

Music and ideology in selected plays of Femi Osofisan: an inquiry into the meaning of life

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ABSTRACT: *Femi Osofisan's plays have become the most performed on Nigerian stages by both amateur and professional troupes. This is due mainly to the fact that his plays have socially relevant concerns. As a welfarism Osofisan is concerned with the well-being of the masses and he fights the cause of the downtrodden. However, it is not just the relevance of the plays to society alone that makes Osofisan such an engaging playwright. The means also by which he presents his materials is delectable. One of the means by which Osofisan instructs and delights is music: both vocal and instrumental. Therefore, in this essay, we shall show that Osofisan employs music to perform ideological function. We shall use *Esu* and *the Vagabond Minstrels* (*Esu*) and other plays as our illustrative texts.*

Femi Osofisan's plays have come to be the most performed on Nigerian stages by both amateur and professional troupes. One factor responsible for this is the relevance of his plays to society. Osofisan has busied himself, in play after play, with the challenges that the ordinary man faces in the course of his daily existence. He takes the welfare of the masses as his top priority. Another factor responsible for the popularity of Osofisan's plays is the means by which he passes across his message to the reader or audience. Specifically, the use of music in Osofisan's plays makes them very unique and easily accessible to the masses.

Some scholars have looked at the use of music and/ or songs in Osofisan's works. For example, Olu Obafemi, in his essay on Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song* and *Once Upon Four Robbers* (*Four Robbers*), examines the use of songs in Osofisan's plays from the satirical angle and considers Osofisan's use of music (or song) as incidental, for as he says, "the whole body politic of the nation is pointedly satirized in Osofisan's *incidental music*" (1982:131 emphasis added.). Muiyiwa Awodiya also looks at the use of songs and music in Osofisan's play. He says "Osofisan, through his songs, takes a message to the proletariat and peasants to rise up and denounce corrupt leadership" (1995:179).

It is pertinent to say here that ideological considerations are very germane to the analysis of a literary work. This is so because, as Chimweizu and others rightly observe, "a work has to be evaluated not on issues of pure art' alone, but also on the values it urges upon its

readers, implicitly as well as explicitly. Moreover, *even issues of 'pure art' embody social values.*" (140 emphasis added) In this essay, therefore, we shall show that Osofisan uses music to embody his economic, political and religious ideology.

Music and Economic Ideology.

Osofisan, as shown in some of the music in his selected plays, oostulates that for life to be truly meaningful, the unjust economic system that makes it impossible for the masses to make honest and decent living should be discarded. All unjust laws that bar people from engaging in legitimate businesses should be reviewed and abolished. There are too many who ride their cars along the sore-ridden backs of the poor. There are very few citizens who live ostentatious lives compared to the majority who wallow in abject poverty. Thus, discarding the unjust economic system is one of the ways that life can be made to have meaning for the people. This is succinctly stated by Major:

Major... today (the) law is on the side of those who have and in abundance, who are fed and bulging, who can afford several concubines. But tomorrow, that law will change. The poor will seize it and twist its neck. The starving will smash the gates of the supermarkets, the homeless will no longer yield in fear to your bulldozers. (*Four Robbers* 84).

It is to avoid this unsavoury backlash that the playwright warns us all. People who are very desperate, and who, in desperation turn to armed robbery, do not care if they end up before the firing squad. They do not care if noon suddenly becomes midnight. Such people have no scruples. They kill easily and impulsively just to have something to eat. For these people, life is already meaningless; therefore the thought of death (or even death itself) holds no terror for them. This point is shown in the song

"We Are What We Are"

We are what we are

and no apologies!

We are what we are, gate crashers

Who, uninvited, bash into parties

Consume the drinks

Devour the food

And loot the store...

We have no equals! (*Four Robbers* 100)

When hunger has pushed people to the stage where they boast of their robbery prowess, then society is endangered. The robbers warn in the song "If

You Hear the Earth Rumble"
 If you Hear the earth rumble
 Quick, run for it:
 We're those who make the earth tremble and
 tear apart!
 If you hear the earth quake,
 don't wait at all!
 We're those who make the earth quake and
 Split open! (*Four Robbers* 101)

A corollary to this ideology is the playwright's advice that, for life to be really meaningful, less emphasis should be placed on money. Even more frustrating is the fact that many people make their money in very dubious ways. Many, for example, get contracts from the government but end up not executing the contracts even after the government has paid "mobilization fee upfront". Consider the following for example:

Soldier 1: ... This platform we are just building for the execution this morning suffering in the cold, tell me, how many days now since the sentence was passed on the armed robbers?

Soldier 3: Seven. Eight self!
 Soldier 1: You see?
 Soldier?: It was the contractor who failed to complete the job.
 Soldier 3: Contractor? To build a platform for execution
 Soldier?: Yes, I heard the sergeant mention it.
 Soldier 1: Tchei, this country?
 Soldier?: Contractor now, *he went and bought Obokun (emphasis added)*
 Soldier3: For the Baba Ke!
 Soldier?: And took a new wife
 Soldier 1: With government money! (*Four Robbers* 59-60).

The "Obokun" metaphor is very appropriate here. Obokun is the name the Yorubas give to that very delicious kind of fish but here it refers to Mercedes 200 brand that was very popular in the 1970s and 1980s. 'This Contractor' has become wealthy by collecting money from government without rendering any service. Then 'this contractor' marries a new wife, flaunts his ill-gotten wealth to spite everyone, and,

perhaps, ends up with a chain of chieftaincy titles. People, especially the young ones, who do not have the moral strength to resist, will of course take to armed robbery just to have money to flaunt before people too. Recently, three boys were caught in armed robbery in Lagos. On interrogation, they confessed that the need to have money “to spray” at a friend's party pushed them into armed robbery.

Osofisan also believes that there's the need for the people to go back to agriculture to help reduce the problem of hunger. The greatest antidote to poverty and armed robbery, no doubt, is a full belly. Not only will agriculture solve the challenge of hunger, it will also boost the foreign earnings of individuals and government and life will become more meaningful for everybody. The peasants in *Morountodun* sing:

Esuro nta wuke/Agbado yo Kondo
 Ede see gunyan/Egusi so kiji
 Afefo oni'ru \Awao le gbagbe koko nitori isu
 En en ene-en / A ole gbagbe koko tori isu (*Morountodun* 81)

The items mentioned in this song (Esuru, corn, cassava, melon, vegetable, cocoyam and yam) constitute the staple food of the people. Some farmers also make gains from selling these items. In “The Farmers' Anthem”, the playwright further emphasizes this idea:

THE FARMERS' ANTHEM

when everyone's a farmer/ We'll grow enough food
 In the land /No insurrection
 When all are fed/Less exploitation
 You eat all you need Refrain
 So clear the forest/Turn up the soil
 Harvest is coming/ In the land
 When everyone's farmer / We'll wipe out the pest
 In the land/No more injustices
 Labour's for all/No more oppression
 All hands to hoe (*The Chattering and the Song* 56-57)

Music and Political Ideology.

Osofisan believes that rulers (civilian/military) should rule with compassion. He believes that human beings, despite the prevalence of brutality and violence in human affairs, can love and do good. It is imperative for men to love and be good, especially those who have been entrusted with the welfare of the masses. This will make existence more

meaningful for the majority. He believes that attaining political power is not an end in itself, but a means to “reduce suffering in the world” (*Esu* 59). His insistence on compassion tallies with that of Albert Camus, the late existentialist Philosopher and writer, who says that while “principles are needed in great matters, compassion suffice in the small” (quoted in Osofisan: 1991 vi). This is the point that the playwright makes in *Esu*. In the play, five wandering mendicants obtain from some mysterious agent they come across magical power capable of altering their circumstances provided of course that they use the power according to expressed injunctions. Of the five mendicants so favoured, only one, Omele, proves to be worthy of the confidence reposed in them by Esu. They are supposed to use their power to reduce the suffering in the world, but they (apart from Omele) end up reducing suffering for themselves. Omele alone uses his power for another person's benefit.

Omele:... I know I helped a woman, who is not here now, but even if she was, it would not change a thing, for she has nothing, and I asked for nothing. *I was glad merely to see she was happy, {emphasis added}* So I make no claim for myself. I too, I wasted your power. Instead of getting rich, I caught a disease. Punish me along with the rest. (*Esu* 63)

This need for compassion on the part of those who have been entrusted with political power is forcefully brought out in:

THE SONG OF TOMORROW

Remember tomorrow/for evil will sprout
And like seedling grow/ Our deeds will come out.
You'll pay back with pain/ When you cause people sorrow
To others be kind, / And think of tomorrow;
The actions of human kind/ Bear fruits to show. (*Esu* 57)

No wonder then that at the end of the play, only Omele gets rewarded for his acts of kindness and compassion. Perhaps, it is necessary to compare Omele's behaviour with that of Shango in *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* (*Many Colours*). Shango, rather than use his political power to benefit his subjects, engages in acts of injustice. At the end, when he is disgraced by his general, he says '...I longed for power, I wanted to be greater than my father, but see how far I have fallen {*Many Colours* 230). No wonder, then, that Alagemo tells him “...at last, you have learnt your lesson, that compassion is the only weapon you need to be greater than your father! Wisdom, humility, these are the ways to greatness....” (*Many Colours* 231)

The playwright also believes that people must stand and defend their political freedom. He believes that once politicians suck the succulent breasts of power, the milk poisons them and they become giddy (*Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* 104). Osofisan uses this imagery of the sweetness of breast milk to babies to show how sweet power is to politicians. He postulates that power can become so seductive that some people are ready to pay for it with all their humanity and compassion (*Yungba Yungba* 105). Therefore, the people must be vigilant to ensure that the political leaders who have become giddy from sucking the breasts of power do not ruin the nation. He believes this rebellion will make life very meaningful for the people. This ideology is forcefully put across in the music entitled “Dance of the Crawling Things”:

DANCE OF THE CRAWLING THINGS

One haughty thing, he walks the street
He walks the street on myriad feet
And struts as if he owns the sun
He has no bite he has no fist
He has no tongue to voice protest
This haughty thing is a millipede! (*The Chattering* 14).

What then do men do to a millipede? They crush it. So, people can crush the 'haughty, crawling thing' that daily menaces their existence. Symbolically the 'haughty thing' is the oppressor who parades himself as if he owns the sun.' The land on which the sun shines belongs to the masses that, if roused, can indeed crush the millipede, the “haughty thing” with myriad feet that throttle the land to a bad and evil end.

The best way for the masses to rebel successfully is by cooperating with one another. The need for cooperation is underscored by the fact that no single person can successfully rise against an oppressive regime. For example, because Ayinde tries to change the situation by himself in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, (*Aringindin*) he ends up almost being lynched:

LYNCHINSONG

Pambata! Jigijigi/Pambata Jigijigi
The lamb that defies the leopard
and goes to piss in the bush
whate'er the leopard does to him
he'll never return to tell

(A can of petrol is finally brought with matches. The mob raises a jubilant Cheer as they spray the petrol on the platform and the two victims on it. Then a torch is lit, nursed to strength (Aringindin 33).

This fate befalls him because he acts alone. However, when people put up a concerted effort, success is sure. This same idea is found in the song "For Discord is our Foe." The playwright demonstrates the need for cooperation by everyone to achieve political emancipation:

For Discord Is Our Foe
 For discord is our foe/It puts its wedges in our weft
 Let's learn from Song and Drum and Dance
 How we need to live as one:
 Since happiness is our goal,....
 Let's all join hands and work as one
 And sweetness will fill our lives! (*Yunbayungba* 120).

The lesson the playwright wants us to learn from his three daughters (Song, Drum and Dance) is basically the lesson of cooperation. Yes, it is possible for each of the three to perform alone; however, the performance is best when the three combine. Of course, the playwright uses a similar anecdote in *Another Rafi* where "Fly Fast", "See Far" and "Heal At Once" must cooperate to heal their father's sickness.

Music and Religious Ideology.

Finally, we have songs that reflect the playwright's religious beliefs. The songs are directed specifically to God Almighty, the perfect God of the Christians. They are songs that eulogize Him and show the joy and happiness of the singers or worshippers. They reflect a characteristic of love that is common to all true worshippers.

In *Tegonni*, Bayo brings his choir from one of the Pentecostal Churches to welcome the Governor with hymns and songs. It is the popular song "Kaabiyesi o" that the choir sings for the Governor:

Kaabiyesi O, (Oh Almighty!)
 We Thank you
 Kaabiyesi O, (Oh Almighty!)
 We thank you
 Holy Father thanks so much

We praise you!.... (*Tegonni* 63)

Osofisan's *One Legend, Many Seasons* is based on Charles Dickens novel, *A Christmas Carol*. The novel has been adapted by Osofisan because, according to him (Osofisan), the story enacts a moving drama of generosity and bevolence. (*One Legend. Many Seasons* 2). So, because of its unique temporal setting (i.e. Christmas time), most of the songs in the play reflect the spirit of Christmas.

The songs reflect the joy and happiness that heralded the birth of Christ and the need to share this joy with all and sundry. The play begins with the Carol (second stanza):

Joy to the world
He rules the world, with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness
And wonders of his love
And wonder of his love
And wonder of his love (*One Legend Many Seasons* 4)

The Lord possesses all qualities that are necessary to make “men their songs employ” (i.e. truth, grace and righteousness). These are also attributes that the playwright believes all men must have if life is to have true meaning. The song that ends the play “Here We Come a Wassailing” is also very appropriate and instructive:

Here we come A wassailing
Among the leaves so green
Here we come a wandering
So fair to be seen
Love and joy come to you
And to you, your wassails too.
And God bless you and grant you
A happy new year (*One Legend Many Seasons* 63)

This song is most appropriate to end the play because it comes right after Alowolodu does his act of kindness to everybody (especially those he has been very mean to). The music comes after he gives money to charity to help provide for 'all these poor fellows on the streets who have no family to go to, the lonely babies abandoned in Motherless Babies' homes...' (*One Legend Many Seasons* 58). Although the music reflects the tenets of Christianity, it also shows Osofisan's preoccupation with love, mercy, kindness and compassion as basic

features of our humanness. Even Alowolodu himself comes to the realization that the happiness and joy he has brought to the homes of people is worth more than all his millions in the bank. No wonder then that Alowolodu himself, after his regeneration, composes a song especially for the "Spirit" of Christmas:

Alowolodu' song
 I stand, I find goodness
 I squat, I still find goodness
 To my left, goodness
 To my right, goodness

Chorus: Christmas season

Oh, how my joy overflows
 A time of happiness
 Goodness, goodness

People, come dance with me (*One Legend, Many Seasons* 68)

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that Osofisan employs music to show us what we need to do to make life very meaningful for all. Economically, Osofisan asks for a level playing ground for all to make a decent living. He also asks that we return to the land that can sustain all without discrimination. Politically, he advocates compassion on the part of all political leaders. He also believes that for religion to have real meaning, it must emphasise compassion, love and tenderness. We only need to say as we conclude that Osofisan successfully uses music to pass across these ideas to the reader or the audience.

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