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DECONSTRUCTING MARXIST/REVOLUTIONARY LABELS IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S PLAYS

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Abstract

Nigeria's famed playwright, Femi Osofisan evidently commits his literary nuances to social change. Marxism thrives on revolution as an instrument of social change. Therefore, literary critics exercising their scholarly prerogatives interpret Osofisan's plays from a Marxist perspective. When these critics focus their Marxist searchlight on Osofisan's plays, they isolate the socio-political and economic indices that give rise to class polarity in society. In their analysis, they go on to advocate for a new society achieved through the instrumentality of revolution where one class, the proletariat, must overthrow its class counterpart, the bourgeois. In this way, the understanding and appreciation of Osofisan's works are circumscribed by Marxist interpretations, which inevitably limit their literary and ideological potential. This paper argues that beyond Marxist sensibilities, Osofisan's plays can be read and understood from a Hegelian dialectic perspective which emphasizes evolution of society through the inevitable interaction of opposites. More importantly, Osofisan commits to achieving mass awareness of the many incongruities besetting society by demonstrating that opposites are bound by the principle of complementarities. As a popular and fashionable theory in the 19th and 20th centuries, Marxism provides a critical tool for interpreting many literary works. However, in the 21st century post-Marxist era, how will Osofisan's plays appeal to new readers? Relying on the theory of deconstruction, this paper liberates Osofisan's plays from the confines of Marxist interpretation and establishes that they can be comprehended from a new prism, the Hegelian dialectic.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Marxism, Hegelian dialectic, Class, Change

Introduction

Femi Osofisan's literary *oeuvre* has attracted diverse interpretations from scholars and critics all over the world due to multiple meanings in them. These meanings range from his ideological leaning, aesthetic orientation, and socio-cultural possibilities, the latter located in his native Yoruba metaphysical matrix. Those who interpret his literary works from the ideological perspective of vision, politics, and technique do so from a *Brechtian* prism due to Osofisan's consistent appropriation of the German playwright's Epic Theatre. In Brecht's Epic Theatre, according to Abrams, "his hope was to encourage his audience to criticize and oppose, rather than passively to accept, the social conditions and modes of behaviour that the plays represent" (84). Furthermore, Hope Eghagha asserts that

“Bertolt Brecht's *oeuvre* was his strong views on how drama can be used as a tool for reawakening. In this regard, the works of Osofisan have paralleled that of Brecht” (72). Eghagha succinctly conveys Osofisan's ideological leaning to Brecht's ideological proclivity which is not too far apart.

Other critics exercising their critical prerogatives have given a Marxist/revolutionary label to most of Osofisan's literary works where they x-ray socio-economic tensions and class dichotomy. This is because a critical insight into Osofisan's creative repertoire reveals that he is concerned with the idea of change or social transformation hence, he juxtaposes the interplay of contraries and shows through their relationships how social progress is achieved. This group of critics argues that his plays ostensibly address the extemporaneous socio-economic issues that bear directly on the lives of the masses with a view to enthroning an egalitarian order while debunking capitalism and exploitation. However, Osofisan has on several occasions denied any ideological label. Muiyiwa Awodiya aptly recounts that:

Osofisan shuns dogma and ideological labelling. Whenever he is asked to define his political ideology, he is always evasive because, according to him, all the labels have been abused and misused particularly in the Nigerian context where these ideologies have several misconceptions. (37)

Marxist critics of Osofisan's works go further to maintain that the plays seek a violent overthrow of superstructures that give rise to graft, heist, institutionalized corruption, and deplorable living conditions. His plays are committed to outlining the interplay of contraries, how they are projected and subsequently accomplished. In line with the provisions of Marxism, these critics isolate the classes in Osofisan's plays, those who control means of production and those who depend on their labour power for survival. Having identified these opposite classes in the plays, they outline how those who control means of production have exploited those who depend on their labour power and then urge the exploited class to rise and revolt against their class counterpart. Furthermore, these critics infer that revolution is the most viable alternative through which change can be attained in society. Their main objective, among several ones, is to project the need for the attainment of an equitable social structure devoid of class contradiction. But Osofisan has rejected the tag of Marxism in his works. While addressing the issue of change in the plays, the playwright remarks that he does not seek to achieve a Marxist consensus in his

dramaturgy as most critics and scholars have tried to do, but rather to create a platform that will accommodate various ideological revisions in the interpretation of change in his plays. According to Osofisan:

my aim I must say has never been to achieve a consensus, but rather to provoke dynamic exchange, to stir the audience into argument and discussions, into a revision of stale and sterile opinions. I want to demonstrate that the world is just as our stage is, a platform of constant revision and of innumerable possibilities, a never finished business waiting for the contributions of each one of us. (22)

From Osofisan's submission, the continued interpretation of his plays from a Marxist perspective leaves the intellect stranded delicately in ideological wilderness and for him this is an exuberant attitude that should be corrected by reason. This is what this paper sets out to achieve.

The last category of critics focus their attention on how Osofisan rehabilitates several pantheons and deities in the Yoruba metaphysics and to what extent he recreates myth and history using them to address contemporary realities. Sandra Richards observes that "much of Osofisan's dramaturgy is firmly grounded in Yoruba epistemology" (vii). In all of this, we can contend that Osofisan's dramaturgy can be analysed and scrutinized from multiple ideologies to address contemporary social realities. Therefore, insisting on the interpretation of Osofisan's plays from a Marxist monolithic purview is inconsistent with the vast arrays of ideas accommodated in literary approach and criticism.

Deconstruction

Many scholars have contributed immensely to the development of deconstruction as a theory, which has dominated literary discipline from the early 1970s until date. However, three distinguished scholars stand out in their postulations with deconstruction. They are, French thinker, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and Geoffrey Hartman. Nevertheless, of these three scholars, Jacques Derrida stands out as the leading proponent of the theory which he first formulated in the 1960s and since then, it has been appropriated into the list of theoretical canons majorly in two disciplines, Literature and Philosophy. This study is concerned with the literary aspect of Deconstruction due to its commitment to textual interpretation where invention is essential to finding hidden, alternative

meanings in texts. In essence, the theory's concern is to locate dualism and multiple hierarchies of meaning in texts, and then proceed to highlight and interpret them. The multiplicity of interpretations articulates various perspectives and paradigms in the appreciation of a literary work and therefore exonerates even cross-disciplinary approach and application of diverse theories in literary discipline. Logarithms and Coefficients, otherwise mathematical tools and theories have been variously applied in Economics, Architecture, Psychology and various other disciplines. The project of deconstruction cuts across every discipline and habituates the very process of re-examining concepts through a plethora of platforms.

The liberty offered by deconstruction divests a text of various theoretical labels and welcomes new ways and new thinking using available critical materials as instruments of analysis. In this way, no theory or paradigm applied in the analysis of a text can claim superiority or supremacy over another theory used to analyze the same text. Rather, there are synergies of interpretations all geared towards the elevation and furtherance of knowledge. Some scholars have also interpreted Osofisan's drama using such paradigms as gender and sexuality. When these scholars interpret some of Osofisan's plays, they isolate the positive portrayal of women and how the playwright accords them such virtues like long-suffering, prudent, compassionate and as agents of social transformation. Tess Onwueme, while acknowledging Osofisan's sympathy for the women folk declares that:

emphasis and prominence given to women in Osofisan's plays as "guardian angels" and harbingers of social change rather than "temptresses" and devils, reveal a positive image in the leadership qualities of women and therefore a radical departure from established norms and are thus deserving of attention (229).

According to Derrida, "deconstruction is what happens, what is happening today in what is society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality and so on and so forth. Deconstruction is the case" (85). Derrida's submission that "deconstruction is what happens, what is happening today" easily throws up some questions: what is it that is happening today in academic circles especially in the literary discipline? What is it that "is the case"? First, academic enquiry is in a flux, it is not stagnated in that it is always providing itself with questions and materials that will enable scholars to investigate and carry out researches in every area of human endeavour. There are no conclusions because every conclusion can be queried and

deconstructed. There are no closures and there are no finalities so that an analysis of a text today can be reviewed further tomorrow. An interpretation of a text that is propagated as containing absolutes and logical connections can be turned upside down by another interpretation. Again, the dynamic nature of human existence initiates all sorts of peculiarities, which continually provide parameters for re-examination, re-evaluation of procedures and styles of living. It is this continual re-examination and re-evaluation that Derrida terms as “what is happening today” regarding the project of Deconstruction. If the above analogy is situated within the discipline of literature, therefore, Derrida's submission that deconstruction is “what is happening today” will involve the daily attempt by scholars across the world to open texts up to alternative possibilities where usually repressed meanings that reside beyond the margins of obvious meanings are laid bare. With regard to repression of meaning in a text, most writers have been found to pursue their own ideological project in a subjective way without recourse to other strands that they may portray. This is because the entire process of writing or the occurrence of any written text is always manipulated in some way in order to give prominence to the author's immediate theme or concern. The galvanizing force in this kind of situation is provided by the logical connectedness and ostensible complementarities that exist between the author's visible project and the sublime contents of his work, which he seems unaware. Evidently, it is by virtue of Derrida's preoccupation with deconstruction and its necessary affinity with the Hegelian system that Catherine Kellogg submits that “Derrida's thoughts remain faithful to the intention embedded within the philosophical tradition itself, and more specifically, to the Hegelian system of speculative science as this tradition's crowning accomplishments”(49).

Deconstruction's main concern is to uncover and reveal that which has been hidden or suppressed and this is the major engagement in this study: to go beyond the borders of revolution as a major cornerstone of Marxism and to reveal the alignment of opposites through the Hegelian dialectic as an alternative possibility for change. In this study, the Hegelian identification of opposites and their complementary relationships appear fecund as compared to the Marxist identification of opposites where they are deployed as having a relationship mitigated by subservience, which must be corrected by revolt. From these mutations, we are able to narrow down the meaning of deconstruction as a dynamic and contemporary process, which is applied to literary texts to decide its undecidability and investigate how their obvious themes are contradictory or

conflicting to one another. It is by analyzing the obvious theme of Marxist revolution in Osofisan's plays that its necessary contradiction is revealed in the Hegelian dialectic where opposites are shown to share a reciprocal relationship. With deconstruction, the centre of any literary text is exploded and the barriers of meaning collapse leaving the text open to multiple and fragments of meaning. This is in accordance with Lois Tyson's observation that in any literary text, "no interpretation has the final word. Rather, literary texts, like all texts consist of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings in dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to us" (252). The primary purpose of deconstructing any literary text is to highlight inherent thematic conflicts in the text. Secondly, to discover meanings which are not readily apparent to the reader and lastly, to reveal the various ideological basis or standpoints which inform the writing of the text different from or in addition to what the author may have in mind. Deconstruction, when generally applied in textual analysis among other things, seeks to expose and subvert the various binary oppositions that undergird the dominant thematic preoccupations of a text. Deconstruction thrives on dualism in that it tries to establish another hierarchy of meaning different from what the author may have presented in a text.

Deconstructing Marxist labels in Osofisan's works

Studies by Amuta (1989), Akinyemi and Falola (2009), Awodiya (1996), Gbilekaa (1997) have shown that there are many critical interpretations of change in Osofisan's plays but most of them derive their animating impulses, salience, and vitality from the Marxist dialectic. Given the panoply of opposites in his dramaturgy as principal factors for achieving change, many critics and scholars insist that Marxism is the best instrument for investigating Osofisan's plays. When critics and scholars focus their Marxist searchlight on Osofisan's plays, they isolate the socio-economic and political indices that give rise to class polarity, economic hegemony, political dichotomy and cultural prejudice. In their analysis, therefore, they go on to advocate for a new social system achieved through the instrumentality of revolution where one class, the proletariat, must overthrow its class counterpart, the bourgeois. Thus opposites, according to Marxist critics interpreting change in Osofisan's plays, opposites are combined for the sake of subversion. However, in deconstructing these Marxist/revolutionary labels in Osofisan's works, it is revealed that the Hegelian dialectic, anchored on the inevitable interaction of opposites and their unities, can conveniently be used to interpret them too. For Saint Gbilekaa, Osofisan belongs to a

generation of African writers who have adopted a Marxist outlook to their analysis of society and subsequently deployed these views into their critical and creative repertoire. Gbilekaa remarks that “in African theatre today, Marxist analysis of the society has been employed both in the conventional and popular theatre to release the people from the claws of exploitation and even to urge them to *revolt* against the decadent social order that oppresses them” (1). Furthermore, Gbilekaa observes that “the recurrent theme expressed in Osofisan's drama is the egalitarian reconstructing of society where there will be equal opportunity for all” (76).

While Gbilekaa appears convincing on the need for an egalitarian restructuring of society, his understanding and interpretation of revolution as the only means through which the society can be restructured calls to question the reciprocal alignment of contraries where opposites must necessarily require each other for advancement and purpose. Although, Gbilekaa's interpretation of reality in Osofisan's plays basically focuses on class differences, in this case, the materially buoyant and materially deprived, there is a sense in which the two classes of people cannot do without each other. Therefore, if revolution is prescribed as an instrument of change, there is bound to be implosion of the social entity which will ultimately destroy society. This is ostensibly because every phenomenon inevitably and generates its opposite. Presumably, revolution as an agency of change is subversive and tends to negate the Hegelian dialectic which presupposes evolution of contraries. In a case where two contrary entities, in this case, the upper class and the lower class are resolved through revolution, it follows that one class (the lower class) must vanquish its class counterpart in order to achieve an egalitarian social space.

Going by Gbilekaa's submission, if such an egalitarian social order is achieved without conflict, the society will stagnate, bearing in mind that contraries provide the fluid and quintessence of man's continual existence. In this respect, man would have reached the final stage of social evolution and stagnancy may set in as witnessed in Cuba where socialism holds sway. It is on record that having achieved socialism in Cuba, there has not been an election in the country for over 40 years because socialism by its nature does not tolerate opposition. Therefore, a Marxist interpretation of change in Osofisan's drama which encourages stability and the abolition of contraries negates Dennis Duerden's observation that “the Yoruba view excessive stability as undesirable because it induces stagnation and entropy, and therefore they have devised checks to restrict power and keep anything from lasting too long” (35). Femi Osofisan is a Yoruba writer who draws a large part of his

creative idiosyncrasies from the Yoruba cosmology. Therefore, it is improbable that he would negate his ideological source. A Hegelian dialectical interpretation of Osofisan's plays portrays a perennial transmutation of social progression where concepts generate their opposite and reveal a continual paradoxical alignment. The foregoing is in tandem with the thesis, antithesis and synthesis triad as provided by German Philosopher Heinrich Moritz Chalybaeus. Hegel's idea of the reciprocal juxtaposition of opposites is suitably explained and understood through the thesis, antithesis and synthesis triadic method.

Muyiwa Awodiya initiates a revolt consciousness in Osofisan's drama which elicits Marxist impulses when he remarks that:

the major objective of Osofisan as a playwright it seems, is to catalyze the evolution of collective consciousness among all black people in an effort to liberate themselves from economic and socio-political oppression inherited from the colonial experience...in his plays, poetry and fiction, he is primarily concerned with man as a victim of history within the framework of the political structure which oppresses him (32).

Awodiya's view cited here reveals his commitment to interpreting Osofisan's works viewing socio-economic lopsidedness as a reason for imminent reconstitution achieved through the instrumentality of revolt. Awodiya establishes a racial concept "black people" and situates their existence within the socio-economic and political environment where they occur. In this situation, it becomes difficult to categorize Awodiya's classification of "black people" as people of Africa, or as black Africans in Diaspora or black people all over the world. The idea of "collective consciousness among all black people" which Awodiya highlights becomes amorphous when juxtaposed with the inevitable intermingling of "black people" with people of other racial extractions. For example, if we take Awodiya's "black people" as a concept which generates its opposite according to the Hegelian dialectic, we will have "white people" at the other extreme. With this synthesizing intervention, it becomes difficult to isolate "black people" as the only audience in Osofisan's drama urged with the responsibility of liberating themselves from a perceived oppressive order. It is important to examine the active shaping of the living conditions of human beings as well as the continual transformation of social relations. In the same vein, it

is necessary to consider that the continual transformation of society require a synergy between peoples of the world irrespective of race, religion, and gender. It is also important to bear in mind that contemporary reality is a product of the internal contradictions of social fabric. Then Awodiya's interpretation of Osofisan's contrary suppositions falls short of a universal, all-inclusive paradigm where contraries supply the force of history. Given a Hegelian dialectic approach, which takes into account the existence of concepts and their opposites in society, the existence of Awodiya's "black people" will naturally demand the existence of "white people" as necessary ingredients of social transformation. It is within the interstice left by Awodiya in relation to Osofisan's literary creativity that a Hegelian dialectic method finds relevance.

Tunde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola appreciate Osofisan's dramaturgy from a Marxist perspective and outline the basic ingredients of Marxism, namely "masses revolt" as forming the thrust and fulcrum of Osofisan's plays. They submit that:

he devotes many of his works to championing masses' revolt against oppressive state structures. In several of his works, he charges the poor and the downtrodden to shake off the shackles of docile acceptance of the tyranny of authority and rebuff the oppressors and their agents(4).

This view by Akinyemi and Falola is sustained in the recognition of conflicts and contrary elements in Osofisan's drama. This agrees with Hegel's own identification of contrariety as an inalienable part of human existence and as a force that drives dramatic action. In the preceding quotation, two opposites can be identified which, for the purpose of this study can be classified as thesis and anti-thesis. These refer to "state structures and the masses". "State structures" in Osofisan's drama can be classified to include the police, tax collectors, and other agencies of government. The "masses" also can be classified as the workers, farmers, the underprivileged, and low-income earners. Viewed more closely, there is a sense in which the two opposites arrive at a synthesis where some members of the masses are part of the police force and tax collectors who in turn are used against members of their own class. Therefore, there is an intermingling of opposites which may render revolt as a process of change difficult. Viewed from a Hegelian dialectic perspective, these opposites flow into each other where both are required for the continual progression of humanity. In addition, the submission by Akinyemi and Falola appears to incite the masses and workers against their nouveau riche counterparts who they depend

on for wages and salaries. The relationship between the two sets of people is mutual as one set require the existence of its opposite for convenience and relevance. Akinyemi and Falola do not view these opposites in Osofisan's drama from the perspective of their complementarities to each other or according to their inter-relatedness in the continual transmutations of humanity. Viewing revolt as a reconciling factor or as the only determinant of change, it tends to abolish the reciprocal relationships, which conjoin opposites where the occurrence of an entity brings its opposite to existence. Again, according to Akinyemi and Falola, in Osofisan's drama "the poor forms the basis and existence of rich rulers"(4). The logical consequence of the foregoing inference is that the rich rulers also form the basis and existence of the poor so that the procedure in the relationship of the two contrary classes is predicated on the existence of each other. By placing the rich and the poor together, and by demonstrating their reciprocal relatedness, Osofisan echoes the Hegelian dialectic consciousness that "opposition and contrariety are the universal properties of nature" (229).

Akinyemi and Falola's view portrays Osofisan's dramaturgy as supporting a masses revolt as the only viable alternative to bring about or achieve social reconstitution where state structures that promote oppression will be abolished. Viewed critically, the above assertion refrains from highlighting the background or origin of class contradictions and also fails to enunciate the viability of a social structure without class dichotomy. While admitting Osofisan's commitment in juxtaposing opposing social structures, the view veers off to suggest that in the parallels, in this case the masses and the state, one aspect must necessarily resort to the instrumentality of revolution against its counterpart, the state, in order to achieve stability. Given this state of affairs, a question naturally arises: Is it possible to achieve a social structure that is devoid of class contradictions? If we argue from a Hegelian dialectical perspective, it follows that at the end of a revolution, when a new state is achieved, the new state will inevitably generate its own internal class contradictions, thus echoing Augusto Boal's sentiments that "each thing carries within it internal contradictions that makes it move from what it is to what it is not" (62). From a Hegelian dialectical premise, it can therefore be argued that the devotion of Osofisan's works towards social contraries reveals a mutual determination and configuration of opposed entities.

Chidi Amuta outlines Osofisan's commitment towards contraries inherent in the Nigerian society by remarking that:

Osofisan's plays can be seen as an attempt to use the

medium of drama to proffer materialistic explanations of the major contradictions in Nigeria's neo-colonial society. In this regard, such contemporary issues as bureaucratic ineptitude, indiscipline, armed robbery and peasant revolt have formed the major preoccupations of his plays with each contradiction being adduced as evidence of the unworkability of the present pseudo capitalist system in the country. (168)

Amuta suggests that Osofisan's preoccupation and concern in his plays is with the perennial interplay of materialistic contradictions in Nigeria's neo-colonial society. While outlining the issues that Osofisan has been preoccupied with - bureaucratic ineptitude, indiscipline, and armed robbery - Amuta includes peasant revolt as a necessary panacea to the contrary materiality which pervades the socio-economic topography in the country. In this case, revolt recurs as a viable option through which a perceived class disorder can be restored. Revolt is a necessary ingredient of Marxism. In the entire study, Amuta fails to advance a possibility of having a social structure without contrary suppositions. If it is agreed that every society is a conglomeration of disparate entities at the apex of which is man, and if it is considered that man reflects the protean complexities of the universe, it is then logical to say that concepts and their contraries are undeniable properties of that same universe. What Osofisan has done is to uphold the ontological principle of phenomenon and their opposites to highlight their inevitable conjoining. Having achieved this purpose, Osofisan awakens man to navigate through the murky waters and vicissitudes of contradictions. By a Hegelian dialectic interpretation, it can be argued that by highlighting materialistic contradictions in his plays, Osofisan invariably reveals a system of mutual contingencies where a concept generates its opposite and both are synthesized for humanistic progression.

Biodun Jeyifo concedes that Osofisan adopts a class approach in his plays which is symbolic of the interpenetration of the Marxist ideology where relations between individuals and the state are mediated by capital and labour. According to Jeyifo, "first everyone knows that Osofisan is a man of left, a radical writer and a critic who has embraced a class approach to the production and reception of literature in our society" (230). 'Class approach' as Jeyifo notes from the foregoing is an inexorable emblem of Marxism. If for Jeyifo, Osofisan adopts a 'class approach' in

his works, it follows that the playwright is committed to the realignment of the attendant social disequilibrium as the best response towards achieving social change. However, 'class approach' can be understood from an entirely different perspective. Perhaps, it can refer to a form of social engineering where the two prominent classes in society, the rich and poor, are inevitably intertwined so that both cannot do without each other. This is in line with the Hegelian dialectic which emphasizes the continual interaction of opposites in a reciprocal alignment. 'Class approach' can also be understood as examining society to uncover the various tensions within different classes which have prevented society from advancement. There is no definite indication that social stratification is the reason why various societies have not advanced in various ways. Furthermore, we can infer that Jeyifo's 'class approach' could mean a systematic study of society which addresses the issues of class as the reasons why various identities like culture, tradition, history, and folklore have all contributed to social regression. Therefore, 'class approach' in Osofisan's drama could have multiple interpretations and not necessarily Marxist. But certainly, it will be easy to ascribe the Hegelian dialectic as the most suitable interpretation for class approach since it provides a critical window for viewing class relations as inevitable, reciprocal unities.

James Tar Tsaaioor agrees with the above Marxist inflections in Osofisan's drama when he remarks that "as a committed and engaged artist whose sympathy resides with the people, Osofisan has mobilized his art and etched it on a visionary pedestal as a revolutionary imperative for the social transformation of society and the re-humanization of the people" (39). Again, Tsaaioor's 'revolutionary imperative for social transformation' is a definite echo of the Marxist ideology. To see revolution as the only way through which society can be transformed in Osofisan's works is to restrict the literary and ideological potential of a great man of letters. This is because if we stick with Tsaaioor's 'revolutionary imperative' it means the recognition of two different classes where the obviously exploited class must be at the vanguard of revolution. Contemporary social realities show that even when members of the lower class migrate to a higher class, they naturally become new exploiting masters and the vicious cycle continues. When those at the base of the social ladder climb up the ladder, they become new task masters. Many of those who are at the forefront of vanguard for change do so for their own inordinate ambitions. For example, during military regime in Nigeria when the late dictator Sanni Abacha was the Head of State, there emerged several groups like NADECO

that purported to fight for the masses. Today, almost all the members of the defunct NADECO are at the helm of the current hardship in Nigeria. Therefore, instead of

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