

Review

Art and societal dialectics in sub-Saharan Africa: A critique of Wa Thiong'o and Osofisan as dramatists

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Art, indeed, remains an effective means of representing reality. It has undoubtedly become instrumental in understanding and interpreting aspects of society – its inherent dialectics – its realities. Drama, therefore, as the most social of art forms invariably predisposes the dramatist/artist as invaluable in the solemn task of mirroring these realities. This paper surveys the socio-political developments, nay realities in two Sub-Saharan African societies, to examine the inextricable relationship between art and society as well as underscore the effect of the past on the present, using relevant works of two prominent dramatists from this region, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (Kenya) and Femi Osofisan (Nigeria) as paradigms.

Key words: Art, functionality, society, societal dialectics, artist.

INTRODUCTION

“Art as a form of social consciousness, having dialectical relation with social being ... exists only in the context of the negation of existing contradictory reality of class society, by rising above its impediments, by going beyond its ideology and developing a system qualitatively new that challenges it” (Udenta, 1993: 55).

The aforementioned quotation is what sets the thrust for this study; and by interpretation, Udenta is no doubt making a case for art as a veritable tool in the battle for the extermination of class society in all its manifestations: a realisation which can only come through aroused consciousness furthered with action. Udenta's aforementioned statement is clearly indicative of the reality of class consciousness inherent in African society; more so, the Sub-Saharan Africa which forms the focus of our study. This is a class consciousness that is replete with its attendant contradictions. Art, therefore, through various aesthetics has not only become instrumental in portraying these contradictions, but also in interrogating them. The impetus for the choice of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Femi Osofisan for consideration in this analysis stems from the fact of the commonalities which they share in this dialectic milieu with the instrumentality of

their works both in their portrayal of their discontentment especially on their various nation's post-independence realities as well as their concern for the oppressed, the less privileged, the marginalised, the pauperised and the brutalised of the society. The foregoing, therefore, predicates art as invaluable in its role as an effective means of representing reality and underscores its inextricable relationship to the society.

What then is art? As a generic term, art is considered in its broadest sense as a creative experience in which man shares in the most enduring and significant attribute of God Almighty as Creator and Supreme Artist. Sofola (1994: 2) remarks that art emanates from the soul of man and thus serves as a medium through which this soul “reaches out beyond itself to transform and make intelligible the proddings within the inner recesses”. Art is therefore a product of the creative impulse; and finds expression through a variety of media and materials. Its genres include the literary, the performative and the plastic arts. The literary arts include novels and poems; the performative arts include dance, drama and music; with painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, decorative arts, crafts and other visual works that combine materials or forms belonging to the plastic arts. Perhaps this explains why art is considered as a specific

form of social consciousness (Lukin, 1980). As an expressive mode which emerges from creative consciousness, what then is the relevance of art to contemporary society? In other words, what role does art play in the society? Does it really help to move the society forward? If we should trace down to the primordial era, we will discover that art has always been very functional right from the earliest agrarian community even before man began to live a settled life. Through it man has constantly sought to find meaning for his existence as well as to rise above the crises that confront him; if only to reinforce Udentia's aforementioned statement and properly direct our attention to the functionality question. Thus from time immemorial – from man's earliest wandering and agrarian experience, man had adopted performance skills as part of his survival strategy, either to disguise himself and imitate the sounds and mannerisms of animals he hunted in order to trap and kill them or in employing 'sympathetic magic' in an attempt to "understand, order and control his environment" in a kind of ritual process (Hagher, 1990: 3) or coercion of cosmic nature, all in his effort to survive.

Also, art signifies. It identifies societies and individuals and most importantly it is a major aspect of culture; culture being the totality of a way of life that characterises a society. Through art, symbols, images, fears, joy, pains, aspirations and even scepticisms have been expressed. Therefore, it needs be pointed out here that it is this said functionality of art as springing from creative consciousness that also makes it invariably and readily instrumental to dialectical pressure as the study will unfold. Certainly, the perspective of art which this paper holds is that which projects it from the focal lens of an expressive mode as emerging from the artist's creative consciousness as a product of his environment. In this context, art functions to mirror the society as an expression of the artist's perception of this society. Society on the other hand emphasises social relations and influences among people. It suggests how people's lives are organised and conducted within their circle. Structurally, every society is meant to operate within certain social order and it is this order that makes human behaviour in the society predictable. This order, therefore, becomes the parameter that defines the kind of relationship that exists within the component units of such society, thus resulting to increasing tendency to always count on people most of the time to meet the expectations of others. This kind of expectation runs through almost all the works studied in this discourse. For this order to thrive, it must be based on a scale of mutual equilibrium, without which friction sets in.

Considering art, therefore, in relation to society in the dialectic context of our discourse, Slaughter may have really thought and observed in this regard that:

"When the social relations of capitalism reduce(s)

human relations to (an) '(ir)rational'" level, "art is therefore ... predisposed to challenge ... (such) existing order" (55), emphasis mine (quoted in Udentia, 1993).

This points to the central theme of this discourse as explored through the works of our selected dramatists. The broad base of this paper is Sub-Saharan Africa. It is pertinent here to offer a brief description of this region for the purpose of clarity in this discourse. According to Newman et al. (2008), Africa is commonly divided along the lines of the Sahara, the world's largest desert, which cuts across the northern half of the continent. The countries north of the Sahara make up the region of North Africa, while the region south of the desert is known as Sub-Saharan Africa which is generally subdivided into the regions of West, East, Central, and southern Africa. This discourse centres on the socio-political developments in Sub-Saharan Africa, precisely focusing on Kenya on the East, and Nigeria on the West, to critically examine how Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Femi Osofisan used their art to capture these developments and underscore the extent of the effect of the past on the present in the contexts of their different environments. This implies, therefore, that art remains an effective means of representing reality as it has proven certainly instrumental to understanding and interpreting aspects of society – its inherent dialectics – its realities. Thus drama as the most social of art forms does not only reflect the nature of the social relations in which it is created, but invariably predisposes the dramatist as invaluable in the solemn task of mirroring these realities. That is also why the study stresses the essence of the relationship between art and society wherein the artist becomes the mediator who integrates the forces between the two extremes.

Ultimately, the study would not only have portrayed our dramatists in context as having reproduced 'life' through their art, but would also have clarified this reproduced life in their own contexts – the realities of their environment; and perhaps, as having laid their own "judgement on the phenomena of life" (Plekhanov, 1974: 129); thus addressing "the question of the relationship of art to social life" which Plekhanov maintains "has always played a very important part in all literature", and history as well.

REALITIES OF KENYA'S COLONIAL AND POST-INDEPENDENCE SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN WA THIONG'O'S ART

Having established the role of art as an effective means of representing reality, we will further examine how Wa Thiong'o has used his art to reflect the realities of Kenya's colonial and post-colonial/independence

socio-economic and political experience. However, it will be necessary to establish also Wa Thiong'o's motivation in this role which he has engaged himself. In this regard, he asserts unequivocally his resolute interest in "human relationships and their quality" which he says he explores in his works (interview with Pozo, 2004); and quality here translates to the acceptability of the standard of this relationship which Slaughter seems to argue previously, must be rationally premised. Transition from colonialism to post-colonialism and the ensuing crisis, therefore, has been the central issues in these works, with their dramatic conflicts drawn along ideological lines, pitting rulers against the ruled, or exploiters against the exploited. In all his works, Wa Thiong'o's attack against injustice and oppression has been most forceful, as he uses them to champion the cause of the less privileged and the marginalised in the society. He believes in the power of art that is in alliance with the people – that which gives them courage and urges them to higher resolves – in their struggle for total liberation, as well as the full commitment of the artist (using his art as an agency) in the cause of bringing about a new social order. His (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's) works selected for analysis in this discourse include: *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1988, co-authored with Micere Githae Mugo) which takes us through the colonial past, *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982, co-authored with Ngugi Wa Mirii) and *This Time Tomorrow* (1972) as reflections of the post-colonial present.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, is quite an imaginative reconstruction of the heroic role played by Dedan Kimathi, the legendary leader of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya and re-enacts reactionary colonialism against radical nationalism. Although the concluding part of the foregoing statement seems more paradoxical, it however explains the vehemence with which the forces of colonialism were matched with the determined vigour of the people to free themselves from its clutches. The play reveals a colonial society in which colonialists in alliance with their surrogates – both Kenyans and non-Kenyan settlers – are pitted against Kenyan peasants and workers, the exploited from whom emerged the freedom fighters. While the former wield economic and political power, the latter are exploited and oppressed. Therefore, key to the understanding of the dimensions of the dialectics in the Kenyan society as portrayed by Wa Thiong'o is the fact that colonialism being largely a system of economic and political exploitation is so intensely drawn between Henderson and his allies, who battle so much to uphold it, against the determined resistance of the people led by Kimathi. This understanding must also follow from Wa Thiong'o's ascription of meaning to the present in the context of the past as he summarises the Black Man's History in four quick montages (5) – a history replete with bondage – and thus reinforces the people's determination to "make a

new earth" (6), a new social order. Here again, the underlying factor remains the light which Wa Thiong'o has been able to shed on the contradiction and conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, much as the Kenyan peasants and workers are unequivocally representative of the generality of the masses of Kenyan populace.

Central to the meaning of the play are the four trials to which Kimathi was subjected. Nwankwo (1992) no doubt directs our mind to the nature of the society in which this trial held when he observed that:

Through the stage directions in the first confrontation between judge and Kimathi, the play questions the notion of justice in the context of the world of oppressors and oppressed (147).

Henderson who stands as judge in the trials makes a parody of this justice when he tells Kimathi:

"We are here to deal fairly with you, to see that justice is done. Even handed justice". Kimathi, however, reinforces the interrogation of same justice by informing us that he is being put to trial in "an imperial court", under a law which his people "had no path in the making" and queries: "Whose law? Whose justice?" (25).

Through the development of the play's plots, the themes of economic and political exploitation of the Kenyan people, and their relentless struggle for political independence, as well as exemplary heroism among others, were highlighted. The major plot presents Kimathi facing interrogations and temptations from different characters who Nwankwo says:

"Variously represent the forces of exploitation and injustice in Kenya ... the exchanges reveal in turns their doubts and convictions of the questioner and the questioned and the implications which their various attitudes have on the welfare of the entire society" (147).

However, despite all the internal and external forces that tried to undermine the cause of the struggle, Kimathi seems to summarise the people's defiance and determination towards the struggle in the following words:

In the court of Imperialism! There has never and will never be; Justice for the people; Under imperialism. Justice is created; Through a revolutionary struggle; Against all the forces of imperialism. Our struggle must therefore continue... Our people will never surrender; Internal and external foes; Will be demolished; And Kenya shall be free! (82 to 83).

The collectivity of purpose in the struggle is symbolised in

the engagement of all and sundry: man, woman, boy and girl – indeed, all Kenyan's – in productive partnership.

Kimathi, therefore, represents the patriotic and nationalistic force of the people. His trial also symbolises the collective trial of the Kenyan people in their struggle for political independence. Although at the end Kimathi remained unyielding to all the forces of imperialism and held on to the people's cause for which he died, there is of course no doubt as to whom the villain or the hero is – “the oppressor or the oppressed”. His trial, therefore, is “only an illustration of justice in parody and a means of exposing those who in the vision of Ngugi deserve to face trial” (Nwankwo, 1992: 146 to 147). In other words, Wa Thiong'o did not hide his scorn at such vicious perversion of justice which he so skilfully lampooned in Kimathi's trial. “I will marry when i want” is also about exploitation; the exploitation of neo-colonialism rather than colonialism, and the role of the Kenyan “traitor-elite” (Nasidi, 2002) in maintaining the exploitation. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Wa Thiong'o offers us more insight about the play:

Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want) depicts the proletarianisation of the peasantry in neo-colonial society. Concretely, it shows the way the Kiguunda family, a poor peasant family, who have to supplement their subsistence on their one and a half acres with the sale of their labour, is finally deprived of even the one-and-a half acres by a multi-national consortium of Japanese and Euro-American industrialists and bankers aided by the native comprador landlords and businessmen (44).

Essentially, therefore, although “the conflict in the play” as Nwankwo (1992) noted, “is between a proletarianized peasantry and foreign-backed native bourgeoisie” (155), which defines the class structure in the play, it still does not detract from the fact that these peasants form the majority of Kenyan populace. The sharp contrast between the worlds of these classes is evident in the representations of Kiguunda's home and that of Kioi. Yet the Kiois were ready to stoop below class snobbery with their visit to the Kiguundas in order to advance their selfish and materialistic interests with which they wield power and dominion over the poor; with religion also highlighted as the opium of the masses in the entire scheme:

Gicamba: Arranged ... to completely soften our hearts; To completely cripple our minds with religion!; And they had the audacity to tell us; That earthly things were useless ... But they, on this earth, this very earth, They are busy carousing on earthly things, our wealth, And you the poor are told... Lift up your eyes unto heavens (57 to 58).

So, the play is about the mindless exploitation of Kenyans by their own rich brothers in alliance with big foreign businessmen to perpetuate their capitalist interests. While this bourgeois class employs the poor peasants who produce so much wealth that enriches them, the peasants only get poorer and poorer because of gross underpayment by their employers despite rising cost of living. Kiguunda captures the situation thus:

But tell me a single item whose price has not gone up? ... Today I get two hundred shillings a month, And it can't even buy insecticide enough to kill a single bedbug. African employers are no different; From Indian employers, or from the Boer white landlords. They don't know the saying; That the hand of a worker should not be weakened. They don't know the phrase, ‘increased wages’! (20).

Perhaps Gicamba's factory experience speaks more of this industrial capitalism, having learnt so much about the cruelty of the system which he and his family with many others had not only been committed to, but also depended on for many years and for very little pay despite being bereft of their basic humanity and being treated as disposable objects. Some inhaled industrial gas, chemical dust and other kinds of poison, only to be rejected or forgotten when they become ill, maimed, grow mad or die. For all the atrocities of industrial capitalism, Gicamba says:

“The owners of these companies are real scorpions. They know three things only”:

To oppress workers, To take away their rights, And to suck their blood (33).

Unfortunately, those who perpetrate these atrocities are their own citizens who chose to collude with external capitalist forces, to deprive them of the dividends of political independence which they all fought to gain. The eventual dispossession of Kiguunda's one and a half acres of land by Kioi and its consequence on him portrays the hardship of the landless poor, as well as the greed and cruelty of the wealthy landowners. Finally, Gicamba enlightens Kiguunda regarding the cruel exploitation of the poor by the rich, envisioned also as a collective enlightenment by which all the workers and progressive forces are mobilised in a revolutionary song with which the play ended. The strength of the play's success is tied to its effective application of familiar elements of the people's indigenous artistic expressive mode – song, mime, and dance which Nwankwo says effectively transformed it into a rousing paean of cultural assertion, and pointed in its critical appreciation of the people's condition. Little wonder, therefore, the force of

antagonism with which the Kenyan government responded to it. *This Time Tomorrow* also re-enacts the injustice in post-colonial Kenya. The thorny consequence of the effect of the past on the present is brought to the fore in this play. The pertinent question which the play raises remains the question of what Uhuru (independence) has brought to the people. The Stranger informs us:

“I was one of those who fought for Uhuru in the forests and in the detention camps, but what has this Uhuru brought us?” (189 to 199).

The Stranger, like every other simple folk in Kenya has struggled and sacrificed and suffered for freedom; when it eventually comes, with mounting hopes, what did the people get?

Stranger: We fought for Uhuru because we were told it would mean decent houses and decent jobs! But where are the jobs? Where are the houses? (200);

No where. They still had to contend with poverty, unemployment and squalor in the city slums – this time, at the hands of their privileged fellow countrymen who took charge of both political and economic power. So, how have the inheritors of power in the new dispensation wielded this power? How have the common people responded to this, and what is the outcome of this response? All these are in consonance with the major issue raised in the play. Instead of living up to their responsibility and the expectations of the people on them, the government decided to compound the people’s woes by decreeing that the slums that shelter them and through which they survive must be utterly demolished to give the city an improved look, since they now constitute “a great shame”; only to serve the interest of their new clientele: “Tourists from America, Britain and West Germany” (193) puzzled by this development – a rather insensitive “determination to punish” the people, one of the threatened shanty dwellers asks, “is this not a black man’s government – our government?” (193). Therefore, the play has an obvious attitude of anger and disillusionment associated with it – anger at the failure of a system to which the people had committed so much to see to fruition, and disillusionment at their inability to realise their dreams of it. The reference to ‘black man’s government’ aforementioned does not only magnify the misery and curiosity of the hopeless shanty dweller, but also clarifies the intensity of his disappointment and contempt at those with whom he had thought that their collective interest was ensured. The Journalist takes us through the slum city in scenes like the cinematic shots of the Brechtian epic tradition to observe the condition of lives and reactions of the dwellers that are the target of

the government’s order. Their destitution and hopelessness are revealed through the Journalist’s interview with Tinsmith and Shoemaker as symbolic representation of the threatened folk. The Stranger, who is introduced as a revolutionary figure, is not insulated from the general problem of the common people in Kenya as Wangiro discloses:

He worked long for the whiteman. Then he went to detention. When he came back his little piece of land had been taken away. He says he will hew and carry wood no more (190).

These problems, therefore, says Nwankwo, “are related to the injustice arising from the lost lands which created a rootless or landless population with uncertain direction and destiny”; for which the Stranger advances his advocacy for change:

There is magic! The magic is within you. The witchcraft with which to blind the City Council is within our hearts, in our hands. Let us stand together. Let us, with one voice, tell the new government: We want our homes, we love them. Unless the City Council shows us another place to go, where we can earn our bread, we shall not lift a finger to demolish our homes! I go further: we must defend our own! (199).

Wangiro’s faith in the possibility of salvation from their predicament in the revolutionary activities of the “stranger” contrasts with Njango’s suspicious and distrustful pessimism; perhaps, informed by the fate of her late husband, who:

Like the other men in the land he, too, foolishly cried defiance to the white man. He went to the forest. Dedan Kimathi led them, and for many years they fought against the bombs and guns in the mountains and the forests. One day reports reached us. Your father was captured. They shot him dead like a dog ... What has this Uhuru brought us? Brought to us who lost our sons and husbands? (191).

Thus, her inexplicable fear for the “stranger” when he was eventually arrested; “afraid I know not of what” (201). She finally laments in regret:

They are herding us out like cattle. Where shall I go now, tonight? Where shall I be, this time tomorrow? If only we had stood up against them! If only we could stand together! (203).

Of course, there couldn’t have been a way of standing together in their prevailing circumstance without inviting action and possible violence. With Njango’s regretful

statement aforementioned, Nwankwo opines that “she as a mother of men accepts collective responsibility for the failure of society because she embodies the problems responsible for that failure: tribalism, mutual suspicion and distrust”; issues which also recur in *The Black Hermit* (2002), another of Wa Thiong’o’s plays, where despite political independence, the people still wallow in social bondage of tribalism, racialism and religious factions which are the bane of national development in postcolonial African society. *This Time Tomorrow*, however, still points to the ability of the common people to unite and fight for freedom; the moral, therefore, is that those who lack conviction and readiness for action and unity will be simply pushed over by stronger forces (Jones, 1976).

REALITIES OF NIGERIAN POST-INDEPENDENCE SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN OSOFISAN’S ART

The commonalities which Osofisan shares with Wa Thiong’o in the dialectical context of this discourse with the instrumentality of their works both in the portrayal of their discontentment especially about their individual nation’s post-independence socio-political realities as well as their concern for the oppressed, the less privileged, the marginalised, the pauperised and the brutalised of the society, is irrefutable. Osofisan, no doubt, is a prolific and radical writer who addresses himself to the socio-political problems in Nigerian society. His dramas, like those of Wa Thiong’o, underscore the utility of art as agency for conscientisation and social mobilisation. There is this strong presence of Brechtian influence that has always effectively propelled their dramas. Through his works, Osofisan also evinces his strong belief in the power of art that is in alliance with the people – which enlightens and spurs the people/masses to take decisive actions in combating and changing a plaguing and oppressive system which does not favour them.

The world he presents in his plays, therefore, is a real world, which is consistently involved in a process of change, and “manifestly observable from the conflict or struggle with the oppressive hegemony in society” (Obafemi and Yerima, 2004: 135). So, because the changes in the societies presented in his plays occur “dialectically”, the plays possess both “dialectic and didactic elements”. The picture Osofisan presents of his society undoubtedly portrays him as a dramatist with a sensitive eye for the problems of his society. These problems are socio-political and economic in nature, and in their multiplicity. His plays, therefore, says Awodiya (2002), respond to:

The disillusionment of the masses arising from their

disappointment at the insensitivity of the rulers to their plights after the euphoria of independence, stinking corruption, injustice and oppression, greed, selfishness and drift of political leadership that led to coups and counter-coups, the horror of the civil war, the post-civil war lawlessness and indiscipline of the military government and the mismanagement of Nigeria’s economy by our prodigal governments since the oil boom days of the seventies, through the eighties to the present (171).

These plays, he earlier observed in *Femi Osofisan: Interpretive Essays I*, “analyze the repeated betrayal of the society by the individuals and the response left them in seeking to redeem their sense of failure” and thereby “document the dynamics of people thwarted in attaining their dreams of good life” (22). Invariably, Osofisan has proven himself a committed social crusader with a sanguine vision of the future he projects of his society – a revolutionised new social order – to which he has remained resolute in using his art to propel by arousing the critical consciousness of the people. This is because of his strong belief in the collective action of the people, which once aroused is capable of bringing about a new social order. His plays, therefore, address themselves to people generally – the masses, whom he imbues with more assertive voices in their quest for progress and development.

A “materialist perspective” of Osofisan’s dramas as “ideological weapon” (Osofisan, 1980): interview with Ossi Enekwe, no doubt prompts the firm assertion that their real significance is not so much in their perspicacity, but rather in their ideological commitment to proclaim a final stand in the conflict they consistently enact between the forces of progress and reaction. Furthermore, this significance, as Awodiya (2002) observes, does not merely lie in Osofisan’s resolve to interpret myth and history from the alternative perspective of the oppressed, but also, in his experimentations with various theatrical forms. His (Femi Osofisan’s) plays selected for analysis in this study include *Morountodun* (1982), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) and *Once Upon Four Robbers*. *Morountodun* (2006) is based on the legend of Moremi of Ile ife, and dramatises the Agbekoya peasant uprising in the then western region in 1969, the year as the Director in the play informs us “in which ordinary farmers ... rose up and confronted the state ... illiterate farmers, whom we had all along thought to be docile, peace-loving, if not even stupid, suddenly took to arms, and began to fight against the government” (6). In *Morountodun*, Osofisan recreates the Moremi myth of struggle and injustice in order to meet contemporary need of the Nigerian society. Peasants struggle, therefore, is the main conflict here, as the peasants battle to surmount the forces of exploitation and injustice perpetuated on them by the ruling class.

This conflict in turn is posing a serious concern for the

authority which finds it increasingly difficult to contend. So, when Titubi, the spoilt daughter of Alhaja Kudirat – the head of the market women, storms in with her group before the play really starts to disrupt the activities of the theatre group whose members are supposedly portraying the predatory nature of the bourgeois class whom her mother represents, and gets arrested by Superintendent Salami – symbolising the repressive state apparatus, a veritable ally in the quest to quell the conflict, therefore, emerges.

This results as Superintendent Salami challenges her on putting up a showdown on the peasant revolt that raged on in the area against her class instead of proving her gallantry in the theatre and seeking to destroy it:

Why haven't you offered your services to crush the peasant revolt? You know there is a battle going on now, don't you? That the farmers and the villagers around us have risen in open rebellion, and are marching down upon the city? When they arrive, who do you think will be the first target? But you don't volunteer to help in fighting them. No. this mere wooden platform is your battlefield. Shit! This is where you come to put up a gallant fight (14).

Titubi, who is no doubt stung by Salami's remark instantly volunteers to collude with the police by serving as a decoy to infiltrate the peasants' camp to trap their seeming intractable leader, and then quell the rebellion; not however without an aim also at redeeming her pricked pride of Salami's allegation of cowardice. Here, however, Osofisan recreates the ancient Yoruba mythology by invoking the myth of Moremi as he links Titubi with the legendary Queen of Ile Ife, who risked her life to save her people from the menace of Igbo by serving as a decoy too. The ploy really is to have Titubi put into prison where she will be freed by the rebelling farmers when they attack the prison to release their captured members. Titubi indeed sets out on this espionage, albeit heroic mission. The rebelling farmers eventually attack as anticipated and free her together with their captured members. As she joins them in their camp, settling and interacting with them, "sharing their pain and anguish" (66), she discovers to her disgust their plights for taking up arms against the state. In this new consciousness, Osofisan (2001:34) says "her conscience was pricked to such an extent that she could no longer be against them" – the farmers – and thus denounces the evil perpetuated on them by her own class by killing "the ghost of Moremi" in her, as such myth only served the status quo; joining forces, therefore, with the cause of the oppressed farmers. She thus turns a 'rebel' against her own class and against the state, in what amounts to class suicide, as she becomes a spokesperson for the oppressed; a development which Osofisan describes as "the big surprise of the play" (34). Here, he subverts the

legendary myth to serve a revolutionary purpose. In Titubi, therefore, Osofisan has created a "metaphor" for his "own feeling of disgust" with the unpleasant "set up of our society", as well as his "aspirations for a better tomorrow" (28), by making her instrumental to the materialisation of this social vision.

The play, therefore, re-enacts the socio-political and economic realities of the Nigerian society, presenting this reality from class point of view. It emphasises an inequitable society where the masses that produce the wealth are deprived only to maintain an oppressive government. Titubi captures this reality when she informs us about how:

Farmers cannot eat of their own products, for they need the money from the market. They raise chickens, but must be content with wind in their stomach. And then, when they return from the market, the tax master is waiting, with his bill (66).

Her candid verdict, therefore, is that "it could not be just". Thus *Morountodun*, as I have noted elsewhere, encapsulates the theme of social change – a case for social revolution. Osofisan's advocacy for collectivism towards this revolution is symbolised in Titubi's handing over the gun to Marshal, with the hope of establishing a new alliance for the betterment of the masses for which cause they have taken up arms against the government. Titubi's action is perhaps propelled by the sheer conviction that the government cannot "win a war against a people whose cause is just" (70). At the end, Osofisan favours a compromise agreement, a round table negotiation between the revolting farmers and the government, all in a bid to advance his vision of an equitable society. *The Chattering and the Song* is yet another of Osofisan's recreation of history with the nineteenth century popular rebellion in the then old Oyo empire, to serve the contemporary need of expressing his social vision. The "Chattering" and the "Song" from which the play derives its title, says Awodiya (1996) are metaphors for "commotion" and "a violent disturbance" (55). The play, which also addresses the issue of revolutionary change and its attendant class struggle, portrays Osofisan's rather radical approach to historical and social realities. Its plot is still centred on the increasing consciousness of the farmers' movement in the society in their struggle against the oppressive machinery of the state.

Right from the prologue which introduces the riddling game built around the Ifa motif – Iwori Otura, Osofisan sets out to explore, besides the theme of betrayal, the prey-predator, class stratification tendency that characterises the Nigerian society in three sets of riddles; and thus underscores the necessity for change: The first riddle involves the frog leaping upon the fish; the second riddle is about the hawk swooping down on the hen; and

the third portrays the stag preying upon the doe. Through these preying images, Osofisan portrays the oppressive nature of the bourgeoisie in their attempt to subjugate the poor in the society, and brings to fore the suffering of the masses; foreshadowing therefore, the eventual revolution that would result from collective consciousness.

The play is in two parts. While part one reveals the oppressive attitude of the people in power, especially through Sontri's confrontation with Funlola regarding the weaverbird, part two presents us with the revolution which emerges as a rehearsal of a play in honour of Sontri and Yajin's wedding. This play-within-the-play which is presumably written by Sontri, and to be performed for guests' entertainment on the eve of his wedding with Yajin, is a re-enactment of the heroic confrontation between the rebel, Latoye, son of the executed notorious warrior, Bashorun Gaha, and the famous Alafin Abiodun in Oyo Empire in 1885. This historic rebellion was quelled by the repressive power of the state. However, in the play-within-the-play, Osofisan subverts the ancient history and presents it from the side of the victim rather than the so-called victors, to advance the cause of social revolution and the overthrow of tyrant rulers whom Abiodun represents. Abiodun characterises oppression, ruthlessness, ferocious brutality and savage cruelty, and one who uses his position to suppress and exploit the common man. His furious address to Latoye confirms this:

I have ordered rain on kings, and it poured down in whole floods to drown them! On men with coral beads and necklaces of ivory I have commanded fire, and they have been burnt out of history by the harvest of sheer lightening! And yet you, you mere inconsequential ant, you dare to defy me! (39).

Latoye, however, succeeds in breaking the stronghold of Abiodun's tyranny: the myth of a god-abated subjugation of one human being by another. He, indeed, must have wondered for how long the society would continue with such excesses that in confrontation with Abiodun, he firmly declares:

Enough! ... For centuries you have shielded yourself with the gods. Slowly, you painted them in your colour, dressed them in your own cloak of terror, injustice and bloodlust ... in your reign, Abiodun, the elephant eats, and nothing remains for the antelope! The buffalo drinks, and there is draught in the land! (45).

Thus, Alafin Abiodun turns the villain – the “new plague! (And) new spot” that must “be scrapped out” (39) for standing in the path of justice. This is further reinforced in Latoye's address to the guards:

Look around you ... look into your future. What do you see? Always the same unending tale of oppression. Of poverty, hunger, squalor and disease! Why! Ah, you and your people, you are the soil on which the Alafin's tree is nourished, tended until it is overladen with fruits! And yet, when you stretch out your hands, there are no fruits for you! Why? Only your limbs are gaunt with work and want, only your faces wrinkled with sweating and not getting! Alafin and his men are fed and flourishing, but they continue to steal your lands. They are rich, their stores are bursting, your children beg on the streets. I am begging you, please, fly out of your narrow nests. Come follow me, raise a song to freedom! Now! (42).

Through Latoye's effective incantatory speech, Osofisan no doubt raises the socio-political consciousness of the masses, whom the guards symbolise here, through which their mobilisation towards the revolution is established and sealed. Hence, for Abiodun and his likes “who seek to unbalance the world, to rearrange it only according to their own greed, there is only one remedy ... Death!” (45 to 46) as Aresa decrees. Aresa's exterminatory bent only underscores Osofisan's total revolutionary vision – a vision which is embedded in his concern to portray the necessity for the evolution of collective consciousness among the oppressed in order to emancipate themselves from the shackles of socio-political and economic bondage. Osofisa's reconstruction of the ancient history in *The Chattering and the Song*, therefore, is basically to reinforce his social vision. The farmers' anthem at the end of the play is very symbolic as it heralds a new socio-political order – a product of mass awareness, mobilisation and revolution, reaffirming, therefore, Osofisan's revolutionary optimism.

Once Upon Four Robbers is another of Osofisan's plays that rings so loudly of the reality that surrounds us as a nation and thus keeps us bound. Femi Fatoba (1996) aptly describes it as a dialectical interpretation of the sociological phenomenon of armed robbery which has plagued us as a nation since 1970. The significance in the year 1970 is more connected to the fact that the Nigerian Civil War which ravaged the nation for thirty months came to an end at this year, marking therefore a rising spate of violence and armed robbery, as many people whose lives were already dislocated had to seek for any possible means of survival – even armed robbery. This phenomenon became so much a matter of public concern for which the then ruling military government promulgated a decree stipulating public execution for any convicted culprit.

Osofisan's position in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, however, is that public execution which he described as “legalised slaughtering” is not the right panacea for armed robbery, as it does not portend any meaningful

“restoration” to the warped sanity of the society. Rather, what should be of primary importance is the unravelling of the root cause of this social menace and adequately addressing it. Here, Osofisan explores once more our socio-historical reality and turns it into a significant analogy to arouse awareness of our immediate problems. Major in adducing one of the reasons for their involvement in armed robbery says, “It is hunger that drives us” (20). Although one may readily dismiss Major’s reason for their despicable action as does Aafa: “it drives other people. But not to crime” (21), it is but instructive to learn from his response that crime is quite indicative of a systemic failure, and that it has actually permeated the fabric of the society. “You mean, not publicly”, he tells Aafa.

The foregoing also raises the question of who then the robber is in the society as Ayakoroma (2008: 359) queries, “is it he who steals out of hunger or he who amasses wealth at the expense of the less opportune ones?” (Quoting Ayakoroma) Lack of employment also counts among the reasons for the robbers’ action. The available employment opportunities are but enslaving kind of jobs which do not attract commensurate remuneration, thus exposing the capitalist tendency of the rich. These jobs, explained the robbers, are: “service boys” “waiter”, “cleaner”, “cook”, “housemaid”, “washerman”, etc (22 to 23). *Once Upon Four Robbers* portrays the high level of poverty and deprivation in the Nigerian society, and the power of the rich – the ruling class – over the poor. It also reveals the level to which the common man could be driven by frustration. So, “rebellion against being trapped in a deprived social setting”, as Awodiya (1996: 22) observes, “constitutes the chief subject matter” of Osofisan’s works, “as his characters revolt to achieve a better life”. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, the force that propelled inequity and class division is no doubt facilitated by the ruling class who has failed to create enough job opportunities for the teeming youths who roam the nation’s cities jobless, and who incidentally find alternative means of survival in armed robbery. This is also representative of the reality of the nationwide terror unleashed by armed robbers daily, especially on our highways, banks, homes, etc. It is perhaps in recognition of all the “callous contradictions” and repressive forces that encouraged corruption and facilitated inequity and class division that one of the robbers, Angola, was prompted to say that:

There are many citizens who must be made to account for their wealth, and the poverty of their workers (29).

Such account for them, therefore, must be settled only through one course – robbery. This, opines Fatoba, explains “their attempt to destroy law and order” as a reaction against “the perversion of justice in the highest

places”, and the subjugation of the greater number of the citizenry by the ruling class. For armed robbery “on the scale we are witnessing”, says Osofisan, remains “the product of our unjust society” (*Once Upon Four Robbers*, programme notes) since a few privileged members have decided to appropriate the people’s labour and the nation’s wealth all to themselves. In all, *Once Upon Four Robbers* should not be misconstrued as an attempt to exonerate robbers for the perfidious terror they unleash on the society daily, but rather as a way of drawing attention to the pernicious social conditions that occasions armed robbery. The play’s argument, as Obafemi (2008) observes, therefore, points to the clear suggestion “that to change (a) man’s social behaviour and attitudes ... the whole body politic must be changed” (99 to 100). The play no doubt points to social redirection.

In the final analysis, although the study has so far explored “Art and Societal Dialectics” in two Sub-Saharan African societies through detailed critical analysis of the works of Wa Thiong’o and Osofisan whom we have chosen as our paradigm, it would, however, not be complete if it fails to ultimately establish the real essence of the relationship between art and society. Art obviously is a product of the social life. Therefore, no work of art exists in a vacuum without that identification with, as well as reflection of the nature of such social relations in which it is created. Consequently, drama as the most social of all art forms, serves as a true reflection of the human society in holding a mirror to nature. The question then is, what is the inherent nature or reality of the social relations under which the human societies we have examined in the works of our chosen dramatists existed? Obviously, they were such that were fraught with gross inequalities and inequities: the oppressor against the oppressed, the exploiter against the exploited, the rich against the poor, and the strong against the weak etc. The dramatist, therefore, serves as a vehicle through whose work this reality is explored. Thus his instrumental, perhaps, indispensable role in propelling and projecting this reality, cannot be neglected. In reaffirmation of the relevance of the relationship between art and society, Vasquez (1987: 112 to 3) asserts that this relationship cannot be ignored, since art is a social phenomenon. He advances three reasons for his conviction; First, “because the artists, however unique his primary experience might be, is a social being” and of necessity must reflect his social nature in that experience. Secondly, because his work, however deeply marked by his primary experience and how unique ... its objectification or form might be, is always a bridge; a connecting link between the artist and other members of the society. Thus with his creation – his art, the artist rather finds himself in a communicative experience with his entire society; since true art, as he emphasised, reveals essential aspects of human existence in a way that could be shared. Thirdly, because a work of art

affects other people – it contributes to the reaffirmation or devaluation of their ideas, goals, or values – and is a social force which, with its emotional or ideological weight, shakes or moves people.

The aforementioned could be explained in the fact that the dramatist, with his works, evokes reactions and responses from his audience and readers alike, no matter the particular experience and influence from which he creates. Invariably, therefore, the social relevance of art cannot be negated. Hence drama's role as the most social of art forms in reinforcing this relevance is indeed, tremendous. The realities of the society are not only reflected through drama, but the society is also conscientised through it as it promotes meaningful social development. The dramatist, therefore, is but a vital agency in the aforementioned realisation, as he integrates the forces between the two extremes of art and society, to actually underscore the true nature of their relationship. In the belief and understanding that the utility of the work of art is but an important dimension in the full appreciation of the true nature of the relationship between art and society, let us at this juncture, direct our focus on the utilitarian conception of art in order to throw more light and further reinforce the true nature of this relationship. A lot of arguments have actually been raised in the past against the utilitarian function of art. Reactionists to this utilitarian notion have vehemently negated any social relevance of the work of art. For them, it is "art for art sake". Art is but an end in itself and never a means to an end.

Contemporary social realities, however, have turned such conservative views absolutely anachronistic. They no longer hold sway; as art is now more consciously geared towards advancing human consciousness and the improvement of society. Art, therefore, is most useful to the society. They are most necessarily connected; since no art, as Asigbo and Utoh-Ezeajugh (2008: 121) note, is unaffected by society just as there is no society that has not been influenced by its art.

CONCLUSION

On a summary note, Wa Thiong'o and Osofisan fully appreciate the implication of the aforementioned. That is why their dramas always underscore the utility of art as a viable agency for conscientisation and social mobilisation. Through their dramas, they evince their strong belief in the power of art to enlighten and spur the masses to action in the battle to better their lot. This realisation would of course not have been made possible without a true sense of commitment on the part of these dramatists with their "total personality" as Wa Thiong'o (1982: 47) would say, to the cause of positive social change in the society – a cause which they have consistently used their works to advance.

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