

National Reconstruction and Commitment in Nigerian Theatre: A Reading of Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun and Other Plays* and Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

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Abstract

*The female protagonists in **Morountodun** and **The Reign of Wazobia** bestrode their Chiefdoms as Regents of peace and re-engineered the machinery of state with an exceptional vigor and steam which achieved the desired unity and stability in their domains. This research paper affirms that the female gender is able to govern and lead a nation, even in times of crises; is able to bear the elephant tusk over her shoulders. The thematic focus of this paper is to advocate for an equitable and level playground for all, irrespective of gender, and the undying spirit of unity of purpose, sacrifice and commitment to participate in the work of community development by all and sundry; atrophy the incubus of sectional synergy that plague our conscientious drive for growth and fulfillment.*

Introduction

An import of artistic criticism and literary scholarship is to illuminate how a writer pursues the social relevance of literature - its humanistic orientation, service to people, and its commitment to social change. The nexus of this change stems from the need to ensure that a nation-state achieves prominence and pride of place in the comity of nations, and that its citizens are happy and patriotic.

The nation-building project of most modern nation-states, especially developing ones, is beset by an avalanche of crises, the most virulent being the absence of the spirit of national integration. Scholars of developmental studies agree that lack of the spirit of national integration is a major obstacle to the developmental efforts of Nation-States builders. This lack is accentuated in the resurgence and frequency of violent conflicts and tension between constituent nationalities and its peoples. It is a common knowledge that this predicament can be rationalized in the context of cultural pluralism in Nation-States, such as Nigeria.

Nigeria as a developing nation is a conglomeration of diverse cultural, linguistic, and political entities that aspire to divergent socio-political interests. This feature might not be ascribed to developing nations only, when we consider the cases of some developed nations that have undergone very critical moments in recent times. Moments of crises in the life of individuals and Nation-States are bound to occur; these might be moments that a people would come to terms with the reality of its divergence, and thus seek permanent solutions to its problem(s). These moments yearn for credible leadership that would have to live the message, as a sincere and committed messenger.

As a vehicle for national integration, drama stands at the apogee of other genres because of its sense of immediacy and direct appeal to readers/audience. A play creates and presents a just and lively situation and image of human nature and behaviour. It reproduces the passions and humours, and changes in fortune to which humanity is subject. Its ultimate aim is to delight and instruct mankind. This genre has a bi-partite utility: it serves as literature, and also yields to a practical production where the audience is brought face to face with its infelicities, through a powerful storyline, such as Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982) and Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), among many others. It is so exhilarating that even those who could not read would be touched by the powerful grip and the edification of a dramatic production. These plays are exemplary of the primary concern of contemporary discourse of dramatists such as Nwamuo, Hargher, Osofisan, Onwueme, etc. The works of these dramatists display a resonant form that etches the contemporarity of the experience in a remarkable way.

The realities of every nation are the consequences of her peculiar dominant historical, socio-cultural and political imperatives. Commitment of African writers stems from the creative concerns of these writers with topical issues, in the life of Africans. These issues are the ones which repudiate their African-ness, sense of national pride, and their nation-hood. This view grants impetus to Gakwandi's (1977) contention that "the committed [literature] ... necessarily looks into the future because of implied faith in the ability of a people to change their history" (108). Committed literature is a veritable tool in the creation of national ethos in art. However, the committed literature drifts to the utopian when it envelopes the notion of an ideal world.

Josephat Kubayanda (1990) in his summation lends credence to the commitment tradition when he indicates that "literary production and criticism is actually an integral part of the process of state formation, for at the heart of the polemic is the search for new political orders for a continent that is viewed by intellectuals as desperately in need of social changes" (8).

The pressure for a National Reconstruction in the Nigerian project assumes an imposing presence in Tess Onwueme's dramaturgy. Her fervent commitment to the socio-political transformation of the society which she belongs to, in the most immediate sense, Nigeria, and beyond that, the human society at large, and to the reconstruction of the status and perception of her sex in a dominantly male society, combine to place her among the more serious dramatists of the emergent generation in Nigeria. This new dimension given to the role of women in Nigerian literature gave second generation Nigerian writers a better view of women.

Coupled with the Marxist and Feminist tendencies of the time, Nigerian writers of the 1970s and 1980s were more plausible in their representation of women. Indeed, writers such as Femi Osofisan went all the way into history to recreate the dynamism and resourcefulness of women like Moremi, which the playwright refers to as a 'discovery of a sweet thing', hence the title *Morountodun*. This historical recreation of events is the premise of Soyinka's (1988) declaration that "Yoruba's myth is a recurrent exercise in the experience of disintegration, and this is significant for the seeming distancing of will

among a people whose mores, culture and metaphysics are based on apparent resignation and acceptance” (28). Apparently, the events in the play *Morountodun* speak of an obvious state of discord in the apparatus of state; the context of action is of mythic origin.

Tess Onwueme’s *The Reign of Wazobia* essentially dramatizes the concept of Regency and the intricacies of power ascendancy and inheritance rights in a fictive Anioma Kingdom. The Kingdom at this point is at an interregnum, whereas the throne is empty consequent upon the death of the reigning King Obi Ogiso.

The atmosphere of the play is the precipitate state of a national emergency; the death of the king provokes a leadership crises, volatile enough to tear nations and kingdoms apart, but it is Wazobia’s answer to this national call to service that restored hope as she “ ... stops abruptly, changes her steps as if shaking-off from the hypnotic backwardness ...” (1), and incipient fate that was about to engulf the entire community.

The title of Tess Onwueme’s play - *The Reign of Wazobia* - succinctly captures the socio-cultural and political diversity of Nigeria. ‘Wazobia’ is an acronym that depicts the multi-ethnic content of the Nigerian state. This term, which means ‘come’ in Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, the three dominant ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, gained currency in the nation’s social parlance in the 1980s, when the nation badly needed a confluence port to berth the simmering embers of national discord. The reign of Wazobia in Anioma Kingdom could be typified to be that period in Nigeria’s socio-political history when the nation very direly sought for national reconciliation, reconstruction, and commitment of its citizens.

Gradations in Historical Perspectives in Osofisan's and Onwueme's Plays

Historical plays convoke the worlds and tempers of their scenes and stages with a quotidian reality, that critics, producers and managers are challenged to reproduce those incidents and events verbatim. The dramatic techniques of improvisation and adaptation are the

dramatist's vehicular tools that can enhance the realization of this vision.

Osofisan's use of myth in his plays is informed by "... the increasing use of myth as a means of offering imaginative order where nationalism had brought disorder" (Bruce King, 30). This technique thus precipitates the playwright's return to the past that is invested with sanity, decorum and the sanctimonious process of ascension to power. The present incoherence and disharmony in the march towards nationalism betrays the quest for a national ethic of decorum, worthy of emulation by future generations. Osofisan's use of myth here transcends cultural chaos and perceived injustice. Apparently, the cause of disorder in the play is economic, coupled with the incendiary clamor for ethnic determinism.

In the Yoruba traditional myths, history reveals the heroic actions of the female warrior, Moremi Ajasoro, who gave up herself to be captured by rampaging savages called "Öluyari". These savages had traumatized the Ife people, taking their men as slaves, and their women were raped at all times. Gradually, the Ife land was decimated by the actions of these savage warlords. Everyone lived in perpetual fear of being captured, as many homes were thrown into agony. Women were made widows and children were made orphans. Seeing the level of sorrow her people were thrown into, Moremi decided to surrender herself as a sacrificial lamb for the salvation of her people.

When she was taken to the land of her captivity, the Monarch was captivated by her beauty that he decided to make her one of his wives. She proved herself a diligent, hard-working and heart-warming wife till she warmed her way into the King's heart, from whom she sought to know the taboo or the secret to the strength of the soldiers that terrorized her people and land. The King told her that as strong as the soldiers are, their weakness is fire because they usually dress in dried giant leaves whenever they were on rampage at Ile-Ife. Hearing this, Moremi on the pretext of going to the stream to wash the king's clothes ran back to Ile-Ife and informed the people and elders that the savages be bathed with fire on their visit.

After this stunning revelation, the savages were roundly defeated, and her heroic actions brought relief to the troubled people of Ile-Ife. Oduduwa was so impressed that he announced the entire kingdom celebrates the historic feat achieved by one of their daughters of the land by dedicating the day to the creator. This day is the celebration of the Olojo Festival – *fi ojo fun Olojo*.

Foremost in the foregrounding of the two plays under study is the fact that the societies which form the matrix of dramatic action are in a desperate strait. The chaotic worlds of the two plays rely on female energy for her re-creation and salvation. Wazobia and Morountodun are the Regents through which female's energy reveals gradually for the rescue mission of a society. Revolutions conceive new orders before the destruction of the old. The feminine agency responsible for the cleansing, inadvertently, gains potency, but through mutual cooperation with men; the two women appeared paired with men – Wazobia with Chief Ozoma, and Titubi (Morountodun) with Marshall. This relationship between the two women and their men rejoins with Carl Jung's point of view, that "one of the peculiarities of Great Mother is that she is frequently paired with her male counterpart" .

The flurry of female voices represents the significant, but marginalized elements in a social order, like Elsie in Nwamuo's *The Wisdom of the King*. Interestingly, these women, Wazobia and Morountodun, all Regents in their right offer themselves to be the clay which the kingdom requires to re-mould her destiny. This is an eloquent testimony and recognition of the feminist consciousness as part of the rejuvenating intellectual and social currents sweeping across Africa. Closely allied with this is the equality of sexes, and their ability to make tremendous contributions to the national building, is a standing Marxist tenet.

The Moremi myth and the quintessential exploit of this female's incendiary prowess is replicated in Ghanaian mythology as the "Asase Yaa, Mother of the Earth" , by the poet and historian, Edward Kamau Brathwaite in his poem, "The Awakening" (1973:156). This Queen of Asante Kingdom, like our own Morountodun is described by Kamau Brathwaite in his poetry as "Divine Drummer and keeper of the tribe" (156) – these roles and responsibilities are incidentally same as those

displayed by our Morountodun to defend her tribe against attacks by foreign invaders.

Morountodun is captured, is a source of inspiration and resistance, restoration and ultimately a renewal of strength. Morountodun and Wazobia are transcendent figures imbued with superhuman qualities, trained in ways of resistance and community development. The consciousness of our protagonists and persona is a collective one.

The playwrights use these wandering figures to explore the complexity of the female self. They are ultimate warriors and redeemers. They are women for whom the stereotypical characteristic of the physical motherhood is not a necessary option. They refused to be limited by patriarchal norms of the society, but choose to be mother of the race or community: Morountodun intones: “I have decided. Moremi shall be the clay which the race requires to remould itself” (34). She further declares courageously, “This is the day of joy, my friends! The land is going to be reborn, by the daring of a woman!” (34). Wazobia also declares that “I, Wazobia have come with these feminine fingers to embroider it, to knit your world together” (6). These protagonists are figures for whom sexuality is forfeited for public service. They are created with an inherent and exceptional strength in women.

The dual-sex socio-cultural system prevalent in the Igbo country of Anioma Kingdom, (present day Delta State) in pre-colonial period is what caught the dramatic interest of Tess Onwueme. She seeks to examine the efficacy of the Omu, acknowledged mother of the clan system of leadership, against the backdrop of the Obi, symbol of patriarchal hegemony. It is interesting to note that in this system, the Omu and her cabinet, the Ilogo, can challenge the authority of the male, the Obi and his cabinet. Wazobia, in the play represents the Omu leadership.

Mariama Ba (1981) avouches that “women are the nation’s fundamental root from which all else grows and blossoms. Women ... take keener interest in the destiny of the country” (51-52). In the same vein, Nwamuo (1998) accents to the enviable role accorded these women in the leadership and power structure of these pristine

societies, when he avers, that “women’s social institutions therefore existed to safeguard their interests and to contribute positively to the general dynamics of traditional governance They were active, socially dynamic and politically conscious people whose role and responsibility were recognized as complementary to those of males,...” (2).

Conclusion

Although both plays may exemplify the feminist rendition in their plot and style, but beneath this, is the motif of nationalistic revival that underlay their protagonists’ quest.

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