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Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan's Theatre of Protest: Struggle for a Better and Just Society

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Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, Africa's most celebrated dramatists have contributed enormously to the development of Protest Theater in the region. With all the differences and similarities in their dramaturgy and outlook, they may be regarded as the representatives of two different generations, who have struggled against the disintegration of their country under the influence of various external and internal forces. Most of their works which "have been carried out in, and defined by, the palpable reality of decrees and sirens and military jackboots" (Osofisan 4), have one common purpose that is the realization of a just and peaceful society. The present paper deals with Wole Soyinka's *The strong Breed* and Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song*, which aptly describe their reaction against the unjust native rites and rituals as well as the political system of their country.

In *The Strong Breed*, which is based upon the purification rituals, Soyinka protests against the ceremonies and rituals which no longer hold any significance and which have become burden on the society. He strives for freedom from the stifling customs and the inhuman practices which are enforced by tradition and religion. The play talks about the fate that Eman meets in the village where he was an outsider. He was killed in spite of the fact that he was a teacher and a doctor in that same village. But all his goodness to the society was forgotten by the villagers when he tries to save the life of a helpless and mentally challenged boy by preventing him from becoming the victim of a useless ritual. He willingly decides to give up his life for the boy and also for the village with a hope that they will understand the futility of such rituals and try to reconsider their belief system which needs revival. He, up to certain extent, succeeds also in his mission after his death when most of the people refuse to curse him according to the custom to rid themselves of the evils of the past year:

Jaguna: Then it is a sorry world to live in, we did it for them, it was all their own common good. What did it benefit me whether the man lived or died? But did you see them? One and all they looked up at the man and words died in their throats. (Soyinka 146)

Soyinka has always seen his society in need of salvation. His vision of the society is based upon his belief that a self sacrificing man with exceptional moral and spiritual strength is needed to redeem the society and in *The String Breed*, Eman is one such man. Thus on the New Year eve, when the villagers choose Ifada to sacrifice as a carrier, Eman presents himself in place of Ifada for the role and eventually dies, leaving a scar on the mind of the entire society. He thus

symbolises the humanity and moral force which transcends all social barriers. By sacrificing himself, he not only saves Ifada, but also puts the entire society on a path that may one day make them realize the futility of their baseless rituals.

Similarly in *The Chattering and the Song*, Osofisan protests against the military rule in Nigeria, which is slowly undermining the cultural roots of the African civilization. He also voices a protest against the conventions such as supreme respect to kings and rulers and thus presents a radical vision of society. The play intelligently takes up the issue of “revolutionary change and its attendant class struggle [and] portrays Osofisan’s rather radical approach to historical and social realities” (Okoronkwo 82). To fulfill his purpose of inspiring a change in the society, Osofisan has used many instruments some of which are play-within-the play and reconstruction of historical events. He takes an event from the history which is farmers’ rebellion in the 19th century in the then Oyo Empire and reconstructs it by changing it altogether. Through this device, he makes audience reconsider the age old traditions and beliefs that have become a hindrance in the progress of the society. He restructures history in such a way that the major historic events are given a new turn which bring about a better life and destiny for the people who have otherwise suffered in reality. He emphasizes the point that kings and rulers in the past exploited the poor and one of the reasons for this was general masses’ inability to rise and fight against them in a united way. He also adds that the condition of the masses is the same even today and if they want to change their fate, they should rise and fight against it.

If Soyinka emphasizes upon the importance of the individual in the society, Femi Osofisan focuses on the collective struggle by masses in society for emancipation. Thus in *The Chattering and the Song*, towards the end of the play there is a hope for the release of Sontri and Yajin, which is the result of collective activity of the rebellious youths. Similarly when Funlola asks Leje about his role in the Farmers’ Movement, he tells her that what matters in a revolution is the mass struggle, not the individual. Talking about the ending of the play and the importance of the mass struggle as emphasized by Osofisan, Okoronko says:

The farmer’s anthem at the end of the play is very symbolic as it heralds a new socio-political order- a product of mass awareness, mobilization and revolution, reaffirming, therefore, Osofisan’s revolutionary optimism. (Okoronko 83)

Both these playwrights also emphasize upon the symbolic representation of characters and the situations. In *The Strong Breed*, which is one of Soyinka’s most symbolic plays, the symbolism has been used to give the play a universal appeal. Thus, the evil which hovers over the whole play is never defined. Sacrifice too; which Eman represents is treated symbolically. But in *The Chattering and the Song*, Osofisan has used symbolic technique to escape the prosecution in the hostile atmosphere of military rule. Osofisan himself puts it:

Plays are metaphors, after all, and no one, as far as I know, has yet succeeded in arresting a metaphor. The possibility therefore remains that, if one stayed behind, one could turn plays into fables of resistance against the predatory regime

of the soldiers and yet escape being silenced or smashed.
(Osofisan 9)

Clash of values and different antagonist forces are in the background in many of Soyinka's plays. In *The Strong Breed* also, the clash between the ancient rituals and their significance in the present times has been dramatized. Eman, who initially rejects the role of a carrier, represents the need of the hour while Girl represents the attitude of the villagers which is completely opposite to Eman. Villagers are opposed to the education and new ideas proposed by Eman. Thus when these two opposing forces came face to face with each other, Eman succumbs to the impact of ancient rituals.

EMAN: Yes. But why did you pick on a helpless boy?

Obviously he is not willing. (128)

He also tells them:

EMAN: In my home, we believe that a man should be willing. (128)

But Jaguna tells Eman that Ifada is godsend and need not be willing:

JAGUNA: What is the man talking about? Ifada is godsent.

Does he have to be willing? (Soyinka 128)

In *The Chattering and the Song* also, Olori, the senior most wife of Abiodun represents ancient tradition of unquestioned respect to the Patriarch while Latoye represents the youthful energy, who rejects such outdated notions. Thus when Latoye is presented in Abiodun's court, a confrontation between the tradition and modernity takes place. When Latoye speaks against the exploitative practices of the state, Abiodun gets infuriated and says:

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 lightning! And yet you, you mere inconsequential ant, you dare to defy me! (Banham 39)

It was at this point that Osofisan makes Latoye change the course of history. Latoye, who in the original history gets killed by the king, here asks people to stand united against the king and his empire and eventually succeeds in it. Latoye says:

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 over laden 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! (Banham 42)

The appeal that Latoye makes to the soldiers and also to the audience is in fact the dramatists appeal to the people of his country to rise and protest against the tyrannical military regimes of his country. Commenting upon the behavior of Latoye against the king and his queen, Okoronkwo says:

Through Latoye's effective incantatory speech, Osofisan no doubt raises the socio-political consciousness of the masses, whom the guards symbolize here, through which their mobilization towards the revolution is established and sealed. Osofisan's reconstruction of the ancient history in *The Chattering and the Song*, therefore, is basically to reinforce his social vision. (Okoronkwo 83)

In the plays of Soyinka and Osofisan, the characters go through a process of development, which takes them from ignorance to awareness. In *The Strong Breed*, when we see Eman in the beginning, he is neither aware of the attitude of the villagers towards new comers, nor of his potential role as a carrier. But as the play progresses, he arrives at a better understanding of his role as a sacrificial carrier and by the end of the play, he is a totally transformed human being. It is his father who reminds him of his strong breed and the purpose of his life:

OLD MAN: Do you know what are you saying? Ours is a strong breed my son. It is only a strong breed that can take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it. I have taken down each year's evil for over twenty years. I hoped you would follow me. (Soyinka 133)

Sunma also in the beginning of the play is shown to be disillusioned with the rituals of her village. She does not approve of all these practices but at the same time lacks the courage to go against society and protest. But when Eman gets trapped in adverse circumstances, she openly opposes her father and goes against society:

SUNMA: Murderer! What are you doing to him? Murderer! Murderer!

[Jaguna finds him struggling really hard to keep off his daughter, he succeeds in pushing her off and striking her so hard on the face that she falls to her knees. He moves on her to hit her again]

OROGE [comes in between]: Think what you are doing Jaguna, she is your daughter.

JAGUNA: My daughter! Does this one look like my daughter? Let me cripple the harlot for life. (Soyinka 136)

Similarly in *The Chattering and the Song*, we come to know from the conversation between Funlola and Yajin that Sontri in his college days was a simple and a passive man. But by the end of the play, we find that Sontri has joined the Farmers' Movement and has grown strong enough to get arrested purposefully. Similarly Funlola, who is a radical painter, dreams of a different and progressive world but does not believe in the feasibility of such notions. But when Leje assures her about a better future, she also joins the Farmers' Movement and steers forward in a new direction. Thus towards the end of the play, Osofisan expresses his hope of a peaceful nation through the Farmers' Anthem:

When everyone's a farmer, we'll farmer, we'll grow
 enough food
 In the land, No more insurrection
 When all are fed, Less exploitation
 You eat all you need.
 Refrain
 When everyone's a farmer, We'll wipe out the pests.
 (Banham 61)

Osofisan has been a follower and a great admirer of the creative genius of Wole Soyinka. But on many occasions, he has protested against his treatment of history and mythology in his plays. For example in *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), Soyinka's portrayal of Historian, who is also the author's mouthpiece, illustrates his worldview which is predominantly cyclic, tragic and pessimistic:

...Yet I must persist in knowing that nothing is ever
 altered. My secret is my eternal burden: to pierce the
 encrustation of soul-deadening habits, and bare the mirror
 of original nakedness knowing full well it is all futility.
 (Onwueme 61)

Against this reactionary tendency of Soyinka, Osofisan points out that history is alterable and people can change themselves and their situations. Thus, in *No More Wasted Breed*, which was written mainly to present an opposing point of view to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, he emphasizes that Eman should have challenged and denounced his fate as a carrier doomed to be sacrificed for society. Similarly in *The Chattering and the Song*, he rewrites an episode from ancient Yoruba history, where he alters the fate of his protagonist. Here he emphasizes that had Latoye convinced soldiers against Abiodun, he would have succeeded in changing the entire social structure.

When Osofisan along with the other second generation playwrights, started revising the theatrical traditions of his predecessors, they encountered many obstacles and complexities in the areas of language and communication because, there audience was necessarily elitist, limited to the upper class. This made people complain that Soyinka was 'incomprehensible' and 'too complex'. Thus, Osofisan, who was eager to address the masses, to share his ideas with them and provoke them into self-examination took to the simplification of language and theatrical styles.

The Chattering and the Song, in which the dramatist borrowed elements of traditional religion known to the audience, is the first and the finest example of this improvisation in drama. In this way, the dramatist makes frequent use of native expressions and songs and thus provides the audience with an opportunity to connect to the play. However, of all the contradictions and objections against Soyinka, Osofisan says:

...that all our quarrels with Soyinka are, in the end, nothing less than a tribute to his genius; that our disagreements with him represent, with all their fierceness, the kind of homage that admirers pay to masters. (Jeyifo 172)

Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan together, through their dramatic works have savagely attacked various institutions and political powers in Africa, which have always posed a threat to their national identity. They have not only criticized these oppressive tendencies but also presented the audience with various alternative solutions. Their works have aimed at the liberation of their society from colonial powers at the same time the revision of their traditional folklore, myths, legends, songs and rituals which were until now neglected. In a search for new Africa and the need to assert its presence in the world consciousness, they have taken the protest theatre to new and greater heights.

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