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THE USE OF ORAL MATERIAL IN THE PLAYS OF FEMI OSOFISAN

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ABSTRACT

Modern African literature is generally viewed in recent times, as a cultural detachment as a result of its revolutionary stand. This article examines revolutionary tendencies through a dialectical process of culture in progression. No culture is static and no writer writes out of experience. It is observed through a critical study of Femi Osofisan's plays that the culture is the target and the resource material for effective agitation for change. Oral traditional materials are thus transferred on Femi Osofisan's plays and are collated in a discussion here along their dialectical functions. One of the major finding and conclusion of this analysis, is that the oral elements serves as repertoire for most emergent plays Femi Osofisan's plays, *Morountodun* and *Tegonni* are used for exemplification here.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Oral literature stands as the backbone and the tool to be used for evaluating or interpreting any pragmatic literary text. For the enhancement of a better understanding of any textual material, oral literary material have become guided instruments in the hands of both writers and critics. Oral literature is the custodian of the various aesthetic notions and values of written literature. The unwritten elements allow us to locate all formalized theories, which are clearly evident in the tradition and culture of the people from time in memorial. Such theories include formalism, structuralism, modernism, post-modernism, feminism and marxism. All theories stress the natural phenomena inhuman existence. And this is the parameter oil which this study examines the use of oral literary elements in Femi Osofisan's drama.

In Femi Osofisan's plays, the past and present are made to merge. Myth and history combine to put contemporary reality in shape. By so doing, the proposition of a revolutionary alternative for the future is ensured. In *Many Colours Make The Thunder King*, the playwright regenerates the play right regenerate the Yoruba legendary experience of Sango, the great warrior who spits fire at the slightest provocation. After his acquisition of magical prowess, Sango in the legend, attempted some impossibilities such as marrying the river and forest. The legend of Sango becomes the mythical material employed by Osofisan to portray man's inhumanity to man and the insatiable nature of man to continue to aspire for more power, wealth, popularity and wives. Other traits of man are portrayed through the king's character of destruction, deceit, violence and murder. In fact, the custodian of tradition, Igunnu, who is the story teller in the play, has to change his name and nature to Alagemo, a Yoruba name for chameleon. This is to enable the story teller meet up with the king's demands. In the African society, diviners are used to get to the very top position, no matter how when it takes them to get there, and whatever it causes them. However, once the African leader gets to the top position, he parts way with his seers by way of violence. The diviners are killed, tortured or jailed. Alagemo is sealed up in a prison cave to die.

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Rivalry between fellow beings is insinuated in Oya's character. She wants Sango to herself alone. She therefore plans the trick against Osun, and this plan disgraces Osun out of Sango's palace. Furthermore, Oya reduces Sango's might by clearing Alagemo out of the way. Alagemo is the only source for the supernatural power acquired by Sango. With cultural affluence, Osofisan 'twiddle - twaddle's' in style and form, social change advocacy is done through the Yoruba rich folklore involving histories, beliefs, myths, narratives, magic, incantations, proverbs, songs etc. Regarding this, Muiyiwa Awodiya (1992: 105) makes a perfect comment thus:

Osofisan combines a radical ideology with recognition of the importance of cultural traditions. He has consistently advocated and defended art that is anti-elitist popular and accessible ... Osofisan's dramaturgy often draws inspiration from traditional culture but he is distinguished by the fact that he uses the devices of oral literature for far more radical purposes than any other Nigerian playwright ... Apart from their aesthetic functions, folklore techniques in Osofisan's plays often become the vehicle of critical thematic commentary on the state of the society.¹

Apart from myth, legend and history, oral narratives also serve as another material functioning as a style and manner of narration that help to reinterpret critical issues presented by Osofisan. In *Morountodun* for a specific example, he uses the traditional 'tales by moonlight' forum, and also uses Nigerian riddles. The storyteller and his children-audience are presented in a circular sitting forum with the use of the opening formula 'alo'; and the audiences respond of 'aloo'. This device captures the attention and interest of the audience. It also establishes rapport with the audience which serves as one of the elements of dramaturgy. The familiar themes of the setting used are the basis for social criticism. The story telling medium becomes the dialogue playground for social awareness in the play.

In the performance of the acts and scenes, we can deduce Yoruba beliefs in mysteries, supernatural life, death, and mysteries. This is made more evident in the discussion between characters where the functions of deities, mediators and ancestors are mentioned. We have *esu*, *orunmila*, *babalawo* etc. songs, dance, chants which constitute elements of dramatic actions in the placements of these supernatural figures. Chants, for instance, are used by Marshall in *Morountodun* to secure the support and approval of the dead and the living. Trees and animals are also used in the re-naming of Titubi as *Moruntodun* Marshall: Now I call on this earth. I am standing on (takes gourd from Kokondi and purs libation. He softly chants on incantation ...) I call you trees and animals ... I summon the seeing eyes of our. Ancestors and you my dear friends standing ... I name her *Morountodun*.²

The festival motif is one of the dramaturgies used in the play. Osofisan sets a typical traditional ceremonious environment. The instability of the characters in movement facilitate the exactitude of African festival aesthetics. The palm wine, calabash-cups, stools and mats are typical cultural articles or artifacts indicating the richness of the Yoruba culture. He consciously collates these elements with the aim of enhancing communication with his audience who are trapped in darkness on facts and arouses the consciousness of the individual through reasoning instinct. With ease, created by the various entertainment modes, the social problems such as bribery, corruption, theft etc.

Out of all the emergent dramatists in Nigeria, Osofisan is the most aggressively ambitious playwright. He uses the 'visionary potentiality on the theater, to shape the audience's awareness and perception of the alternative to the problems of the society. He

rejects the metaphysical option he describes as the philosophy of defeat as an approach to finding solutions to problems in contemporary society. Like most modern writers, he demands for the radical alternative that can bring about the questioning and challenging and history the audience or the masses. His intention is to get close to the spectator who is trapped in darkness of the situation in his society. He intends to penetrate and wash his major character inside out in the naked and then return him back again a different man. That is to use theatre to effect change and awareness.

2.0 THE MYTHICAL DIALECTICS IN OSOFISAN'S MOROUNTODUN

The myth is recreated and reconstructed in moment to contend that Moremi played herself in the service of the ruling class where she belonged. Osofisan, recreates man in Titubi who belongs to the capitalist class. Her mother a wealthy leader of the market women pampers her daughter, Titubi. However, she volunteers to infiltrate fanners' corruption and help to capture their leader. At this stage, she doesn't know the implication of her action. The attempt is to oppress a progressive movement and to mount an unjust status quo.

In the course of events, she learn through experience the nature of her adventure because her decision is born out of her desire for adventure to message her ego. She soon learns of the fanners, experiences their sufferings and frustrations, their hardships and the deprivation they undergo and she grows renewed and becomes reborn. She: ultimately denounces her class and Drop Titubi for Morountodun (i.e. I have found a sweet thing by liberation). The symbolic sweet shown by the quietude of the village is an indication of positive values and collective sense of heroism born in the struggles of the fanners against the bourgeois oppressions. There is a dialectical relationship between Moremi and Titubi-Moremi served the state, was the spirit of the ruling class but Titubi puts herself in the service of the ruled she becomes oppressed herself having decamped for the ruling class.

Among the dramatic devices employed in this play is play within play recreated through role-playing. These are roles of money by the riverside, visit of the governors and the play involving Titubi and the riverside, visit of the governors and the play involving Titubi and the peasant fanners and the sanitary inspector. This role playing is used to show the government against the moles of the farmers. It is relayed as a feedback (Titubi's explaining farmers) to show Titubi's process of her political education. Other flashbacks in the play enact and reenact the relationship between Moremi and Titubi. Moremi is a mythical heroine serving as Titubi source of inspiration. This is recreated in the text of demonstrate the process of political awareness and political indoctrination of Titubi. There is also a conscious effort by the playwright to ensure that participation of the audience is only at the intellectual level. The play begins with the director who is also the narrator on stage to give the people fore-taste of the play. The projects it as a planning and not as real life or an illusion of real life while this goes on actors and actresses make up on stage and in the full view of the audience. This helps to effect alienation as the characters are presented detached from their real selves. The final appearance of the director is a reinforcement or reemphasize. The positive dimension of the transition of measure as only an instrument for the liberation. The reality of this struggle can be seen as a symbolic eradication of class barrier aiding the union of the oppressor and the oppressed. It generates the questions what become of Titubi or her political education after marshal's death and what become of Alhaja's wealth.

Morountodun can be said to be a successful play in many respects, especially as it demystifies and demythologizes especially from the point of view of Moremi and the political education of Titubi as well as the general awareness it grants to the end. Two mythical imperatives are utilized in this play. One is the myth of Moremi is an extended of myth. The other is the contemporary experience of the Agbekoya peasant farmers with its concrete historical reality. Here, an attempt is made to create new vision from myth, legend and history. He, posits concrete and radical alternative to a decadent frequent. He exposes myth through unfolding separate aspects of history and of his experience and reveals a vision of collectivism.

The Agbekoya uprising of peasant against military dictatorship is juxtaposed against a similar oppression of Ibo people by the Igbos. Hence, in a dialectical use of abstract experience to propose a vision of human liberation. He points out that through collective action generated from within the rank and status of the masses, directed against the bourgeois class, liberation is visible, possible and practicable. Titubi can therefore be taken as the modern Moremi belongs to the ruling class but her bourgeois inheritance is over by events having lived among radical. Transformation by physically experiencing the abject social condition of the farmers-their sorrows and sufferings when her own class imposes on them. She discovers that her own reactionary role is a reinforcement of this oppressor status quo and she transfigures into a new being and becomes an instrument for the oppressed in their bid to gain liberation.

Morountodun is therefore a classical example of the emergent tradition in its proposition of radical alternative to society in its use of concrete images particularly in its thematic concern. The objective aspiration and historical condition of the downtrodden class are accentuated. The dialectical correspondence between the past and the present indicates oral continuity in Africa. The target is how all elements discussed are in contemporary usage

3.0 TRADITIONAL FORMS AS REVOLUTIONARY ALTERNATIVE IN OSOFISAN'S TEGONNI

Oral tradition also has a radical posture as a way of urgency on the crisis of the western cult. Osofisan in Tegonni is a propositional revolutionary alternative for the future. The play opens with sarcasm on the skin-colour, the director looking for white actors who are no where to be found. This is heightened by the characteristic African dance, music and praises e.g. the oriki of Yemoja. The cure notion is brought to early focus by Isokun who claims:

Really, young women, I tell you, I am just going off
to the bush there, to pluck some medicinal leaves ...
ust to pluck some herbs- (pgs 18-20)

Tegonni the female protagonist, is created a radical woman right from youth. She refuses to sink in the background as dictated by society and her parents. Baba Isokun is used as a weapon for social change in the play. He protects Tegonni's right and freedom of choice and decision by taking her to the D. O- Allan where no one can go and disturb her. This gives her the opportunity to learn bronze casting and sculpture making as a woman. Isokun symbolizes progress. Tegonni's stands for the maker new generation that will close the door to an outdated way of life and at the same time, retrieve the dignity right and the freedom that necessitate the merging traditions to allow peace to reign in the coexistence of the two races heightened by intermarriage. Tegonni confronts the Governor whom everyone including the D.O-Allan fears. This action is radicalism.

In the African culture, it is self degradation for a royal child (a princess) 'to marry a commoner, not to talk of a British officer. This move by Tegonni is therefore seen as the attempt of the British to annex not only the African territory but also the African girls. The imperialists therefore exploited the Africans, physically, materially and economically. The radical implication of a whiteman conquering the hands and heart of all African lady is a total and complete exploitation of African continent. Ironically, Tegonni demonstrates the democracy movements preached but not practiced by the whiteman. Tegonni stands for the expected antagonistic move of the Africans. However, she uses this move in a wrong way. Osofisan draws on the traditional myth and belief of the Yoruba's using Oke-Osun town in its present development, and contemporary realities of change in the individual behavioural attitude and the societal change at large. Hence, the relevance of the poem 'Ozymandias' (written by Percy Shelley) and used in the play to illustrate the African situation. Tegonni appears to come up with solutions. And one of such solutions is to fuse the two races together through love. She aims at having her either-to feminist relegatory stand back on the tradition which in itself is not progressing or adapting to changes and realities, but rather remains pretentious, corrupt and callous, despite its natural and human resources.

Tegonni is rejected by her society. For instance, Asipa jilts her because she chooses to be a carver. That no woman has ever joined that profession, not to talk of a princess. The D.O did not only protect Tegonni's right but also set up a factory for her. Cultural confusion is indicated in the character of Isokun. Federera says; "Yesterday, baba. Only yesterday you said you understood. Will you now take back your words?"

Such Brechtian approach to theatre is used to arouse the consciousness of man and his reasoning faculty. The typical social problems that deal with what he finds resulting from the social system, include: bribery, fraud and Corruption. He further uses the armed robbery phenomenon as a metaphor to deal with social problem Osofisan recreates an aspect of Oyo history to depict a vision of the ongoing process of change and confrontation. The historical forces of oppression and capitalism are brought to focus as examples of the present circumstance that needs adjustments.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Generally, Femi Osofisan uses idiomatic expression in native linguistic forms for the clarification and simplification of his purpose i.e. breaks down recognizable symbols that are reachable, assessable and acceptable to his audience. In sum, he achieve the following oral literary formats, namely

- a. He draws his images from familiar environment like the rhythm of the rustic environment.
- b. The use of disalienation technique with permits the active involvement in the dramatic process.
- c. He demystifies, up in the presence of man and the supernatural
- d. He includes elements of oral performance like dance, mime, music, song and folklore to enrich the play
- e. He creates a popular theatre which the audience identifies.
- f. He is able to mobilize his audience to participate in the issue at hand.
- g. He takes outside the stage to the door step of the masses.
- h. The existing values are only transformable through this familiar route

Art as propaganda (The Marxist doctrine) incorporates dialectical motivation theory of Karl Marx, combining traditional materials and modern reality and their unification. This principle of oral functionalism is a device created for special purpose and activity of persons and things.

This explains why a dialectical relationship exists between Iggunnu and Alagemo- Iggunnu is a honest story teller that people abandon their homes and trades to listen to, while Alagemo turns chameleonic in nature so as to deceive the masses by attempting to achieve the impossibility. Among the dramatic techniques employed in this play is the play within -play.

Osofisan's plays are therefore epic forms of theatre, where characters presented detach evidence emotionally from the event on stage. The destruction of Sango, despite all the achievements including wives and children, is a symbolic representation of the out come of greed, deceit. All these notwithstanding, Many Colours fake The Thunder King can be said to be successful in many other respects. as if demystifies and demythologies Sango as the all in power and wealth. The deceptive nature of Alagemo as well and the general awareness it grants to the audience is an indication that greed, deceit and power drunkenness destroy. not only people but a nation. The important mythical imperatives are: Sango, Oya, Osun, Iroko and Oba Koso. The replayed story of Sango, Oba koso, Oya and Osun has created new vision from myths and legend.

The playwright posits concrete and radical alternative to a decadent present in an attempt to get wealth and power. He exposes myth through unfolding events that separate aspects of history and human experience and reveals a vision any collective struggle against injustice and all forms of means to get to the top. This is symbolized by the ants that collectively free Alagemo because of his innocence. This play is therefore a classifical example of the emergent tradition in its proposition of a radical dialectical alternative to society. It uses concrete images, particularly blended with a recreation of myths, in a thematic concentration. The objective aspiration and the historical breakdown of the plight of the down trodden class,- the oppressed workers, is the major pre occupation of Femi Osofisan

ENDNOTES

¹Muyiwa P. Awodiya (1992:105) Oral Literature and Nigerian Drama: The Example of Femi Osofisan in Eldred Durosimi Jones (Ed) Orature in African Literature Today No 18 Plymouth James Currey Ltd.

²Femi,Osofisan (1982) Moruntodun and Other Plays Ikeja: Longman Nigeria Limited.

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