

REVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICS; FEMI OSOFISAN'S DRAMA AND THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

The poor performance of Nigerian leaders in governance soon after independence dashed the hopes and expectations of the masses. The occurrence of the civil war and the emergence of the oil boom almost simultaneously did not help matters because both events widened the gap between the rich and the poor. Part of the consequences of the above developments was the materialization of revolutionary writing in Nigeria. Revolutionary drama, for instance, has done much to awaken the consciousness of the masses. It has imbued them with critical thinking by making them skeptical and active participants in determining the issues concerning them. Consequently, they are able to ask questions on matters concerning them. Femi Osofisan is a dramatist who practises revolutionary aesthetics in his art. His plays encapsulate the abysmal performance of the leaders on one side and the need for the masses to strive to actualize social change on the other. In this paper the pathetic Nigerian situation has been identified using select plays of Osofisan. The researcher recommends a change of attitude of the Nigerian leader; he should refocus himself and be conscious of the feelings and expectations of the people he represents in leadership and governance.

Key Terms: Nigeria leaders in governance, oil boom, revolutionary writing, revolutionary drama, revolutionary aesthetics, Social change etc.

Introduction

Revolutionary Aesthetics: Femi Osofisan's Drama and the Quest for Social Change

Definition of Revolutionary Aesthetics

Frantz Fanon has posited that colonial exploitation, poverty and endemic famine drive the natives more and more to open organized revolt. "The necessity for an open and decisive breach is formed progressively and imperceptibly and comes to be felt by the great majority of the people" (192). Emmanuel Ngara agrees with Fanon when he adds that, the conflict between nationalism and oppressive forces gives rise to tension in the ideological sphere, a tension between the pull of nationalism and the pull of subjugating forces, between the surging forward of the revolutionary forces and the holding back of acquisitive capitalism. This tension in turn results to a new form of Art (26). Christopher Caudwell has earlier stated that "All art is produced by this tension between changing social relations and outmoded consciousness" (54). Ngara quickly adds that at such crisis points, art is likely to present a significant challenge to the ideology of the ruling group (26). The kind of literature that emerges from such a crisis situation is what Frantz Fanon calls "a literature of combat" or "revolutionary literature" a literature that calls on the people to fight for their existence as a truly independent nation. "It is a revolutionary literature, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons" (193). This type of literature expresses the will of a people to liberate itself from the shackles of oppression.

Tar Ahura consequently defines revolutionary theatre as the transformation of art in a way that it can induce action for social regeneration and struggle (133). Ross Kidd had earlier expanded on this contention by advising that theatre must be turned from.

... a monologue fostering passivity or pseudo-therapy into dialogue in which people are actively engaged in the production of meaning. It converts the audience from passive recipients of received truth to active protagonists in creating a theatrical experience (which reflects their own sense of their situation), criticizing it, and using this analysis (and further theatrical experience) in working out political strategies and engaging in struggle. (10)

Revolutionary Aesthetics in Nigerian Drama

Chidi Amuta has argued that the great tradition of Nigeria literature was as practised by writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Dapo Adelugba, Kola Ogunmola, Joel Adedeji etc. This is a tradition that has conferred on Nigerian literature the vibrant image of a national literature that has come to stay. This literature bears undiluted testimony of the socio-political changes on the evolutionary pattern of national literature. The immediate post-war period of the 1970s and 1980s however came with its sudden rush or artificial wealth and attendant inequalities and consequently produced an alter-native tradition to which Amuta refers as "the left hand of the great Nigerian tradition" (167). Akin Olaniyi says the writers of this period were contented in using drama to restore Africa's bastardized culture and correct Euro-centric views on Africa as expressed by foreign "arm-chair" critics¹.

The Nigerian Civil War and the oil boom did a lot to strengthen the capitalist stance of the bourgeoisie who quickly cashed in on the situation to further consolidate their position and interest. Saint Gbilekaa has argued that both the civil war and the oil boom thickened the walls of social class formation in Nigeria. The businessmen in alliance with their international colleagues accumulated wealth to the detriment of the working class and peasants. While the rich indulged themselves in excessive consumerism, the underprivileged wallowed in abject poverty. Part of the consequence of the above development was that the less privileged members of the Nigerian society who did not benefit from the war or the oil boom resorted to indecent means. The implication of Gbilekaa's observation is that the civil war actually radicalized the minds of many Nigerians. The monopoly that the bourgeois ideology had hitherto enjoyed in Nigeria was broken because the level of perception of the average Nigerian was broadened (4). Akin Olaniyi has said that the post civil war era of oil boom and its attendant squandermania, economic subjugation, socio-political imbalance, religious intolerance, administrative ineptitude, bureaucratic red-tapism, ethnic chauvinism, moral laxity, etc. provided impetus for the emergence of a new crop of radical writers who became disillusioned at the turn of events despite the hope and aspiration of independence. The indigenous ruling elite that took over from the British soon proved themselves to be unworthy and even more oppressive when compared with their British counterparts (3).

On the intellectual level, the war period provided an opportunity for patriotic Nigerian intellectuals to re-examine their stance in terms of the two world's ideological positions, namely the capitalist West and the socialist east. It is important to point out that the Nigerian intelligentsia played a major role in bringing about this consciousness. Prior to the war, the dominant academic tradition was bourgeois-inclined. Nigerian universities even after independence taught mainly the traditional courses which were earlier on designed by the colonial masters. This type of education propagated ideas that could not change the statusquo or the existing values. Gbilekaa further contends that during the war, leftist intellectuals became popular by advancing theoretical constructs which were centred on the people. They evaluated the continuous interests of the former colonial powers in Africa from a purely dialectical materialist perspective. The implications of these sociopolitical developments on

Nigerian theatre were that it created a radical theatre (5). Gbilekaa's view corroborates the earlier assertion of Olu Obafemi that,

... the younger writers who sprang up after the war... find their writing skills sharpened by events into instruments to declare the personal and social trauma they received from the war. (188).

In other words, the Nigerian Civil War and its manifold human experiences that gave birth to socio-political crisis provided a base from which Nigerian artists and intellectuals could speculate about the past, the present and the future of Nigeria. These developments also made dramatists like Kole Omotoso, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Bode Osanyi etc begin to re-examine the socio-political and economic structure of Nigeria and their implications for those who lived below the breadline. Gbilekaa further reveals.

*These new plays differ remarkably from the radicalism and commitment of Ogunde and Soyinka because they unambiguously articulate the aspirations and yearnings of the working class and peasants. These new plays like Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song*, *Morountodun*, *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Sowande's *Farewell to Babylon* and *Afamako* harp on the revolutionary potentials of the proletariat in bringing about a socialist society. While the plays of Ogunde, Soyinka and Clark are critical of the social, political and spiritual events surrounding their society, they neither point the way out nor do they suggest a particular order that they want society to adopt. (9)*

Ayo Akinwale readily corroborates Gbilekaa in the following assertion.

...a new crop of plays emerged in Nigeria and soon became a movement. Dissatisfied with the dense allegories and metaphors of the classical and liberal phases of the literary theatre, younger writers wrote with the vigour of their age and came up in clearer terms with plays that made more open and simplified political statements and protested vehemently against the oppressive political system. This movement featured prominently in the works of Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Olu Obafemi, Tess Onwueme and so on. Their plays show a lot of ideological commitment. (25)

Obafemi had clarified that the dramatists of this movement elected to "deal with urgent, particular, topical, contemporary social problems with the aim of raising popular awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative" (189). In an interview with Onuora Enekwe, Osofisan had agreed that younger generation of writers profess ideological inclination in their art. He said,

A number of us, the younger generation, in fact share this perspective.... you may say we are leftist without being dogmatic about Marxism. But our essentially socialist leanings and convictions separate us from the old writers by a wide margin. . . We want to create an alternative tradition. We look at literature as a social weapon. (qtd in Akinwale 26)

Theoretical Framework

Osofisan in his theatre of revolt seems to have been influenced by Georg Lukacs (1885-1971), a Hungarian critic. In his Marxist theory known as Reflectionism, Lukacs had argued that a text should reflect the society that has produced it. The theory operates to discover how characters and their relationship typify and reveal class conflict, the economic system, or the politics of time and place. Such an examination will lead to the understanding of the text, the

system and the author's worldview. Thus revolution for social change dominates the themes of Osofisan's plays. He employs characters from two identifiable spectra, the rich and the poor to enact his vision of salvation of the society. Osofisan's revolt is double-layered. The surface layer is political revolt directed against incompetent leadership, political corruption, betrayal of hopes and aspirations of the people while the inner layer is social revolt directed against the injustice, oppression, hypocrisy and avarice of the bourgeois Nigerian society.

Social Change

Sean Mcpheat defines change as "make or become different; to alter". He identifies three types of change: developmental change, transitional change and transformational change (qtd in Nwamuo 63). Chris Nwamuo identifies three ways of orchestrating social change. First, one can be an exemplary politician and expect society to scrutinize one's official behaviour and emulate one's examples. This is referred to as the individuals as actor approach. The second is to see the government as the major agent for bringing about social change. This is the government as actor theory. The third approach to social change is the community centred approach referred to as the community as actor theory (48).

The approaches are relevant to this study. For example the community as actor theory to social change sees growing opportunities for the masses to play significant roles in political change. It embodies a general desire to see the masses take advantage of these opportunities and bring about change in society. It further believes the masses, the community, rather than self or government seems to offer a way out of conflict and provides good leadership generally (Nwamuo 64). Lukacs reflectionism which provides the theoretical framework for this study accepts the community as actor theory. The community as actor theory provides for the masses vast opportunities to participate in the process that brings about quality change. The benchmark of Osofisan's drama is change, in other words positive change. Osofisan as a dramatist is mainly concerned with how he can use his plays to alter the seemingly negative and harsh social structure in order to effect change. In our society, In doing this Osofisan believes in the masses participation in the political process.

Femi Osofisan's Drama and the Drive for Change

Within the revolutionary tradition, Femi Osofisan stands out quite prominent in terms of output, as well as stylistic accomplishment. Osofisan's plays no doubt are clear attempts to use the medium of drama to adduce materialist explanations of the major contradictions in Nigeria's post-colonial society. In this connection, such contemporary social malaise as, indiscipline, armed robbery, consumerism, poverty in the midst of plenty, religious fanaticism, ostentation, corruption, bureaucratic ineptitude etc form the major preoccupations of his plays with each contradiction being adduced as the evidence of the unworkability of the current pseudo-capitalist system in Nigeria (Amuta 168). Muiyiwa Awodiya believes *that* the vices of corruption, injustice and oppression are recurrent and are illustrated in many of Osofisan's plays. Osofisan constantly reflects on the ills of the society, reveals social imbalances and consequently rouses the people's awareness of the urgent need to rise and do something about their conditions. Our dramatist refuses to accept the sympathetic conditions of the masses as divinely ordained. He frowns at the way the society is disorganized and the fact that some people are perpetually affluent while the majority swims in abject poverty. Charles Uji refers to these themes in Osofisan's drama as the dramatization of revolution and revolutionary romanticism (105)².

In an interview by Muiyiwa Awodiya in 1993, Osofisan had said,

Corruption, injustice and oppression do not come from heaven, but from the man-made god on earth. It is not a divine order that some people should suffer or enjoy forever. Although our leaders

tell us that it has been ordained like that by fate or by God so that we can accept what is happening around us as destiny. (Excursions 139-140)

Osofisan does not spare the masses. He descends heavily on them identifying their complacency as being largely responsible for their position as 'the wretched of the earth'. Again in Awodiya's *Excursions*, Osofisan says,

We ourselves are also responsible for whatever our society may become. What we have in the society is what we have ourselves created. (139-140)

In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, for example Osofisan reveals to us a frightening identity of ourselves as latent candidates for the stake. For all of us are stealing in one-way or the other: the rulers and their cronies; the poorly paid Civil Servants who thrive on kickbacks; the police personnel who can only make ends meet by graft; and the business men whose wealth is built on inflated contracts and fraud but who are rewarded by society with lavish titles and honours. All of these people referred to euphemistically as pen robbers, do even more damage to the economy and enjoy much larger loot than the armed robber on any outing. Chidi Amuta says that,

Once upon Four Robbers is an attempt to provide a fictional interpretation of the social scourge of violent robbery, which has engulfed Nigeria since the end of the Civil War in 1970. Successive Nigerian Governments have insisted on dealing with the problem at a symptomatic rather than a causative level. (168) Femi Fatoba refers to the play as a dialectical interpretation of the sociological phenomenon of armed robbery which has plagued Nigeria since 1970³.

The play can, therefore, be seen as an attempt to counteract and challenge the government's position, which is informed by the perspective of the ruling class. Specifically, the artistic thesis that forms the basis of the play is three-fold.

- a. armed robbery is the product of a system rooted in inequality,
- b. the solution to armed robbery and associated societal problems lies in a revolution that redefines production relations thus removing the sources of inequality and aggressive competition, and
- c. that the violence with which the state confronts violent robbers cannot but beget greater violence on the part of robbers and others who objective conditions compel to defy the terrorism of the state (Amuta 168).

Ayo Akinwale reaffirms Amuta's view. He says that in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan shows clearly that the society will continue to manufacture its own potential assassins (armed robbers), if the sociopolitical arrangement currently in vogue continues,

... If unemployment and starvation are our permanent companions, if the degree of corruption in high places persists, if money continues to remain a god to be worshipped by us, if our economic system remains tele-guided by foreigners, then executing armed robbers will not stop this heinous crime but rather will multiply it. (26)

In *Red is the Freedom Road*, Aondowase Boh says that Osofisan employs revolutionary conflict to fight for the freedom of the masses. The oppressed in this play are the people who have been captured and enslaved in a foreign kingdom. The captives are people of various classes, soldiers, noblemen, kings in their domains and were subjected to all forms of inhuman treatment. Among the captives is Akanji who has a secret plan to emancipate the slaves, including himself. Osofisan conceives the conflict in the play as that between the slaves and the monarchy. The children of the slaves have been sacrificed to the gods of the kingdom of the captors. The inhuman treatment of the slaves is clearly indicated in the stage directions:

"At this moment enter a group of slaves, with a slave driver. Chained together about the waist and ankles, the slaves carry boulders on their shoulders or heads" (*Freedom Road* 120). There is a depiction of hardship and suffering in another stage direction, "the ship cracks. An old woman falls. It is Akanji's mother! He turns his face away immediately" (120). In spite of the death of his mother, wife and Son, Akanji manages to mobilize the slaves into a revolutionary force. He educates them that their dehumanizing condition is not caused by the gods but rather is a product of man's negative efforts and that it is only their collective resistance against the oppressive forces that will, and can actualize their emancipation.

Akanji: No the gods you speak of are in your willing not in magic. I offer you freedom, but only to men, only to those who can stand and beat their chest (131).

Osofisan tenaciously rejects the idea of fatalism as he uses Akanji to successfully stage a revolt of the slaves against their captors. It is important to stress that the same spirit of revolution re-echoes in other plays of Osofisan such as, *Midnight Blackout* (1973), *A Restless Ran of Locust* (1975), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986) and *Midnight Hotel*, (1988)⁴.

Dele Bamdiele refers to the preceding context as,

...dramatization of the revolutionary class conflict between a feudal oligarchy that is characteristically exploitative, oppressive and brutal and the slaves who are whipped and cowered into living under the dehumanizing condition of the oligarchic government Since the slaves were once free in their respective kingdoms, it is only human for them to mobilize, concretize and struggle to regain their freedom from exploitation- and tyranny to their collective emancipation. (273)

Again in *No More the Wasted Breed*, the revolutionary conflict is built on the traditional purification ritual of the society. The human sacrifice ritual is supposed to be an annual affair. The victim through his ritual death is believed to have carried away the sins and burdens of his society. Aondowase Boh observes that "religion is revealed in the play as a super structural component of the society" (253). In the play, Biokun who represents the poor masses, as he is about to perform the ritual obligation as the ritual carrier is interrupted by his friend, Saluga. Saluga questions the rationality of choosing the less privileged in the society as scapegoats, instead of the highly placed and the rich in the society. The following argument between Saluga and the priest well typifies the oppression of the masses:

Saluga: Tell me, why is it always us who give our lives? 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 fulfill himself in suicidal task? Why?

Togun: You must ask the gods, who decide such things. Carriers are born.

Saluga: Yes born poor.

Togun: With the mark of the chosen. Look at the mole on his chest.

Saluga: And who decided that chest moles are the mark of identity for carriers? Why not fat chick like yours for instance? Or a rotund overblown belly? I would have thought that more juicy meal for your cannibal gods.

Togun: Take time youngman. The gods may strike you for your blasphemy (105-106).

Contrary to the fatalistic approaches to dramatic aesthetics, drama of revolutionary aesthetics such as this brings out the goddess to a trial whereby she is found wanting and guilty of human injustice. The following lines of Biokun further bring out the writer's message.

Biokun: ... They are rich and few, they are the beloved of your priest. But we're numerous and nameless, like the sand of the beach, we're wretched and expendable. A wasted breed, we're ready, at a signal, to forsake our deepest dreams, and take out a canoe in savage weather. We'll give our life, our blood, while they, the privileged, remain here on the shore, bowing to their white masters, gathering... and Saluga saw it all and spoke out, he had great courage, he has paid with his life. (109)

In *Another Raft*, Osofisan takes a comprehensive look at collaboration as a tool for achieving social change. The call for unity as a way of solving our common problems is not restricted to the poor and oppressed masses. It is extended, to everybody, to all sections of the society. Osofisan believes that what we require is unity and a sense of purpose to right the wrongs of the past.

According to Toni Duruaku, "in exploring this subject, Osofisan seems to subsume the argument that tribalism is responsible for the problems of the country"(74). The characters in the play are from the same community "Aiyedade", a select group of people given a grave responsibility to embark on a cleansing expedition, to find the shrine of Yemosa, a goddess and placate her so that the occurrence of natural disasters like flooding and fire outbreaks resulting in pestilence would abate. Rather than show maturity and commitment, they spend their time bickering, and each charting his personal course. Confusion reigns as the characters accuse one another specifically of cutting the rope that had held the raft. Even Gbebe believes that the old Priest of Yemosa, his father set the raft adrift.

Gbebe: You did it father. You cut the moorings

Omitoogun: Let's all perish here let the goddess have her vengeance

Ekuroola: What?

Oge: Yes, who care? Make death come self at last make we all Perish.

Reore: Better like that let those who say they have power use it now. Welcome death the leveler. (30)

In the melee, Gbebe in a fit of possession stabs his father who falls into the sea screaming. As others attempt to throw Gbebe into the sea, the ritual victim, Agunrin, who is supposed to be a young virgin girl is discovered to be a man in full military uniform. He berates and humiliates the elite class as he now usurps control of the expedition.

Agunrin: No but? Enough of the argument! We are going to repeat all the scene again and again, as many times we are all drenched in it! Until none of you dares forget again.

Ekuroola: But this is madness! Madness!!

Lanusen: The avenging angel isn't it! Who are you to dare teach anybody... You took my money, didn't you? You're not as clean as you make out.

Agunrin: Maybe not. But I hold the gun. (51)

Charles Uji says that Osofisan brings us to the realization that the exploiters and oppressors themselves are at war with each other mainly as a result of their cut-throat attitude. The weird idea of human sacrifice, which initiates the entire action of the drama, for example, is shown to be motivated by political vendetta (75). This ritual voyage has in fact been stage-managed by Lanusen for the sole purpose of assassinating his rival, Ekuroola.

Anthony Eyang observes that the disorderly nature of society in the play is adequately accounted for by the episodic plot which Osofisan adopts⁵.

Uji argues further that the drama does not exonerate the military from the many crimes of this debased society which the drama takes time to show to be all man-made. Agunrin continues the torture and insist on repentance before he decides on what to do with the lives of the looters Gbebe reminds him "But you know, don't you, that you are just as guilty as those you condemn" (63). Agunrin's silence, his inability to respond to Gbebe's remark has a great dramatic significance. Agunrin's offence conveys to us the fact that he is equally guilty, if not guiltier. Again, that the ritual victim was substituted for the soldier is quite instructive: "this is an indication that the entire expedition with this evil intention started on a criminal note" (Uji 75). With particular reference to Nigeria, the setting of this play, the above is unquestionably a profound theatrical statement that reveals at least in part the germ of our political, economic and social predicament. This fact becomes even stronger during Agunrin's torture of the oppressive gang including OROUSI who manipulates his privileged position as the Chief Priest of Ifa to nurture fraud and exploitation. The raft is adrift, however, not due to the whims and caprices of the gods as originally assumed by the characters in the play, but owing to the intrigues and corruption of some members of the cleansing mission aboard the raft, who have had their hand soiled by embezzling the drainage contracts. Ironically it is the very lack of good drainage that caused the flood in the first place. In the end, the shrine cannot be located and six of the nine who set out on the ill-fated journey drown.

In *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, the societal problem is the menace of armed robbery besieging an evidently administratively well constituted community. The ruling cabinet is thrown up and about by the problem. From the outlay, it is obvious that the most outstanding and flourishing business in the land is trading, and so the market place becomes the confederacy to confront the subsisting contradictions in the society. Aringindin, a retired soldier and a war veteran, prefers the engagement of nightwatchmen as the remedy to the people's problem. The confusion in the land and the proposition of Aringindin are encapsulated in the following words of Kansillor.

Kansillor: And the blood that has already stained it, Bar Nonhun You tire me, all of you! A man is dead, others are ruined. The town is in a panic yet Aringindin made a suggestion and you stopped it! It would have saved a life, saved the wares of my laboring electors. But you imposed your authority, invoked tradition, and agreed to leave ourselves stupidly open to the menace of robbers. (18)

The oracle was quick to respond to Aringindin's proposition. The verdict of the oracle was revealed by the Baale.

Baale: The people, they will grind our heads, as usual, for it is our horses against the leash of common sense. But the cock must not run from the challenge brought by the pride of his fiery mane. The oracle was clear yesterday; increase the nightguards and you grant the power of arbitrary death! And who knows a long journey may then begin for us into a season of darkness, our task is to be the beacon of light and yet to suffer to be singed by it. (*Aringindin* 27)

The Baale, the Council of elders and the community members were to acquiesce to pressure. Aringindin was empowered to raise and organize the nightguards and to protect the lives of the people in the community. The idea seems to have worked because lives and property became safe, even the nights too became quite. The king and his subjects have unwittingly played into the hands of an ambitious destroyer. Aringindin successfully cashed in on the existing situation to invade the town with his band of robbers and consequently brought untold humiliation and hardship on the people who were looking up to him as a leader and protector. Awodiya remarks that,

...the tyranny, hypocrisy and insincerity of the ruling class, often in the contemporary Nigerian society are the thematic focus of Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen. The play which is about the fascist method of power, uses the current phenomenon of armed robbery in the Nigerian society and the consequent establishment of vigilante groups by the people as its central metaphor. (15)

The nightwatchmen who are given more arms to guard the people in order to curtail the menace of robbers, themselves turn robbers with the collusion of Aringindin and his second in command, Kansillor, to rob the people they are supposed to guard and protect. Awodiya further comments that in the play, both the military and civilian rulers, respectively represented by Aringindin and Kansillor are indicted of fascism, tyranny, betrayal and oppression. For example, Kansillor's concern for the people's security at night is a pretence to carry out his ulterior motive of using the night-watchmen to rob them. Moreover, his act of colluding with Aringindin to rob the very people who elected him into the office of councillor, is dishonest and a criminal betrayal of trust.

Osofisan's consistent deep concern about positive change through collective, conscious and conscientising action is eventually achieved in *Yungba - Yungba and the Dance Contest*. The play can therefore be described as a celebration of the realization of Osofisan's dream as a committed writer.

Yungba-Yungba ... is a play about change and resistance to change. Iyeneri, an epitome of African sit-tight rulers, usurps the position of the priestess of the shrine for ten years. This happens in a traditional community where dance contests take place between three major families namely, Mayesoge, Arooroton, and Jeosunwon annually in order to select a new priestess of the shrine, Iyeneri, capitalizing on the complacency and apathy of the community members, changes the rules and converts the occasion of the traditional dance to choosing husbands only by the maidens. Edde M. Iji observes that before Iyeneri's usurpation, the festival was for a double-fold achievement to show off one's dancing prowess and skill that enabled the winner to win her dream husband and also for selection of a new priestess who, being the best among the best becomes the representative of the youth in the Council of Elders (90). Edde Iji's observation is further buttressed by the following words of Ayoka in the play.

...as our forefathers danced, so did they also remember the welfare of their community. As they sang their songs, so did they keep in mind their responsibility to others and to themselves. They never forgot that they have to find two women to represent them every year in the assembly of the bale. (*Yungba-Yungba* 24)

The order of succession, as Ayoka stressed, was well-laid down until subverted by Iyeneri who tried to perpetuate her through a dictatorial style. However, opposition comes not from the three families but from *Yungba-Yungba* girls led by Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo. *Yungba-Yungba* is a group of courageous young women who shed their smugness and apathy and stood up to resist the dictatorial and arbitrary rule of Iyeneri. They are bent on breaking the jinx of Iyeneri's unyielding, sit-tight leadership. The *Yungba-Yungba* girls agree with Gbemi, Osingbin and Rokeke, the three current contestants, that the rule of law and order of succession be reestablished to terminate Iyeneri's despotism and greed.

Ayoka: We can end it if we stand together... our mothers have chosen to remain silent up till now, to accept to live with corruption, but we will not. The issue of freedom of choice must not be negotiated, Iyeneri must step down this season!

... We will have a competition, but only when it is agreed that the winner will be installed as the next priestess ... (25-26)

The Yungba-Yungba girls confront Iyeneri and expose her as a deceitful leader who talks peace and unity when her people are starving, who proffers homilies when homelessness stares the citizens in the face, a leadership pattern which Femi Fatoba refers to as "Kakistocracy"⁶

In these plays, Osofisan enacts myths of rebellion and consequently confronts the widespread political corruption that has been associated with Nigerian independence since 1960. It is for this reason that Peter Ukpokodu says that *Yungba-Yungba* is an "elucidation of existential philosophy"⁷.

Conclusion

Femi Osofisan exposes the Nigerian leader as a corrupt, self-seeking and unjust person. The Nigerian leader is portrayed as a heartless opportunist who would readily cash in on the weakness and complacent spirit of the masses to undo the very people he ought to protect. This view is reflected in Chinua Achebe's insistence that the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership⁸. The failure of the Nigerian leaders is also effectively captured in Kole Omotoso *The Curse* (1976) and *Shadows in the Horizon*⁹, and Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*¹⁰. Members of the ruling class in the plays are reputed for their doublespeak and broken promises. They have consequently inflicted misery, deprivation, pain and anguish on the people. For example, they have wrecked the Nigerian economy for years, running with spiraling inflation, unemployment, corruption, crime and violence, degradation of the standard of living of the masses and the bastardization of the electoral process. Osofisan's ultimate message to this class of Nigerians is captured in the words of Yobi a character in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*

For now the laughter is yours. But one day, our people will be awake. They will stop calling so helplessly for Messiahs. They will be ready, every one, to assume responsibility for their own lives And then, true democracy will come. And the laughter will not be in the Palace alone nor on your frightening lips. The laughter will be in the streets. (77-78)

Notes

1. Akin Olaniyi discusses radical drama in post-colonial Nigeria using the example of Femi Osofisan see Ekpoma *Journal of Languages and Literary Studies* Vol. II, (2005), pp 1-14.
2. Charles Uji avers that the play *Red is the Freedom Road* brings out the manifold ills of an inhuman regime. see *Interpretative Essays I*, Edited by Muiyiwa Awodiya (1996), pp 67-79
3. Femi, Fatoba. "The state as Terrorist: *Once Upon Four Robbers*" criticizes the public execution of robbers. Published in *Interpretative Essays I*, Edited by Muiyiwa Awodiya (1996), pp 81-87.
4. Femi, Osofisan. *A Restless Run of Locust* (1975) *Farewell to Carnibal Rage* (1986), *Midnight Hotel* (1988), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) *Midnight Blackout* (1973) in all these plays Osofisan portrays the incapacity of Nigerian leaders as well as the complacent attitude of the masses.
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