

FEMI OSOFISAN: FROM MIMESIS TO DRAMATIC MATURATION— A CANONICAL EXPLORATION OF A GENERATIONAL ICON

'Diran Ademiju-Bepo

INTRODUCTION

Beyond history and culture, the political and social problems confronting the emergent nations of Africa—Nigeria not excluded—contributed to the choice of “commitment” on the part of certain established and upcoming playwrights in the 1970s. This was to signal a shift in their (the playwrights’) perception of the possibility of salvation as a societal collective responsibility, rather than the celebration of the individual hero in plays of the previous generation. As it paved the way for the emergence of the drama of revolutionary change, this development also came to terms with the cleavages and clan identities which followed in the first ten years of independence.

Their thematic response naturally became manifest in the adoption of a doctrine of political and ideological commitment as a weapon in the struggle for the emancipation of the peasants, workers, and the urban and rural downtrodden from the bondage of the ruling classes. With an open identification with the less privileged, and a commitment to their eventual liberation, this drama offered a new direction, eloquently speaking a “new language,” as exploitation and oppression formed the kernel of their themes in favor of the societal “underdogs.” These themes—some of which have existed in the plays of the pioneer generation, notwithstanding—find fertile expression in the soil of corruption, already a festering cankerworm in the body polity of the Nigerian nation, as an offshoot of the civil war (1967-1970) which threw up more armed robbers and opened the eyes of many to the abundant, yet-to-be tapped oil resources in the country.

Since the writer lives in this society, and owes a responsibility to it, his/her response as a committed writer must come in themes and styles to reflect the aspirations of his/her people. The committed writer, Akorede asserts, "is to make his people aware of the socio-economic and political problems, the cause and to some extent, the solution to such problems (17)." In other words, the environment furnishes a writer with the material with which he/she creates his/her work; therefore, the influence of this creation on the same environment cannot be underestimated.

THE RISE OF AN IDEOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE

Departing from the non-tangible, supersensible solution to practical and tangible social problems that were the thematic thrust of the Soyinka generation, Obafemi notes that a new group emerged, determined "to break down societal problems in the light of real historical occurrences (12)." Their ideology was materialist in description/perception and dialectical in approach. Their mission was to impress upon their audiences that man's problems originate from man and not from the metaphysical realm or from the gods and, therefore, he further contends, only man can, by himself find solutions to his problems.

The group asserted that only a restructuring of society along purely socialist and egalitarian lines can put an end to strife, hunger, violence, war, pestilence, etc., all of which are caused by want or capitalist greed. To them, this is only possible through collective action on the part of the down-trodden masses. To overthrow the corrupt and decadent status quo, therefore, a practical manifestation of will and determination is required.

Social revolution, and the strident call for one, make a materialist perspective in art and society imperative, as Osofisan has argued that an animist worldview has been rendered obsolete by colonialism and the experiences of capitalism and modernization. To conquer corruption, decadence, graft, and moral confusion the awareness of class-consciousness becomes a task for the writer whose response the society actually awaits in most cases, to create the desired seeds for a revolution.

In response to the challenges of shaking off the stupor of post-independence disillusionment, this crop of playwrights came with a different thematic thrust, like a new weapon in the manner of legendary Ògún, Yoruba god of iron and war, who, according to myth, had fashioned a weapon of iron with which he cleared the path for the other *òrisà* when they all descended to earth. The list includes Fela Davies, Comish Ekiye, Soji Simpson, Kole Omotoso, Bode Sowande, Meki Nzewi, Laolu Ogunniyi, Bode Osanyin, and Femi Osofisan. To this crop, we want to add Sonny Otti (1943-1997), Tess Onwueme, Tunde Fatunde (a pidgin drama expert), Olu Obafemi, Akanji Nasiru, Segun Oyekunle, Sam Ukala, Iyorwuese

Hagher, Stella Oyedepo, Hyginus Ekwuazi, Rasheed Gbadamosi, Sonny Samson-akpan, Chris Nwamuo, Fred Agbeyegbe, Obi Egbuna, Catherine Acholonu, Ahmed Yerima, and Irene Salami. Many in this list constitute the band of 'lesser-known stars' in the generation, with their dramatic flowering coming in the 1980s and 1990s.

A handful of these dramatists have actually passed from the tutelage or brief apprenticeship under the pioneer generation. Anger, suspicion, and outright condemnation make up the collective mood of this generation, many of whom had gone to school in latter years of colonialism and are thus living witnesses to the way of life when their aspirations, dreams, and hopes were shaped and buoyed by the promise of a glorious future for their newly-independent nation. Their collective or individual expectations were however, gradually but surely deflated, one after the other, especially with the military's disastrous rule and autocratic nature, and what they did to the fatherland through their insistence on holding onto power beyond the promised date of return-to-civil-rule.

The regime of General Yakubu Gowon (July 29, 1966-July 29, 1975) had earlier on set October 1, 1976 as the handing-over date for the much-desired Second Republic. On October 1, 1974 the administration announced the non-feasibility of the date after eight years of military rule. The collective hope of the people received a jolt and a general mood of despair began to sweep through the entire land. Even the oil boom which had hitherto given the people a sense of succor, soon turned to oil doom with the concrete evidence of a collapsed economy. The stage was thus set for the apostles of a positive revolutionary alternative to the decadence which Gowon's rule threw up. The signpost of their departure from the Soyinka-led pioneer generation was their conscious ideological commitment with which they proposed to raise mass awareness among the people to contemporary social problems plaguing them.

Obafemi asserts that this group helped to reveal the revolutionary potential of the theatrical medium to make firm political statements, through their urgent handling of such topical issues as the phenomenon of armed robbery, students' rampages, class struggle, corruption, fierce capitalism, and feminist concerns. He adds that,

in their total rejection of the idealist vision based on the animist-metaphysics of their predecessors and their preference for social change through the collective will of the masses lies their unanimity. (168)

From an intellectual terrain, the appearance of this group signaled the birth of an ideologically-driven force, a force that stood up against the overbearing hegemony of the ruling class, and was to declare that art is both "politically correct" and artistically powerful. Their emergence was not without its own fair share of dilemma, however.

Irele, from an analytical, scholarly, and critical perspective describes them as,

an eclectic group of radical university teachers and intellectuals, that came to be known as the Ibadan-Ife axis, distinguished by their strict doctrinal affiliations and common disaffection for the power structure in Nigeria, and their passion for a profound reordering of their society along socialist and egalitarian lines. (ii)

He sympathized with their dilemma of being caught between their resistance to cooptation by the ruling class to which they are tied, and the pursuit of their advocacy. This dilemma forms the theme of Osofisan's response in his play, *The Oriki of a Grasshopper*, from the psychological and ideological perspectives. Ogunbiyi's reading of this group is of "a different crop of playwrights" (who emerged in the post-civil war period). "The finest crop...are set apart from their first compatriots not necessarily by any substantial age difference (where it does exist at all), but rather by temperament and vision, hardened as it were, by the wounds and trauma of the civil war" (36).

THE LESSER-KNOWN STARS: A SYNOPTIC VIEW

Before we go into the discussion of Femi Osofisan, the icon of this generation, it is pertinent to point out those playwrights who emerged alongside the aforementioned, but whose shine was not as visible. For our present endeavor, the quartet of Oyedepo, Obafemi, Nasiru, and Fatunde would serve to illustrate the coterie of "lesser-known stars" of the second generation, towards a definition of their dramatic enterprise and relevance, having chosen to depict and represent in their works, our contemporary socio-political and economic realities with a satiric brush in an agitation propaganda, or "agit-prop," coloration.

Rather than being rhetorical like Sowande in their themes and approach to the ideology of Marxism in literature, this category projected their message through experimental dramatization of the fate of the oppressed masses in the hands of the oppressor-elite. Their thematic proposition is the overthrow of hegemonic tendencies in their society, based on the reawakening of social consciousness. We therefore want to see them in the light of a "transitional generation" from the second generation to the post-Osofisan generation, our main focus in this thesis, just as Zulu Sofola and Wale Ogunyemi stand as the "transitional duo" linking the Soyinka generation with the Osofisan generation.

OSOFISAN: THE ICON OF A GENERATION— AN APPRAISAL

That the plays and name of Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan have come to represent the second generation can be viewed in the same manner that Wole Soyinka

stands out as the doyen of Nigerian dramatic literature of English expression. The themes he has treated and still continues to treat have ensured the survival of his *revolution* and that of his class of dramatists, also represented by the trio of Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, and Tess Onwueme whose analysis we attempt in the following section.

It is obvious that Femi Osofisan *did not* take part in the Oxford University Press, OUP-sponsored playwriting competition of 1969 in which Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame* won the first prize, while Kole Omotoso's "Pitched against the Gods" placed third. Dunton informs us of Omotoso's participation in the above competition, and it is pertinent to note here the similarity of titles, and probably even theme, in the first play by Osofisan, titled, "Oduduwa Don't Go," a play about the Yoruba gods and their attitude to socio-political reality, with the above plays. Perhaps Oxford University Press had prescribed a thematic perspective for the drama competition. The coincidence of their dates of debut, 1968 and 1969, makes Osofisan and Omotoso respectively members of the second generation of Nigerian dramatists.

Osofisan as the exemplary icon of that generation has been described by Goodman in the following:

Osofisan and his ilk of the generation after Wole Soyinka obviously agitated the Nigerian Theatre by their social zeal. Their generation differs from Wole Soyinka's because of their technique and ideological commitment. They are apostles of the New Left. Thus, being branded leftists or Marxists never bothered them, especially with some of them nurturing bushy beard, as signs of rebellion against the status quo, and going further to wear their belt's buckle the other way round, and to the side of the pelvis. They turned the stage into a platform and a pulpit like Arnold Wesker (of the British Theatre) and are held together by the common bond of social protest, which gives them an ample chance to expand their thematic preoccupation as wide as possible. (216)

The oil-boom era of the 1970s, and the attendant squander mania on the part of the military rulers, provided the canvas on which the playwrights painted their responses to the social and political realities of the time. Since Osofisan's first play mentioned above, he has been radical thematically, technically, and stylistically in his taming of the stage with his experiments. Whereas Sowande has been more rhetorical than politically effective in his approach, Osofisan, conscious of the great social, political, and moral changes going on around him, has tried to see the times not just from a local or Nigerian, but also from a universal point of view. The social class differences, consciousness, and ideology—all these were critically but creatively explored by Osofisan.

Barakat has observed that, "there is no theme that could not be presented in an artistic and creative form (135)." Osofisan in conformity to the above has used the folktale motif to weave dramatic statements on the political realities of our time, in his role as a visionary writer who stimulates active questioning, doubting and insurrection, in order to help diagnose and increase awareness on the Nigerian situation, protesting, and moving others to protest¹. Awodiya² has noted the major objective of Osofisan's drama as the ceaseless fight against corruption, oppression, and injustice, and fight for social equality in a transformed classless and egalitarian society. In his plays, Osofisan refuses to celebrate individual tragic heroes because, in his view, heroism based on the individual plane leads to catastrophe.

Through his thematic trend and preoccupation, which extend to his large body of plays, including published titles like, *A Restless Run of Locusts*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*, *Once upon Four Robbers*, *Morountodun*, *No More the Wasted Bread*, *Red is the Freedom Road*, *Midnight Hotel*, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, *Oriki of a Grasshopper*, *Altine's Wrath*, *Another Raft*, *Birthdays Are Not For Dying*, *Fires Burn and Die Hard*, *The Inspector and the Hero*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest*, *The Album of the Midnight Blackout*, *Twingle-Twangle*, *a Twynning Tayle*, *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*, *Tegonni*, *Reel Rwanda*, *Africa Ni*, *Nkrumah Ni!*, *One Legend*, *Many Seasons*, he has constantly sensitized the society to the potential of theater as political activity.

The Chattering and the Song is the play that established Osofisan's ideological commitment to the plight of the downtrodden. Not content merely to expose the ills of society, he has dared to provide us with glimpses of his vision of a new society. *Chattering* has been described by one militant and critic as, "the most revolutionary play ever written and produced in Nigeria, and its fervent plea is for a revolution," as Jeyifo records in his book, *The Truthful Lie*. Jeyifo further notes that the play attempts to show the world

how revolutionaries are made; of what stuff are they made; in what consists the rightness and authority of their cause? (52).

On another level, a number of Osofisan's plays have come true in our present reality as vintage drama on the alienating of class society. In April 1998—five years after the annulment of the popular June 12, 1993 presidential election mandate given by Nigerians to the late M. K. O. Abiola (who was to die mysteriously only three months later, on July 7, 1998)—the Agbekoya (or Farmers reject suffering), the real life precursor and model of Osofisan's Farmers' Movement in *Chattering*, betrayed the people's expectations. These defenders of the people's rights unfortunately pitched their tent with the state, and allowed the latter's

agents to unleash terror on the masses and apostles of change, in the course of a despicable pro-government rally to canvass for the transmutation into a civilian president of the then *de facto* head of state, General Sani Abacha, who died on June 8, 1998, about a month before Abiola.

Once upon Four Robbers, another play by Osofisan, rings so loudly of the reality surrounding our lives which keeps us bound. The metaphor of armed robbery as an equivalent to the function of the army is used against the backdrop of society's hypocrisy against the robbers, which the playwright criticizes. The robbers are seen challenging society by the self-assessment of their daring audacity, forcing the latter to painfully come to terms with the real plunderers of their life and property—the soldiers deployed to “cage” the former—in an open ending. Osofisan employs the same motif in *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen*.

It is equally pertinent to note that the dramatist could have alluded to the present-day episodes of kidnapping which have become daily rituals in the oil-rich, but highly devastated Niger-Delta region in *Aringindin*, where Aringindin's boys kidnap the Councilor's daughter, only to be warged for her hand in marriage with the former—obviously because the community is not endowed with the “black gold” (crude oil) which could have become the bone of contention and led to further bloodshed as the State abdicated its responsibility to the militants, or *night watchmen*.

As the icon of that phenomenal generation of young radicals, propelled by Marxist ideology, in response to the anxiety of liberalism, Osofisan takes to the self-questioning of not only themes but also myths that are very familiar to the audience, which he “tames,” as Richards has noted. Rather than oppose them, “he subjects tradition to scrutiny and reinterpretation, using its own modes of thought and structure” (288). The playwright himself has admitted in an interview with Ossie Enekwe that he re-reads and uses myth, “only from a subversive perspective. I borrow ancient forms specifically to unmask them” (79).

The myth of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning and retributive justice which he borrows for *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* is used with a deep understanding of the society in which he lives as a writer with a vision and a task. Jacobson once noted in his response to Soyinka that

The duty of the writer will depend (in a Modern African State) upon the particular society he lives in. And even then, each writer is likely to see his duty in a different way. (28)

Thus, Osofisan has done with his themes what Marxist radicalism has done to contemporary history and reality. The main thrusts of his thematic preoccupation are *compassion*, *knowledge*, and *justice*, as the triangular impulses which have shaped, and have been sharpened by, his dialogic climaxes in most, if not all,

of his plays in the form of debate, which sometimes begins right in the theater, immediately after the

performance. The impulses have been aided by his aesthetics, a thriving revolutionary and radical "aesthetics of possibility" to enable progressive creativity, with theatrical forms, which Osofisan himself admits,

is a rejection of the old cultic conception of dramaturgy, with its quasi-esoteric mechanics and thematic forms; of hermetic tropes and symbols fashionable with neo-Romanticists and formalists; of the centrality of the agonistic hero with its implications of martyrdom and of enervating metaphysical anguish; and of Aristotelian catharsis, in favour of open-ended resolution. And finally, the audience is energized, provoked out of its customary passive response into active participation and challenge. ("The Terror of Relevance", 93)

The challenge thrown at the Osofisan generation by the plays of the first generation Nigerian playwrights, which we have noted earlier, became manifest in a revolt against their forms and themes, to revolutionize the status quo of Soyinka's original "ritual aesthetics," in place of potential tragedy and annihilation. This development, Osofisan asserts, marked his departure from mimesis, and the beginning of his maturation as a dramatist.

Jeyifo has described Osofisan as, "a consummate aesthetist and mythopoeist, given to the creation of extended effects and motifs," (53) because of the extraordinary nature of his forms, techniques, and style, which have aided his experiments to assume their own originality over the years. His characterization is more often than not done metaphorically, creating figures in drama eclectically for the purpose of educating, entertaining, informing, and enlightening his audiences. Osofisan apparently has proved the truism of Jeyifo's dictum that form is always the dialectical handmaiden of content in his plays. His constant reminder that only a collective revolution can bring about change in the people's fortune is anchored on his observation that an "enduring revolutionary work is collective work, of people acting together. It does not mean that the individual is useless. The individual is usually a good catalyst," since he believes that salvation lies in the people themselves (see Awodiya, *The Drama of Femi Osofisan*).

Osofisan's drama also makes an ample case for Nigerian youths to take their destiny in their hands in search of harmony as we encounter in both *Yungba-Yungba* and *Aringindin*, in a multi-ethnic entity like ours, as opposed to the type of youthful response Nigerians witnessed between 1997 and 1998 in the fraudulent and obnoxious Youth Earnestly Ask For Abacha, YEAA, an association which sprang up under dubious circumstances to perpetuate late General Abacha in office and purportedly held a "2-million man march" in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, on March 2, 1998 as was widely reported by many national dailies.

One other play by Osofisan that has become a common denominator of our collective consciousness in the quest for a just, transparent, and corruption-free polity is *Midnight Hotel*, first published in 1985. Inspired by the greed, recklessness, and betrayal of the politicians of the Second Republic in the aftermath of thirteen years of military interregnum, the play is situated in the world of the Midnight Hotel, a seedy haven for all manner of public officers elevated by the newfound freedom offered by democracy. Osofisan employs humor, according Awodiya, “to paint a scathing picture” (205), and to tell the serious, interesting but unpalatable story of hunger and squalor, diseases and agony, death, and violence which became the order of the Shagari days in the midst of our endowment. Two decades later, the story still rings true in the characters of the new pseudo-democrats who still dole out squalor and disease and hunger alongside seeds of hope to the teeming population, even in the face of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the anti-graft institution set up in 2003 and backed by law in 2004. The optimism expressed by the playwright is founded on the soil of sacrifice, and a life of unending struggle. But before the harvest, the likes of Pastor Suuru, Honourable Awero, Headmaster Alatise, Ashibong and the other guests in *Midnight Hotel* with their scummy escapades would taint the planting season.

Ashibong, housing-agent-cum-architect, whose company has leased out the hotel building, comes on a fact-finding mission upon the complaint that one of the rooms, Number 7, is being haunted by ghosts. Jimoh, the receptionist, who checks him into Room 7, enthuses:

JIMOH: (Seeing him tremble). But...you're sure you won't like to change your mind?

ASIBONG: (Putting up a bold face). Oh not at all, chief! I see too there are many beds here. (Forcing a joke, to cover his nervousness). It's a family of ghosts who come visiting then? (A sudden burst of singing and laughter from upstairs cuts in, startling him). Hey, listen, what's that noise? Ghosts don't laugh, do they?

JIMOH: (Laughing). It's the lodgers upstairs, sir. Soldiers, here for a week.

ASHIBONG: I see. Ah, bissimilahi!...Allah, I am in the hands of your prophet tonight! (20)

Unknown to him, his wife, Awero, “the only female member of the Capital Projects Committee in the House of Assembly,” is on her way to the same hotel for a “safe” rendezvous with a frightened, but contract-seeking Pastor Suuru, her husband's friend. According to her,

AWERO:...I'm telling you it's regular practice in parliament. All the male MPs are doing it, even to their own nieces and cousins! Everyone in our Contracts and Awards Committee is taking some member of the opposite sex somewhere or the other before jobs are given out. They call it "sampling the goods". So why should I be different? Listen, we even have a song about it. (23)

She calls for the *Song in Praise of Sampling the Goods* from the Songmaster, one of the many that make this play and some others by the same author operating as they are checked into Room 6, opposite Ashibong's. The point must be made that Osofisan uses songs in the Brechtian style of alienating the audience from the action on stage, advancing the narration and as a thematic device of enlightenment in a total theater experience. Awero assures the Pastor of getting the contract,

AWERO:Once you co-operate, and I sample – (She goes to him, but he recoils instinctively). Once you stop making a fool of yourself!...your company can bag ten...fifteen...even twenty! ...Twenty contracts in a week! (35)

The naïve Pastor is reluctant and clumsy to take advantage of her offer, and in a dramatic twist, as he begins to feel a burning sensation in his head, claims his rivals have pursued him to the hotel because they also want the contract.

SUURU: My head!...I don't know. Suddenly this burning sensation! Don't leave me Awero! There is in my head...in my head...a fire! A fire!

AWERO:(Frightened). A fire?

SUURU: It must be my rivals. They want the contracts too. They've pursued me to this place! Ah Awero, you can see I did my best to the end. I'm going to die. (35)

He sings *an ode to his Swiss accounts*, which he would never see again if he dies, Awero can only think of her own reputation:

AWERO:You can't, Kunle! You can't! Think of the scandal in Parliament! You can't die now; you've got to wait till you get home!

SUURU: How? You know we can't go now. It's not safe, with all these robbers about. We've got to wait till morning. Ah, Lord, forgive us, as we forgive you your trespasses! (Crosses himself). Jah! (Takes off his agbada). I feel hot all over ...and I've not even written my will! (37)

The dramatic conflict comes when Alatise arrives with his three daughters, and they are checked into Room 7 by Bicycle, Jimoh's assistant, who has no idea that someone is already staying there. Tension is heightened as Alatise runs into Awero in the lobby and recognizes her as Mrs. Asibong. As a cover-up, she tells him about a quarrel with her husband, hence, her presence in the hotel. He innocently detains her with talk about the new government and how he has lost his school, land, and even his deposit, subsequently calling for the "Song of the Lost Deposit". After the song, Alatise asks his daughters to keep her company as they all troop into her room. His attempts to show concern for the girls and calm Awero's obviously frayed nerves fail. As he moves to go, he appears to give up, interjecting:

ALATISE: All right then. Girls! (They start to go. He turns again at the door. Same game). I'm surprised, though, that you didn't first seek out some of your close family friends to mediate in the matter. That would have been better than coming here, surely? I mean, that Pastor Suuru, for instance, whom you once introduced to me in your house. He seemed very intimate with your husband, and looked quite a responsible man too...Pastor Suuru is a close friend of your husband, isn't he?

AWERO: Yes, very close. But if you please—

ALATISE: Then I'm sure he could have helped!

AWERO: I know....Only, he has travelled!...Overseas!

ALATISE: Are you sure? This afternoon, as we arrived, I thought... may be I'm mistaken. But I could have sworn it was him we saw from the bus standing by his car on Ikorodu Road...

AWERO: It's possible. He ...he only left by the evening flight.

ALATISE: I see ...What a pity then—

(At that moment, the door opens, and the Pastor comes in. Everybody jumps in surprise). (53-54)

The "coincidence" of his appearance in his singlet, and all the efforts at covering up by both Awero and the Pastor are not lost on the headmaster, who decides to leave them for their own room, to which Ashibong returns later, making straight for the toilet, oblivious of the presence of four strange people. The girls wake up and begin the "Song of the Fairy Mother," dancing round the candle. As Ashibong comes out and sees them, he runs out towards Awero's door, shouting:

ASHIBONG: It's ghosts! I beg you! The ghosts are coming! Please open up! Open up before they get me! (57)

He succeeds in forcing his way into the room where Awero quickly covers his head with a wastepaper basket and pushes him out. The play moves quickly to its climax from this point as the three girls, unable to wake up their father, flee up the stairs, where the soldiers give them VIP treatment and vice-versa. In the meantime, the older characters meet in the lobby to a hilarious moment of truth, from reconciliation to realization of the folly just committed by the couple and the girls:

BOSE: Papa!...The soldier, he was so kind! Papa, how easy it is to earn money in the city! We should have come long ago!

ALATISE: Pastor, you see? I've ruined them! Ruined my own daughters! (80)

Bicycle comes tumbling down the stairs again as he did at the opening, bearing the tale of Alatisé's suicide by hanging while trying to fetch the other two girls, only for him to appear, with his belt dangling from his neck, to his weeping Bose:

ALATISE: I'm here, my daughter...You see—Eti ro-o! The spirit was willing, but not the neck!...It seems to me we are in for a long and turbulent night. But before we retire to our rooms, why not let us sing a song together? (84)³

whereupon they sing the "Song of a Faraway Land."

The playwright uses historical consciousness as theme, to rouse the people from, rather than join, the general despair and save them from the asphyxiating amnesia characterized by the terror unleashed by the military since January 15, 1966. Osofisan thus hopes the people would be salvaged soon, even as he proposes a rite of cleansing, if the people's revolution is to succeed. This is a vision the post-Osofisan generation, albeit, unconsciously at first, set out to fulfill.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

From the foregoing, we have traced the evolution and maturation of the second generation of Nigerian dramatists, who, taking up Soyinka's challenge to shake off their ostrich posture, have utilized the "forgotten gems which dazzled and distracted the present" to reshape the same present, turning inwards, truly into the present, and into the obvious symptoms of "the riddling...and predictable present"⁴. Their attempt has been able to bring forth enlightenment, enhance consciousness, provoke debate, and to ensure salvation through galvanized action. Osofisan, as the intellectual-activist, does not believe in any utopia (in contrast

to Rotimi's observation of the thematic thrust of utopian model),⁵ as most of his plays have shown, but in a practical, realistic grasp of events. Okonkwo's assertion that, "the intellectual subjects his appraisal of events, situations and natural phenomena to rigorous scrutiny in order to arrive at some solutions to social and physical problems in his environment and persuades others to accept his proposed solutions", (15) captures Osofisan's dramatic mission. That Osofisan has dared to engage his audiences to reflect on social divisions and on the miserable conditions under which a majority of them live is not in doubt.

Femi Osofisan was indeed not the first voice of a whole new generation of the post-oil boom writers who came to notice over the '70s and are now some of our leading established authors, whose names, works and thematic focus have shaped the trend of discourse in Nigerian literature. But he has carved a reputation for being the *most vocal, visible, and prolific ambassador*. An appraisal of the process of his evolution and maturation in the "playhouse" of Nigerian dramatic literature has been the subject of this chapter, with a view to celebrate one of Africa's leading contemporary literary figures. His Muse—*originality, creativity, imagination and zest*—make him stand out among his peers as a consummate creative writer and a first-rate scholar. And he has indeed inspired many worthy successors, through his bubbling creativity.

NOTES

1. Femi Osofisan, "Enter the Carthaginian Critic...?" *Okike*, No.21, July (1982) 40.
2. Muyiwa Awodiya, in Ogunbiyi Yemi (ed.), *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature. 1700 to the Present*. Lagos: Guardian Books, 1988.
3. Femi Osofisan, *Midnight Hotel*. Lagos: Concept Publications, 2003. All the quotations above are taken from this play.
4. Wole Soyinka "The Writer in a Modern African State," in Dan Jacobson (ed.) *The Writer in a Modern African State*. Stockholm, New York: Africana, 1967.
5. Ola Rotimi, asserted in his inaugural lecture, *African Dramatic Literature. To Be or to Become?* Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 1991.

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