

The Revolutionary Drama and Theatre of Femi Osofisan

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By

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To every individual of any cultural background, dead or alive, who may or may not have suffered persecution but has dedicated their life or used their talents or resources to champion the cause of the underprivileged.

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Photo 1. A scene from *Morountodun* as directed by Andrew Buckland for Rhodes University. April 2010. © Copyright by Sophie Marcus and Rhodes University Drama Department. Reproduced with permission from the copyright holders.



Photo 2. Chima Osakwe (L) interviewing Femi Osofisan. Ibadan, 27 July 2011.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Femi Osofisan (1946-) is one of Nigeria's most important dramatists and the indisputable leader of Nigeria's second generation of playwrights. Driven by Marxist ideology, this generation, which also includes Bode Sowande and Kole Omotoso among others, rose to prominence in the 1970s after the nation's civil war. Since then, it has continued to produce revolutionary dramatic works calling for the immediate transformation of Nigeria's repressive socio-political order. As the most prominent member of Nigeria's second-generation playwrights, Osofisan has produced works that are widely considered paradigmatic articulations of revolutionary theatre. And this book is about how Osofisan produces the imaginary revolution, using the medium of drama and/or theatre.¹

All the selected Osofisan titles—*Morountodun*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* and *No More the Wasted Breed*—analyzed in subsequent chapters validate my notion of revolutionary drama. For greater clarity, I use the term “revolutionary drama” to mean drama that seeks through the conscious manipulation of content and technique to empower the underprivileged, whether as an individual or a group, to gain socio-political and economic rights and privileges or overthrow an oppressive political system or repressive institutions of civil society. Such institutions include the patriarchal family system, the caste system, exploitative religious practices, racism, unequal gender relations, sexual oppression, feudal politics and political patronage, and their overthrow is meant to facilitate the achievement of a better quality of life and to ensure a relationship of mutual respect and recognition of the human rights of all peoples. Not only does each selected Osofisan title validate my notion of revolutionary drama, but the selected plays arguably capture the spirit and mood of Osofisan's revolutionary theatre. Such a spirit and mood is perhaps best captured in the words of Osofisan:

I try to speak on behalf of those whom I consider marginalised, those who are oppressed through no fault of theirs, and who are the victims of our parasitic ruling class...My target is the mind and the conscience of my

audience; and the aim is to disturb, and to provoke questioning. Most theatres try, on the contrary, to put the audience at ease, to lure them into a state of self-satisfaction and of self-assurance. But for me, however, what I like to do is awaken people out of their usual complaisance, rouse them out of their usual feeling of helplessness, and provoke them into anxiety, into thinking, and ultimately into realising and accepting not just the possibility of action, but also the necessity for it. I want to challenge my audience to take another, possibly violent, view of their society, instead of merely helping them to reinforce those views. I want to push them to begin to ask if there are other possibilities than what we have now, and how to make those options real, now, today, and not in some imagined future paradise.²

The ambition of Osofisan's theatre to uproot the tree that yields the bitter fruit of social inequality, injustice, tyranny, intimidation, oppression, ignorance, illiteracy, poverty and degradation is evident in the above quote. A deeper understanding of how Osofisan pursues his revolutionary objectives will be hopefully achieved in the critical examination of selected titles in subsequent chapters. My analysis touches on both the political and aesthetic dimensions of the plays. I have referred mainly to the playtexts, but occasionally cite some stage productions, published reviews of some productions and audience responses to specific productions of Osofisan's plays in Nigeria and elsewhere. Information gleaned from a personal interview with the playwright as well as studies of Osofisan's theatre by some other scholars and critics has been cited as well. Given that Osofisan's revolutionary plays are driven by Marxist ideology, I have inevitably engaged Marxism while simultaneously drawing theoretical inspiration from key figures like Fanon, Spivak, Ngũgĩ and Mbembe among others. At certain moments, my analysis sets the chosen Osofisan titles against some other literary texts, theatrical experiences and artistic productions from Africa and the rest of the world, all in a bid to emphasize what is unique about Osofisan's revolutionary theatre. It is hoped that this book will be a useful addition to previous studies on Osofisan in addition to making a valid contribution in the area of literature and politics and the role of art in social change.

CHAPTER TWO

CLASS STRUGGLE, IDEOLOGY, POLITICS AND VIOLENT REVOLUTION IN *MOROUNTODUN* AND *THE CHATTERING AND THE SONG*

The two plays examined in this chapter are linked by their use of historical events and violent revolutionary technique. The oppressed characters in both plays are representative of the impoverished Nigerian masses and do take to arms in order to wrest their freedom from the oppressors. And the oppressors are representative of the indigenous ruling class in postcolonial Nigeria. Embarking on violent confrontation appears to be an inevitable option for the underprivileged in dealing with a ruling class that has become increasingly deaf and insensitive to the plight of the robbed and marginalized. Resorting to violence by the oppressed in order to assert their humanity validates Frantz Fanon's observation that

The existence of an armed struggle shows that the people are [sic] decided to trust to violent methods only. He of whom *they* have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free.¹

Although Fanon is talking about the settler colony in the context of the European colonization of Africa and other parts of the world, the "settler" is arguably representative of the oppressor in any given situation of unequal power relations. And Fanon's postulations clearly suggest that it is the violence of the oppressor that triggers violence by the oppressed. He further argues that "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" and that

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder...Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies...In decolonization,

there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation.²

Again, Fanon's observations are about decolonization in Africa and other parts of the world, but they are relevant to postcolonial Nigeria. What makes them relevant is the fact that the postcolony came into being by the retention rather than the dissolution of the political, juridical, and ideological apparatuses of the colonial state. In other words, far from calling "the colonial situation" in Nigeria into question, the anti-colonial forces adopted that situation as the cornerstone of its architectural blueprint for a postcolonial Nigeria. This is not to suggest that the anti-colonial forces in Nigeria were unified in their opposition to colonial rule, or that they had a unanimously accepted blueprint for a postcolonial state. Rather, it is to say that in Nigeria as in other colonial states in Africa, the confrontation between anticolonial nationalists who desired "nationhood" and their "nationalitarian" adversaries who sought social "reconstruction" eventually resolved itself in favour of the former whose "vision" of the postcolony was, in its essence, *colonialist*: "the nationalists' vision was framed not only by the felt necessity of operating within the territorial boundaries constructed by colonialism, but also by their desire to retain and, as it were, 'inherit' the colonial state apparatus."³ As Dale Byam rightly contends, "[t]he legacy in many [African] countries of [the] post-colonial period, under the leadership of various petty bourgeois leaders, has been to revert to the very oppressive techniques that fostered colonialism."⁴ In a similar vein, Daniel Gover, John Conteh-Morgan and Jane Bryce have rightly noted that "the hopes and expectations born in the 1960s with political independence have developed into bitter fruit. African writers have often served as the leading social critics of their own societies."⁵ By appropriating the oppressive system of the colonial state and installing themselves as the rightful heirs of the retreating colonists, the nationalists successfully reconstituted Nigeria as a postcolony, and thus has emerged a system of political governance and authority that is tantamount to internal colonialism.

Thus, too, the political disillusionment of many writers in postcolonial Africa. Osofisan is among the African writers who have subjected their society to vitriolic attack as an expression of the disillusionment accompanying independence from colonial rule. He is mindful of the fact that what Nigeria obtained from Britain in 1960 is "no more than a flag independence" and that "the local leaders left behind were stooges carefully selected from among the members of the elite sympathetic to British interests."⁶ It is the blatant dehumanization of the masses, and the corruption, wanton cruelty and callous mismanagement of the economy by

this postcolonial elite that have precipitated Osofisan's revolutionary theatre. In *Morountodun* and *The Chattering and the Song* this revolutionary practice takes the form of a dramatic re-enactment of historical materials and a renegotiation of character and situation that advance the cause of the oppressed. Thus, Osofisan's approach to the sources of both plays amounts to writing or rather re-writing history from below.

Morountodun

The play had its premiere performance at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 1979. The plot runs together the Agbekoya farmers' uprising of 1969 in Yoruba-dominated Western Nigeria and the mythological character of Queen Moremi of Ife. In 1969, the illiterate farmers staged an unsuccessful rebellion against the government of the then-Western region for the heavy taxation, oppression and other kinds of injustice that threatened their survival. Regarding the mythological Moremi, we are told that she forsook royal glamour to infiltrate the camp of the neighbouring Igbo warriors whose invasion was threatening the peace and security of her ancient Ife people. She obtained the secret of the enemy as a result of which her people finally defeated them. This historical background enables us to better assess the extent of Osofisan's faithfulness to his historical and mythological sources.

Osofisan's play begins with the actors preparing for their roles. While they are getting ready, the Director addresses the audience members seated in the auditorium. He provides the historical background of the play but hardly has he finished before he is interrupted and ultimately seized and beaten by a richly-dressed, placard-carrying mob of young ladies who invade the auditorium to disrupt the play. The young women are led by the "pretty, sensual, and obviously self-conscious" (7) Titubi, the spoilt daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, and it is obvious from the inscriptions on the various placards that they are strongly opposed to the farmers' revolt, totally antagonistic to the well-being of the underprivileged, and overly proud of the riches of the ruling class. The arrogance of the disruptive ruling class, particularly as represented by Titubi, is captured in her speech to the audience:

Look at me. Go on, feast your eyes. Am I not good to look at? Ehn? So what is wrong with being rich? So there is a peasant rebellion. And then? What have we got to do with it? Is it a sin to be rich? Night after night! Day after day! Lies! Insults! In the newspapers! On the radio. On the television...And then here they come with a play. But it's got to stop! This

is our country too, and we shall not run away! I, Titubi, daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, I am stopping this play tonight! And if you're wise, you will go and return your tickets now and collect your money back (7-8).

Not even the threat of the imminent arrival of law enforcement officers can rein in Titubi's supercilious disposition. The police eventually arrive but rather than apprehend Titubi and her band of troublemakers they instead arrest the director of the play, apologizing to Titubi for the supposed misbehaviour of the director whom they dismiss as a goon. But after repeated explanations by the director, the police are convinced that Titubi is the real trouble-maker and the director the offended party. After being treated to some rude remarks from Titubi for daring to arrest her, the police chastise Titubi for disrupting the play rather than assisting the law to quell the farmers' revolt which is threatening the privileges of her powerful class. Ashamed and wounded by the verbal castigations, Titubi volunteers to assist the state in crushing the peasant rebellion. Inspired by the mythological Moremi, she is determined to infiltrate the camp of the farmers, obtain intelligence, capture their leader Marshal, bring him to the police and, thereby, quell the peasants' revolt. Convinced of the genuineness of Titubi's determination and her willingness to assist the state, the police work out the following strategy with her: she will be detained in a prison supposedly as a genuine inmate so that when the peasants storm the prison to release their captured comrades the police will let them in to enable them to release all detainees including Titubi. She will then follow the farmers to their camp on the grounds that she has nowhere else to go. And upon arrival at the farmers' camp, she will have to convince them of the need to live with them because she has been renounced by her people for supposedly killing her children. Things work as planned and Titubi is allowed to live among the farmers and quickly wins their trust. But finally, unlike Moremi, Titubi actually switches her allegiance to the oppressed. She refuses to serve the interest of the state anymore. She simply commits class suicide and her volte-face is occasioned by her first-hand experience of the cruel, squalid and subhuman conditions under which the peasants live despite their hard work. Titubi is disturbed by the fact that it is the members of her own privileged class who appropriate the crops of the farmers. Rejecting the excesses of the ruling class, she is now determined to ensure that the peasants win their demands from the government. When she finally brings the elusive Marshal to the police station, it is not for him to surrender to the state but to sign a truce that accedes to the demands of the farmers. In an atmosphere of celebration in a subsequent scene, Titubi marries Marshal who names her "Morountodun" ("I Have Found a Sweet Thing")

for nursing the famers injured in battle and in recognition of her role in brokering the truce. The wedding party is hardly over before Marshal, in an obviously misguided, anti-climactic and inexplicable fashion, decides to break the truce by resuming the battle. He does not return from this battle and his decision to proceed when it is totally unnecessary is an attempt by Osofisan to draw attention to the other side of the historical coin: that the Agbekoya farmers' uprising concluded with the capitulation of the farmers. His decision to include this last scene is informed by his desire to "provoke debate and reflection" and "to present the truth and disturb the actors and the audience."⁷

In *Morountodun*, as in the rest of the plays to be subsequently analyzed, the ideology dramatized is Marxism. The conflict is couched in class terms and the play is driven by some fundamental tenets of Marxist theory: the history of any society at whatever period is the history of class struggle; the consciousness of men does not determine their being, rather their being determines their consciousness; revolution is necessary for the termination of class society and that human condition is changeable rather than unchangeable.⁸ For Marx, the two main polarized classes are the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The bourgeoisie are the capitalist owners of the means of production and the employers of wage-labour; they are the primary controllers and beneficiaries of the economic system of production and the distribution of wealth. The proletariat, on the other hand, does not possess the means of production and has been reduced to the status of wage-labourers in order to eke a living. Both major classes are diametrically opposed in an industrialist capitalist system. It is instructive to note that the class war in *Morountodun* and virtually the rest of the titles to be subsequently analyzed is not between the industrialist capitalist employers of labour and their employees but between a corrupt and violent political class and underprivileged citizens. Neither *Morountodun* nor the rest of the plays engages the issue of capital, economics and means of production in the context of the exploiting bourgeois employers of labour versus the exploited wage-earning workers. Therefore the nature of oppression we find in these plays is not industrialist capitalist. Osofisan himself acknowledges that postcolonial Nigeria which generated the plays is not industrialist capitalist:

It is true that capitalism promotes development in the sense that it encourages manufacturing, discovering and inventing new things and ideas and so on. But that is not the kind of society we have now, we don't even have a glimmer of that. People are not interested in manufacturing; they just want to be middlemen; ripping off to make profits which those who are manufacturers are not making. Can we survive on that?⁹

Since Nigeria is not an industrialized nation, as evident in the above remarks, the question arises as to what kind of economy it is? And who precisely are those seeking to reap the kind of benefits that manufacturers do not enjoy? Nigeria is a mono-product economy that depends solely on oil resource. And since oil has become the main source of foreign exchange, neither agriculture nor industrialization has received adequate attention. Hear Claude Ake:

The structure of industrialisation in Nigeria shows that the type of industrialisation occurring is not very conducive to the diversification of the resource base of the economy, or even to the reduction of its disarticulation. In the first place, the bulk of the value added comes from light industries with a very low-level technology.¹⁰

This clear absence of meaningful achievement particularly in technologically-driven, industrialized economy continues to ensure an increasing dependence on the oil resources. The oil industry is being managed by successive military and civilian governments that are so corrupt and self-centred that they are unable to create a meaningful employment for the masses or provide basic social amenities like health and quality education among others. Consequently, the ruling class swims in affluence while the masses wallow in abject poverty. So this scenario appears more like a state capitalism than industrial capitalism. It is a scenario that illustrates Ake's argument about post-independence Africa's indigenous ruling class:

[They] also understood that political power offered opportunities for economic power, and that the opportunities inherent in their political power were the best and perhaps only way they had of creating an economic base for their political power. And they did not hesitate to use these opportunities. Essentially what they did was to extend the economic role of the state as widely and rapidly as possible.¹¹

In Nigeria the ruling elite has appropriated the state for its own economic prosperity. Both *Morountodun* and virtually the rest of the selected titles authenticate Ake's argument. But *Morountodun*, as we shall soon see, particularly validates Henry Bienen's postulation that "the direction" of Nigeria's "economy, even without the oil impact, has accentuated rural-urban differences in per capita income as a result of the...policies of the Nigerian government. Government would have to revise fundamentally its policies to alter the trend of increasing rural-urban inequality."¹²

And it is instructive to note that we cannot consider post-independence Nigeria neo-colonial going by the nature of the oppression in *Morountodun*

and the rest of the selected titles. These plays do not dramatize the influence of foreign powers or their instruments of indirect control such as multinational corporations or international monetary bodies and portray the postcolonial indigenous leaders as agents of these powers in the oppression of African people as we find in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood* or his play *I Will Marry When I Want* for instance. Osofisan's selected titles hold the indigenous Nigerian leaders *solely* responsible for the oppression of the people and believe that the subjugation of tyranny or elimination of despots will surely lead to the socio-political emancipation of the people. However, much as the oppression in *Morountodun* and other selected Osofisan titles is neither neo-colonial nor industrialist capitalist, the Marxist bourgeois-proletariat dichotomy is representative of other instances of unequal power relations that we find in these plays. As Marx has stated, the bourgeois-proletariat dichotomy represents "in a word, oppressor and oppressed."¹³ And for Marx, "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."¹⁴ Therefore intellectual works including literary and artistic works for instance, in the Marxist view, are mere ideological instruments of the ruling class. This argument becomes particularly persuasive when we recall, for instance, some literary or dramatic works like Sophocles' *King Oedipus* which portrays man as incapable of influencing his destiny. This play projects a hierarchical social order in which the gods come first, followed by the members of the ruling class and then the masses. The play illustrates the essence of ancient Greek theatre which served the ruling class; it was a theatre that validated the existing power structures and brooked no alternative social vision in a society that practised slavery and treated women as second-class citizens. But the same Marxist theory can equally be adapted for subversive purposes. A literary work could therefore appropriate the Marxist theory in order to challenge the hegemony of the same ruling class which it might as well have chosen to uphold. As Osofisan explains, "I am interested in my society, how to change it, by using certain modules that are... Marxist-Leninist."¹⁵ Like the rest of the selected titles, a play like *Morountodun* is a Marxist-inspired play arising from the writer's opposition to an oppressive socio-political structure which has made the ideology of the ruling class the dominant ideology. Terry Eagleton has noted that

Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the *struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression*.¹⁶

We get some sense of the emphasized lines in Eagleton's argument in view of the polarized confrontation in *Morountodun* between the farmers and the state. The characters we meet in *Morountodun* are of two social classes: the rich/privileged who are represented by the likes of the police Superintendent, Alhaja Kabirat, lawyer Isaac and Alhaji Buraimoh, and the poor/underprivileged represented by the exploited farmers such as Baba, Marshal, Bogunde, Wura, Mosun and Kokondi. A mere look at the members of both classes can detect their specific socio-economic standing. As we saw earlier, Titubi's speech makes it clear that she is opulently garbed and must be a luscious sight to behold; we are left with no doubt that she belongs to the rich and powerful ruling class. In *Class Struggle in Africa*, Kwame Nkrumah observes that "[c]ertain social habits, dress, institutions and organizations are associated with different classes. It is possible to place a person in a particular class simply by observing his general appearance, his dress and the way he behaves."¹⁷ Besides the example of Titubi we further get some sense of Nkrumah's argument from the manner in which the police treated or rather mistreated the director of the aborted play in *Morountodun*. Although the stage directions give no clue as to his appearance, it is highly likely that he is humbly dressed, a bit shabby and malnourished as a result of which the police mistook him rather than Titubi for the thug who came to disrupt the play. The police roughen him up more as a result of his looks than any concrete evidence of wrongdoing. Thus right from the beginning of the play, we are treated to an atmosphere of unequal power relations between the rich and the poor.

The two classes in the play are at loggerheads, the atmosphere is redolent of tension and the society threatens to fall apart. Here is Titubi's initial reaction to the crisis: "The peasant revolt, mama! You talk about it every day with your friends. I see all of you tremble. The peasants are upon us. They will eat everything up, all your wealth, the entire meaning of your life, unless someone acts" (20). Her grave concern for and determination to ensure the continued supremacy of her class, is probably better appreciated in view of Marx and Engels' argument that the battle between the oppressors and the oppressed is "a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."¹⁸ Indeed, Marx considers revolution a necessary antidote to the problems of class society; only the victory of the proletariat in a decisive and epic clash with the bourgeoisie will permanently eliminate class society. Drawing inspiration from Marx, Osofisan believes that, in the battle between the classes, the awakened consciousness of the marginalized can vanquish oppression and achieve a better quality of life for the oppressed. As Titubi says, "there's no way you

can win a war against a people whose cause is just” (70). And earlier on, Moremi had declared that “[f]ace to face we stand together, in the onrushing waters of danger. In my own hands I hold the paddle of my destiny” (38). Any attempt to rely on magical or supernatural powers is strongly discouraged. Moremi again: “That is the life our gods have provided for us after all our rituals and sacrifices. No, no!...it is time for us to rise, to stand and square up our shoulders by our own courage, and stop leaning on the gods” (33). Therefore Osofisan posits unlimited human potential for those who are courageous and adventurous enough to question the circumstances of their existence. The peasants in *Morountodun* “disrupt the oppressor/victim dichotomy to demonstrate that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, [and] to show that victims are also agents who can change their lives...in radical ways,” to borrow the words of Obioma Nnaemeka from a different context.¹⁹

The violent clash between the farmers and the state in Osofisan’s play is somehow reminiscent of that between the Brazilian government and the underlings inhabiting the nation’s backlands of Canudos in Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel *The War of the End of the World*. The iron determination with which the peasants in *Morountodun* win their demands from the state mirrors that of the inhabitants of Canudos, a religiously driven communist society that has defeated successive military expeditions by a seemingly irresponsible government accused of being the anti-Christ as a result of demanding income taxes, promoting civil marriage over church marriage, perpetrating unjust social inequality and re-introducing slavery among others. Osofisan’s Titubi in her role as a nurse, attending to the peasants wounded in battle, recalls Vargas Llosa’s female characters such as Maria Quadrado, Alexandrinha Correa and Gertrudes all of whom are “healers, the herb doctors, the midwives, the bonesetters”²⁰ and provide the much needed care to the wounded combatants from Canudos during their battle with the government soldiers. And Titubi’s central role in the liberation of the farmers is also reminiscent of that of the white British female character Elizabeth (Rachel Shelley) in the movie *Lagaan*, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. Elizabeth opposes the unjust taxation which the British colonial officers (including her own brother) have imposed on Indian villagers, and teaches the villagers the rules of the cricket game in which they must defeat the British in order to secure the cancellation of taxes. And during the all-decisive game she protests on behalf of the villagers when the British appeared to be cheating. The villagers benefit from her efforts by eventually defeating the British in a cricket match as a result of which taxation is not only cancelled for three years but the British cantonment in the Indian village is equally disbanded. Just as Titubi falls

in love with the farmers' combatant leader Marshal, Elizabeth equally falls in love with Bhuvan (Aamin Khan)—the young Indian villager leading his people against British exploitation. But unlike Titubi and Marshal, Elizabeth and Bhuvan do not marry. Bhuvan instead marries an Indian woman and the disappointed Elizabeth returns to England. When Elizabeth is described as “an English rose who came to India and lost her heart,”²¹ one cannot help but think of Titubi as the aristocratic queen who came to the peasants' camp “and lost her heart.”

In a bid to win the revolutionary war, the male and female subaltern characters in Osofisan's play demonstrate the kind of solidarity that also recalls that of their counterparts in Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*, a historical novel based on the Niger-Dakar railway strike of 1947 and 1948 in the area currently comprising Senegal and Mali. The black female characters in Sembene's novel generally exhibit a sophisticated degree of support that enables the African male workers to win their industrial action against the French colonialists. Just as Sembene's black African women are behind their men and assist in domestic responsibilities, attending high-level meetings, clashing with security forces in addition to partaking in marches during the strike, Osofisan's women are equally very useful in domestic chores such as cooking, nurturing and doing laundry, partaking in the highest decision-making body among the farmers, fighting alongside their men in battlefronts, suffering detention in state prisons together with their male counterpart in addition to being exposed to all sorts of dangers during invasion by government forces. As Omofolabo Ajayi has noted, “the peasant women...are not less effective in furthering the cause of the revolution.”²² These women, as in Sembene's novel, do regard their men's war against the oppressors as equally theirs. In view of this atmosphere of camaraderie, we can apply the phrase, “populist and collective”²³, which Fredric Jameson uses to describe historical novels, to Osofisan's play. While the oppressors in Sembene's story are white colonialists from distant foreign lands, those in Osofisan's play are home-grown indigenous hawks. As in Sembene's novel, the characters in Osofisan's play live in the same community but inhabit separate worlds just as in Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World* where Canudos and the Republic constitute two separate entities within the Brazilian border or even in Western nations like England and the United States with certain neighbourhoods reserved for only the rich or the poor. This separation, which further substantiates the class division in the society, equally validates the view that the social order in *Morountodun* approximates internal colonialism for it recalls Fanon's description of “[t]he colonial world” as “a world divided into compartments.”²⁴ Just as

there were native quarters and European quarters or separate schools for natives and Europeans during Western colonization, so the peasants and the privileged characters in *Morountodun* live in different locations. The peasants dwell in rural areas while members of the ruling class live in the cities. Unlike in the cities, the social infrastructures in the rural areas are extremely dilapidated and inadequate in comparison with those of the townships. For example, rural roads are so bad that members of the ruling class dare not use them. Let Mama Kayode finish the story:

And then Baba stepped forward. He bowed like this, very low. He said: 'Your Excellency, my son, we have listened carefully to your fatherly appeal. Our roads have been so bad for years now that we can no longer reach the markets to sell our crops. Even your Excellency had to make your trip here by helicopter. Now that we have listened to your kind and fatherly appeal, we shall forget all our sufferings and pay our taxes. I promise we shall now send in the money promptly, through the same route your appeal has come to us—by helicopter!' [*General laughter*] (65).

Clearly, we are faced with a ruthlessly oppressive society where only the rich can enjoy the good things of life. The rich can afford to fly to the rural areas to make irresponsible demands from the poor, but the poor cannot afford the same means of transportation to the urban centres to confront the authors of their misery. "Africa has...in its midst a hardcore of bourgeoisie," says Nkrumah, "who are analogous to colonists and settlers in that they live in positions of privilege—a small, selfish, money-minded, reactionary minority among vast masses of exploited and oppressed people."²⁵ The state governor whose visit is the subject of the immediate preceding re-enactment enables us to better appreciate Nkrumah's point. The off-stage governor and the rest of the members of the ruling class whom we meet in the play are callous drones; they appropriate the farm produce of the peasants without caring about the welfare of the underprivileged. Thus we are faced with a situation that is consistent with the attributes of a hierarchical system whereby the relationship between the haves and have-nots and the rulers and the ruled are characterized by an uncompromising sense of socio-political clout.

Although the nature of oppression here, as earlier noted, is not industrialist capitalist, it somehow recalls the relationship of unequal bargaining power between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in an industrialist capitalist system. The ruling class in Osofisan's play do enjoy the farm produce from the peasants and definitely want the money accruing from the sale of the farmers' crops by insisting on payment of tax by the farmers whose welfare is a non-issue to the ruling class. The members of the ruling class are therefore simulating the attitude of the

industrialist capitalist bourgeoisie. The Marxist ideology that drives this play is opposed to the “Fetishism of commodities”²⁶, a concept that explains the tendency in industrial capitalism to attach more premium to both commodities and the wealth accruing from them than to the proletariat whose labour has been used to generate the wealth. Again, as we can see, the attitude of the non-industrialist capitalist ruling class in *Morountodun* somehow recalls this concept. The crops may be viewed differently from commodities but like the latter they are products of labour; the farmers just like the workers in an industrialist capitalist system have invested their labour in making the products that will benefit those who debase their humanity. Marx condemns the “*alienation* of the worker in his product”²⁷, a situation whereby the bourgeois reaps the fruits of the workers’ labour at the expense of the latter. “It is true,” writes Marx, that “labour produces for the rich wonderful things—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity”²⁸. Marx’s argument is amply demonstrated in *Morountodun*. I submit for your inspection the following observation by Titubi:

I saw myself growing up, knowing no such sufferings as these. With always so much to eat... Yet here, farmers cannot eat their own products, for they need the money from the market. They tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise chickens, but must be content with wind in their stomach. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill... It could not be just (66).

The society we are faced with in Osofisan’s play is obviously the type where the ruling class and their agents prey on the weak, commandeer what little they have and persecute them for daring to resist. The peasant women illustrate this point through role-playing, with Mama Kayode as the Sanitary Inspector and Molade as the underprivileged Titus:

MAMA KAYODE: Where are you going?

MOLADE: To Mama Laide, Sah.

MAMA KAYODE: In this rain?

MOLADE: It’s my wife. She’s in labour. She needs help.

MAMA KAYODE: What’s that in your hand self?

MOLADE: You mean this umbrella, sah?

MAMA KAYODE: Hen-hen that’s what you call it, this dirty, smoky, cob-infested jagbajantis! I bet it’s got lice in it too.

MOLADE: But it’s brand new!

MAMA KAYODE: Well, it’s under arrest. I will certainly not allow this umbrella to go on soiling the rain, which is a public property under the bylaw (62-63).

An errand boy of the ruling class, the Sanitary Inspector is clearly overstepping the boundaries of his minimal power. His attitude recalls those of black African paramount chiefs, clerks and court messengers of the colonial era all of who “manage to turn themselves into little tyrants over their own people,” as Captain Winterbottom has rightly noted in Achebe’s novel *Arrow of God*.²⁹ Such an attitude recalls the slave era, for instance in the United States where

A few slaves were made into a slave elite. They were given a few privileges and, in return, they controlled for their masters the rest of the slaves. Even though an elite slave is still a slave, his economic mini-privilege and his carefully fostered sense of social superiority firmly tied his interests to those of his masters and made him loyal to the slaving system.³⁰

The cruel and brainwashed errand boys of both the slavery and colonial era are re-incarnated in the likes of the Sanitary Inspector. Titubi, who witnessed the above re-enactment between the Sanitary Inspector and Titus, cannot believe that Titus was jailed for two weeks for refusing to surrender his umbrella. Like the title character in Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, Titus suffers unmerited humiliation and punishment for daring to protect what belongs to him. Woyzeck is beaten up by the Drum Major when the former confronts the latter over an affair with the former’s mistress. It is the exploitation and humiliation that the more powerful inflict on him that finally drives Woyzeck to suicide after murdering his mistress. But unlike Woyzeck, Osofisan’s peasant characters refuse to turn against each other or be cowed into submission. The unflinching determination of the peasants imbues them with the confidence to change their world by fighting and defeating their wicked oppressors. That is why Osofisan’s Molade can afford to say with perfect aplomb that life is “unkind only till you begin to fight back” (65).

The oppressed in this play simply reject the status of second-class citizens; they can no longer accept the class-divided society that has placed them at the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. “[T]he genuinely revolutionary drama,” opines Udentia, “becomes a...hater of compartmentalization.”³¹ Osofisan’s play condemns the oppressor-initiated status quo of one world divided in two. It is because of the knowledge she obtained from the re-enactment of the confrontation between Titus and the Sanitary Inspector and her direct observation of quotidian events while she was living among the farmers, that Titubi, upon her return from the espionage mission, tells the police Superintendent and her own mother that she is “not Moremi! Moremi served the State, *was* the

State, was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not true that the State is always right” (70). The point in this assertion is not actually the state itself but how the state is administered. A situation in which the leaders or rather rulers are considered demi-gods and perpetuate a univocal and monolithic authority in the affairs of a nation is what we are being encouraged to reconsider. It is a situation that recalls Achille Mbembe’s argument about the “colonial sovereignty” where “right was on *one* side”³² and “the colonized had no rights against the state. He or she was bound to the power structure like a slave to a master.”³³ Mbembe further argues impressively that

the colonized could only be envisaged as the property and *thing* of power. He/she was a tool subordinated to the one who fashioned, and could now use and alter, him/her at will. As such, he/she belonged to the *sphere of objects*. They could be destroyed, as one may kill an animal, cut it up, cook it, and, if need be, eat it.³⁴

Clearly, the peasants in *Morountodun* illustrate the unenviable status of the “colonized” as captured by Mbembe. They are deemed inconsequential and have no human rights unless the ruling class says so. Simply put, they have been *re-colonized* in post-independence Nigeria. The play is against those who have hijacked the state and have used their privileged position to mistreat the majority of the citizens. Osofisan therefore wants an egalitarian socio-political system that will replace the repressive machinery of the state that we find in this play.

“*Morountodun*,” writes Chris Dunton, “is Osofisan’s most ambitious attempt to stimulate radicalization of the sense of history.”³⁵ In a similar vein, Sola Adeyemi is of the view that “Osofisan subjects tradition to scrutiny and re-interpretation, using the embedded modes of thought and structure to proffer a counter-official version of myths and history.”³⁶ Osofisan is mindful of the fact that a playwright is no journalist who is expected to be faithful to the source of a news story. In his words:

whereas the journalist is supposed to be merely a mirror or megaphone, an objective and transparent medium who does no more than transmit the message as he receives it, the artist is always an active mediator, whose vision interferes with, and imposes an interpretation on the message.³⁷

This remark confirms the absence of faithfulness in his treatment of history and myth; it clearly demonstrates that his tampering with historical and mythological characters and situations is more deliberate than accidental. So Osofisan is not willing to be a literary journalist who must ensure that in his reports he remains totally faithful to his sources. And

when he further declares that “[a]rt does not exist beyond politics, or beyond economics; it is determined by them; but...art also determines them in turn”³⁸, we get the impression that his dramaturgy politicizes art and aestheticizes politics. His handling of historical and mythological characters and incidents in *Morountodun* is a clear indication that the play is not a straightforward dramatization of history or a mere artistic re-incarnation of mythological characters. Making the farmers win their demands and making Moremi’s alter ego, Titubi, commit class suicide amounts to a radical revision, re-shaping and reconstruction of historical accounts and mythological narratives. As Chidi Amuta has rightly contended, *Morountodun* is a play in which “everything and everybody changes into their opposites and back again” so as to pursue a “redefinition of social reality.”³⁹ Osofisan has used artistic license to alter historical facts in order to pursue his social vision. According to him,

Myth is only history which has been distilled by time, which has crystallised. So that when we use it, we are not supposed to have a subservient attitude to myth. Myth is just a peculiar interpretation of issues. And when you think of it, most of these interpretations, in fact, have been decided by the ruling class, which means that they are also subject to *re-interpretations*. In most of my own work, I take the myth as the version of history that has passed and then rewrite the version the way I see it, asking myself that if somebody who was not in the ruling class was telling this story, how would he tell it? What would be his own attitude?⁴⁰

Osofisan’s approach to myth and history validates Mao Tse Tung’s observation that “all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics.”⁴¹ Osofisan’s identification with the cause of the underprivileged attests to the fact that “[e]very writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics?”⁴² Because of this obvious challenge and interrogation of received readings of history and myth, demystification of supernatural powers, sympathetic portrayal of oppressed characters, constant expression of desire for social change and the ability of the underprivileged to wrest their freedom from their oppressors, Osofisan’s theatre becomes particularly *revolutionary*. Therefore, Osofisan is arguably revolutionary by not only dramatizing revolution but by attempting, among other things, a revisionist adaptation of historical and mythological sources. He *revolutionizes* the borrowed historical and mythological materials. The author’s political maneuvers which are motivated by his sympathy for the underprivileged have

justifiably elicited the comparison of his works with those of some prominent avant-garde artists in world theatre. In his review of *Morountodun*, Niyi Osundare writes that Osofisan's works "are about the first body of plays in Nigeria with a clear ideological perspective. He is already on the way to doing for us what Bertolt Brecht did for Europe."⁴³

Osofisan considers the peasants' revolt in *Morountodun* as paradigmatic of the mass resistance necessary to dislodge oppression in postcolonial Nigeria. As Sandra Richards has noted, Osofisan, together with other Nigerian second-generation playwrights such as Bode Sowande, "seemingly viewed the Agbekoya Farmers' Revolt as a prime example of the national liberation struggle yet to be waged in Nigeria."⁴⁴ By the same token, Yvette Hutchinson has noted that "[o]ne of the ways Osofisan engages with recognizable socio-political realities of contemporary Africa is by situating his plays clearly in the context of the post/neo-colonial. The plays are framed by events in history that Osofisan sees as profoundly influential on Nigeria's current situation."⁴⁵ *Morountodun* holds up to the oppressed majority of Nigerian population a vision of the kind of unity, solidarity and collective heroism exhibited by the revolting farmers. Osofisan's emphasis on *collective* rather than *individual* heroism is informed by his ideological position. "Being greatly influenced by Marxist thinking and in particular by Marxist materialist dialectics," Osofisan, contends Hutchinson, "has challenged Soyinka's use of myth and focus on individual heroes as being static and reactionarily backward."⁴⁶ Hutchinson further argues convincingly that "Osofisan is closer to Ngugi wa Thiong'o than Soyinka on the uses of myth and history."⁴⁷ Osofisan has explained that his notion of people-oriented revolutionary leadership is different from Soyinka's:

We also differed on his image of the romantic hero, the *Ogunnian persona*. We feel strongly that what our society needs badly is somebody who is far less of a loner, an organizer who can bring men together into a team. Of course the inspired, courageous individual has his role, to act as the catalyst, the vanguard and so on; to rouse awareness and provoke insurrection, but the real work is in planning and organization.⁴⁸

In *Morountodun*, nearly all the time, decision-making is democratic.⁴⁹ As Osofisan explains, "[t]he revolution itself is a mass of people always doing things together."⁵⁰ This position is echoed by Sowande:

Revolution has to be collective. If any man believes he can go it alone, he is fooling himself. The forces that he is fighting are enormous...Let us start from history, none of the revolutionaries worked alone. The kind of characters you have in Soyinka's plays who are individualists are so