Togun:

Tell me, why is it always us who give our lives? Why is it always the poor who are called to sacrifice? Why is it always the wretched, never a wealthy man, never the son of a King, who is suddenly discovered to bear the mark of destiny at difficult moments, and pushed on to fulfil himself in suicidal tasks? (*No More*... p. 105)

The less-privileged are often seen to be more vulnerable to the laws of the land. On the other hand, the rich and noble are protected by the same laws. This is true of the Nigerian polity as obtains in most post-independence African nations, and of the Third World countries in general. The thrust of the entire drama is that man remains the architect of his own destiny. The approach is both existentialist and humanistic, with the central ideal being the preservation of the dignity of man in his confrontation with the supernatural. This is one way that the playwright reconciles both the traditional and what might be termed modern in art to speak directly to Nigeria's national life. By the traditional and the modern, our reference here is to the extent that Abiola Irele draws a distinction between the two:

Traditional African literature is something which exists in our indigenous languages and which is related to our traditional societies and cultures, while modern African literature has grown out of the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the

colonial experience ... expressed in the tongue of our former colonial ruler.(1981: 27)

The theatrical principles of Osofisan sincerely attempt to bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern and plays to reconcile the two to evolve a new kind of social awareness. African theatre locates itself in the public domain; that is, it is essentially communal, pulling together the entire community into a large group of performers and audience in a participatory theatre. It therefore demands a sufficient level of commitment on the part of the artist. The nature of this commitment, according to Chinweizu *et al* (1980:252), requires that "the writer [pays] attention to his craft, that he not burden his public with unfinished and indecipherable works ... that his theme is germane to the concerns of his community." The emphasis here is a people-oriented art or, as Odun Balogun posits, "the definition of African aesthetics ... is the definition of those 'unheard of things' which we Africans are doing with the various art forms we patronize" (p. 18).

The Nigerian polity is characterized by multi-ethnic/multi-linguistic relationships. In addition to these, the Nigeria/Biafra civil war of 1967 to 1970 has carved a socio-political dichotomy among the geo-political groups in the nation. For any genuine progress to exist in such an acrimonious atmosphere, there is need to reconcile differences and come to terms with one another; there is need to explore the abundant natural resources and convert them to serve the nation positively; and there is need to forgive and unite. This is Osofisan's message in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986). In this play, the dramatist locates the dramatic situation succinctly in the actual history of the Nigerian civil war. He metaphorically speaks of the need to reconcile the people to their history. Two youngsters in love, Akanbi and Olabisi, who met themselves in the city, come home to seek their parents' consent to marry each other. Unknown to them, their families have been wrapped up in irreconcilable hatred as a result of the killings and reprisal killings during the civil war. The hatred threatens to tear the two young lovers apart, but their resolve to overcome hatred with love strongly unites them. In the end, reconciliation is made possible after anger and bitterness have exhausted themselves.

As the play opens, Narrator, also a member of the cast, artistically demonstrates reconciliation. He loses out in the hustle by the actors to secure a mat for the performance. While the others ridicule him for his failure, he announces his acceptance of the loss and quickly takes up the

role of Narrator through which he does not only tell a story but equally directs the actions. By doing that, his missing the mat offers him an opportunity to sustain the development of the drama (both producing and directing):

Alright, I am the loser this evening. I accept to tell you a story. Let me see ... (He reflects briefly) Yes, I know the story I'll tell. It's one of reconciliation, which is very appropriate to our occasion ...(*Farewell*, p. 1)

What the play presents is an occasion that can generate anger, disappointment or envy on the part of Narrator. Instead of feeling any of these, he rather comes to terms with his situation and plays a leading role. One outstanding aesthetic feature of the play is its utilization of indigenous materials to boost its setting, theme and theatrical construct. The playwright improvises various settings and scenes out of the mats: the moon, the Iloto hill and other necessary features of the stage, which the story requires. In association with other non-indigenous influences, the artistry in the play illustrates the aesthetics of African indigenous communal performance – a dramatic situation where the playwright makes “no attempt to create a fixed, highly individualized character [but allows his characters to emerge] from the social function” (Weiss, 1956: 416). The intensification and integration of the various dramatic devices in the play to achieve the full participation of the audience is an artistic demonstration of reconciliation; deploying an indigenous African dramatic technique that evokes Brecht's Epic Theatre. The emotional and verbal contributions of the members of the audience lift the story from an ordinary framework of speeches to an exalted level of narrative performance. Thus, Osofisan bridges the gap between the locally obtained and the foreign; between the artist and his audience; between the young and the old, or between generational divides, and through negotiation and dialogue he demonstrates the futility of war and wanton destruction.

Conclusion

As a leading playwright of the third generation of Nigerian writers, Osofisan primarily demystifies the theatre so it can harmonize itself with the people it is meant to serve. He delves into the rich pool of oral reserves to borrow materials for his craft. By so doing, he extends his intellectual resourcefulness to achieve creative relevance such that art

does not remain an exclusive domain for the elites. In his theatre, he reaches out and affects the least individual and activates him to participate in what may rightly be termed theatre of collaboration. This technique situates his theatre in the public domain – the domain where the committed artist belongs. It also testifies that Osofisan's theatre harmonizes other theatrical models, reconciling them with the African indigenous dramatic forms in order to evolve a pragmatic form of performance that speaks directly to the needs of its primary audience. One of such models is a uniquely conceptualized modern theatre, which Osofisan develops to address the pressing needs of the Nigerian polity.

Reconciliation is not only necessary but also a crucial factor in the Nigerian polity. At the politically administrative level, the country is divided into six geo-political zones for the purpose of fair political appointments and opportunities. This, by itself, cannot offer the country that peace and unity required for development. In addition to other apparent odds in the polity, there is the nightmare of the Niger Delta unrest; the strained relationship between the ruling political party and other deeply hurt and aggrieved parties. With these and many more, coupled with a tensed up and unsecured political atmosphere, the attainment of the much-desired Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹ in the country exists yet as a phantom possibility. It calls for harmony and peaceful co-existence at various levels of the nation's life. This is conceptualized in art and, particularly, in the theatre of Femi Osofisan.

Notes

¹ The Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) are developmental targets given to nation states by the United Nations for developmental plans realisable by the year 2015.

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