

Review

## Socio-political satire in Femi Osofisan's Many Colours Make the Thunder-King

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Oral literature is a vital tool that is sometimes deployed by African writers for criticizing the social and political situations in their countries with the aim of challenging and proffering solutions to unpleasant and oppressive practices by its leaders. Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* exemplifies this situation. It is observed that oral literature is not usually considered as a possible means of solving the social and economic challenges encountered in African countries. This study examines Nigeria's situation by focusing on the identifiable traditional aesthetics deployed in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* as a means of satirizing Nigerian leaders and also for possible reconstruction of their characters towards enhancement of a better society. It is imperative for Nigerian leaders to learn and apply other strategies that would be useful in eradicating the hydra-headed challenges confronting the nation. This paper considers the application of oral literature, a possible means of solving the social-political and economic problems ravaging the country. The research methodology used for this study is qualitative. A sociological approach is adapted to evaluate the African oral aesthetics deployed in the literary text. This study concludes and recommends that Nigerian leaders should go back to their traditional roots to seek the basis for economic, political and social innovation and progress if they are to succeed in developing the country.

**Key words:** African oral literature, challenges, possible means, relevance, satire, socio-political.

### INTRODUCTION

A literary writer as a member of a society is expected to be sensitive to the social and political happenings around him, and not just that but beyond the portrayal of negative social image and happenings, his obligation is to shape and direct the affairs of the society. A literary work is more relevant if it dwells on the consciousness and experience of the populace, reflecting their dispositions such as sadness, anger, condemnation, bitterness, crave for change and so on.

The literary writer must not overlook contemporary social and political problems ravaging his society, "all art is propaganda, though not all propaganda is art" (Achebe, 1964). It is expedient for the literary artist to expose and attack the ills and injustice in his society without fear or favour. For instance, it will be insensitive for any literary writer in Nigeria now to write anything outside the prevailing daily experienced dilapidation in the social, political and economic issues in the country

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ranging from corruption, election manipulation, poor infrastructures, lack of basic amenities, unemployment, dwindling economy, rampant fuel scarcity, Boko Haram insurgency associated with incessant bombings to insecurity, religious bigotry, kidnapping and so on. To buttress this point, Akano (2013) describes the role of the artist in the 21st century as:

Not quite different from what art helps do in society. It is climate and time which often impose compelling artistic tasks. We may say that in the 21st century Nigeria, there is enough discontent in the polity or affairs of the nation that is more engaging for the artist

It is also imperative for a literary writer to choose and better still adhere to a particular literary genre through which he will disseminate his ideas. Every writer is at liberty to choose any convenient genre out of the three main literature genres of drama, prose or poetry. By using a qualitative research methodology, this study evaluates the African oral aesthetics deployed in Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* with the aim of satirizing the unpleasant social and political situation in Nigeria and also proffering possible solutions to her leaders.

## DISCUSSION

### Osofisan: Explorer of oral art

Osofisan is one of the prominent second generation of literary writers in Nigeria whose works through the genre of drama, centre round the theme of social and political tribulations that came with the oil boom in Nigeria in the 70's. Osofisan commits his writings to the expression of African tradition and culture through the medium of English Language. It is evident through his theatre that he identifies with the down trodden masses in Nigeria as he devotes his plays to championing the proletariat revolt against oppressive state structures. As a total theatre practitioner, Osofisan employs the devices of oral literary form and the traditional performance mode in his plays not just for thematic and aesthetic effects, but also to make progressive and ideological political statements. Osofisan has once admitted that modern African playwrights restructure oral traditions in their works, stating that "they take legendary and mythical figures and bring them on stage, mostly to revive a tradition, identify with a glorious past, and reclaim a heritage" (Osofisan, 1974). *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* first published in 1999 as *Recent Outings* comprising: *Tegonni: An African Antigone* and *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* is one out of many other plays by Osofisan that combines African oral literature with Western techniques as a means of dealing with social and political problems in Nigeria.

### Preamble on oral literature

Oral Literature may be defined according to Bukonya and Nandwa (1983) as, "those utterances whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression". Most literary writings in the world first existed in oral forms (Awoonor, 1974; Uka, 1980; Chinweizu et al., 1980). These oral literary forms include but are not limited to; myths, legends, tales, riddles, songs, proverbs, epics and so on. It is in this context that Irele (1981) sees oral literature as "the fundamental inter-text of the African imagination".

African oral literature embraces the entire spectrum of the Africans ways of life, thoughts and ideas in terms of philosophy, feelings, behaviours, psychology, relationship with fellow Africans, and his ways of expressing the relationship in terms of socio cultural values etc. Prose narratives- myths, legends, folktales, riddles and jokes- are the most collected form of African oral literature, but also of equal importance are proverbs, riddles, songs, poetry, praise names, and tongue twisters from where all forms of drama evolved.

### Many colours make the Thunder-King: Ideology and content

The Yoruba traditional beliefs in divinities, spirits, mysteries, rituals, sacrifices as intermediaries through which they can reach and appease the Supreme Being, Olodumare inform the actions and attitudes of the characters in most of Osofisan's plays. Historical figures in Yoruba land such as Oduduwa, Oranmiyan, Moremi, Esu, Obatala, Orunmila and Ogun are freely mentioned in his plays.

Of the deified ancestors, Oduduwa and Sango are among the ancient Yoruba heroic men and women who have made useful contribution to the life and culture of the people and as such were deified. A popular legend among the Yoruba states that Sango was a human being who reigned as the fourth Alafin of Oyo. After his death, he was deified as Sango, the god of lightning and thunder who strikes as a manifestation of the wrath of Olodumare descending on the evil people in the community (Sekoni, 1988).

*Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* retells, in dramatic form, the story of Sango, the thunder King of Yoruba folklore, and his desire to transcend childhood, becoming a self-sufficient adult free from the influence of his legendary father, Oranmiyan.

**Sango:** Our people say- A man begets a child, and later, the child becomes a father

**Igunnun:** But they also add, my fiery King: "The child, however tall, does not become a man until he has grown to become the father of his father!" (1.1: 151).

He sends for an Ifa priest in order to find out the procedure to achieve this great feat. The priest after casting his nuts said he must marry a river and thereafter marry a forest and mountain in addition: namely Oya, Osun and Oba.

The play therefore sets out to answer a riddle; how can a man marry a river, a forest, and a mountain? The symbolic meaning of these three figures is subsequently revealed in the play. The Yoruba belief in the intermittent associations between the celestial and the terrestrial bodies is also portrayed in the play. The gods it is believed seldom come to human communities to restore and cleanse the earth. In one of such missions, Alagemo, the Yoruba primordial god, transforms into the human form to assist Sango, King of Igbeti at that time, to restore peace and sanity to the war torn community. This he did through master minding his marriage to Oya, Osun and almost succeeded in marrying Oba too but the plan was truncated by the first two wives (Oya and Osun) and the chiefs (Gbonka and Timi), because they thought she would be a threat to the dynasty. Failure to marry her however led to the downfall of Sango and his empire. The symbolic figures of a river, forest and mountain represent the three stabilizing forces a leader must be identified with which are prosperity (river), humanity (forest) and humility (mountain). Osofisan's interest in Sango's myth is not the belief in the content of the story but the philosophical essence of the whole experience. He uses the story as an analogy to political leadership in Nigeria (since Independence) with the observation that the "Sangoistic" tendencies are still prominent in the corridors of power and this has jeopardized the growth and development of the country in spite of her resources. All succeeding leaders have failed to channel the course to national prosperity. Rather, they are constrained by personal ego and complacency (Obafemi AND Abdulahi, 2006).

Sango's inordinate ambition nudges him onto many adventures without recourse to their societal effects. He seeks to surpass his predecessors in achievement by accepting to marry spirits. Osofisan assumes the traditional role of Igunnun, the masquerade storyteller, who features annually in the Yoruba festival of communion (with the ancestors) to emphasize the leaders' continuous crave for excessive power and the selfish desire to subdue the citizens. Sango's insatiable quest for power urges him to explore the world of spirits as a mark of his supremacy over his predecessors. He eventually comes to realise that it is not enough to be rich and powerful; one must also conquer the pride within oneself and be humble.

**Sango:** I am now a fugitive. I wanted to be greater than my father! But look where fate has pushed me! Even lower than the worst of my predecessors... (2.40: 237).

The play ends on a sad note as Sango loses everything he had including his Kingdom, wives, children, properties

and even his life, which he terminates by hanging himself. Sango's misadventure of being greedy, power-drunk and proud eventually led to his downfall. This is the lesson Osofisan wants to teach Nigerian leaders in their apparent misconduct and lawlessness.

### **African literary aesthetics and dramatic techniques in Many Colours Make the Thunder-King**

The allegorical play is a rich feast of theatre experience as the playwright uses various total theatre techniques including songs and dance to personify the inanimate, and celebrate all that keep the earth alive such as river, plant and animals.

### **Festival Motif**

Festivals in African Communities are occasions of merriment and joyous celebration through which ritual propitiation and sacrifice are offered by the community in order to control and dominate the natural forces around them. In essence, festivals are held mainly to offer sacrifices to ancestors for peace and blessing. They involve specialized music, dance and costume which serve as media for the interaction between the empyrean and the terrestrial. The ancestral spirits are believed to appear as masquerades or possess one of the citizens or reside in an object to enable the community commune with them. They return to the land of the living from time to time to look after those they left behind and exchange views and ideas aimed at providing guidance for their socio-economic and political well-being. They are also devised as an effective instrument for maintaining law and order in the community. Osofisan makes use of the Igunnun festival in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*. The festival originated from the Nupe tribe of Nigeria and spread to the Yoruba enclave in the South West.

**Song Leader:** Baba Igunnoko, father of masks, Welcome again from the land of the dead! It is a year since you last visited us... (prologue: 145).

The Igunnu's annual visit is characterized by different performances involving drumming, singing, dancing, story-telling and riddles. To emphasize the use of multi-media devices in the play, Osofisan concentrates on the ceremonial aspect of the festival, which brings the whole community together.

### **Use of proverbs, parables and riddles**

The Yoruba language, which informs the setting of the play, is very rich in proverbs, idioms and parables. Osofisan abundantly exploits verbal communication; a central aspect of Yoruba world-view in this work. He uses it to enhance the dynamics of human interaction in his

characterization through language. To start with, the play itself sets out to answer a riddle: how can a man marry a river, a forest and a mountain?

**Song Leader:** Igunnun, we do not follow your riddle! Why should a man even think of marrying a river?

**Igunnun:** Suppose he does my people? What step must he take next?

**Voices:** Tell us! Tell us yourself!

**Igunnun:** My friends, the answer is simple: If a man dares and marries a river, then he must also bring in a forest as her co-wife! (prologue:146)

**Igunnun:** A riddle! A riddle! If a man marries a River, and goes on to marry a forest, Tell me, my friends, what must he do to dispel the danger of an early death? The answer is simple, my friends! He must go to the mountain and ask for her hand! He must take the mountain for his third wife, or he'll never know peace in his life! (prologue: 148).

More riddles are used in the play during Alagemo's encounter with the ants inside the cave where he was locked up on Sango's orders. To regain his freedom, the ants offered to assist him but only on the condition that he passes a test, which comes in form of seven riddles as a sign of solidarity of every living thing.

**Ant:** Tell us, what looks at the valley, but never steps into it?

**Alagemo:** The Mountain!

**Ant:** Good! What is long, but has no shadow?

**Alagemo:** The road

**Ant:** What is it that always stands, and never sits down?

**Alagemo:** The tree

e t c. (2.24: 209).

Furthermore, just as the play is in the form of a riddle, it is also in the form of a parable. The parable of Sango, his two wives, Oya, and Osun, his loyal generals; Timi and Gbonka, and also his faithful servant, Alagemo.

**Igunnun:** ... It's a long story, my friends

**Voices:** Tell us! Tell us!

**Igunnun:** Settle down then, we're going start. (prologue: 148)

Similarly, the play centres round an appropriate proverb by Igunnun.

**Igunnun:** "The child, however tall does not become a man, until he has grown. To become the father of his father. (1.1: 151)

### Music, song and dance embellishment

There are hardly any of Osofisan's plays that do not

employ the traditional Yoruba music, song and dance. Songs are core to performance in most African traditional settings. As stated by Obafemi (1996) "no traditional performance can be conceived outside poetry (songs) and folktales on the one hand, and music and dance on the other hand. Of all the verbal arts however, song is the commonest". It features frequently in and outside performance because it is easily accessible. Events are recorded and are easily recalled through a song. Awodiya quotes Izevbaye remarks after watching a production of one of Osofisan's plays:

"I noticed people humming and singing some of the tunes as they left the theatre" (1988: 225).

In Osofisan's theatre, songs are however not just all about entertainment, they carry strong social messages. Dance, "the rhythmic movement of human body, in time and to make statements, is a continuous thread in the fabric of the existence of man and his society" (Bakare, 2002). It is used as a medium of expression for all levels of the society on occasions of ritual and social significance, and it is the most popular form of recreation and entertainment. A common feature of dance is its dependence on music but in a situation where there is no music, Africans sing, clap their hands, drag, hit or tap their feet on the floor to produce music to accompany their movements.

In Osofisan's theatre, there is a resourceful use of songs, music and dance as metaphors in manners that make them pre-emptive, proactive and interactive. The three elements possess participatory qualities because they evoke responses from the audience. They serve as means through which the audience actually partake of the action on stage.

Many Colours Make the Thunder-King opens with song, music and dance to welcome a mask as part of annual communion with the ancestral spirit, Igunnun.

The sound of Dundun drums, shekere, Agogo and Flute, accompanied by singing, welcomes us, as the lights come up on stage, to a public square... (prologue: 144)

In another instance, they are used during Osun's departure from Igbeti after her banishment from the palace by Sango on the false allegation of sexual immorality.

**Alagemo:** ...But what's that I hear? Drum? A song of lament? Ah, it's Osun's procession. Sango will you really let her leave? (1.23: 204).

Other instances are during the clothe changing scene with Sango, Alagemo and Oya (1.2: 161-164), and during the colour embellishment scene when Alagemo endowed the birds with colours in exchange for their voices, (1.6-8: 168-173).

### Audience involvement

Osofisan provides avenue either in the opening, mid-way or at the end of some of his plays for the audience to participate in the actions through songs, dance, questions, riddles and so on. The integration of the audience is a structural component that is embedded in African oral literary arts, particularly the folktales. According to Adedeji (1998)

African audiences do not want to be passive. Oral tradition provides them with direct means of vicarious participation in the production. They react to lines, often join in the songs, repeat dialogues, move in rhythm to the action on stage.

The integration of the audience in his plays is to remove the dividing wall between actors and the audience. Osofisan resolves the issue of audience participation in his dramaturgy by categorizing his audience into what Obafemi and Abdulahi (2006) describe as 'integral' and 'integrated' audience. The integral audience forms a corporate part of the play, while the integrated audience is the theatre audience, which is also sporadically drawn into the performance.

In the prologue to the play, the song leader, drummer, women, elder and voices form an integral part of the play (as audience to Igunnun, the master story-teller). They partake in the opening of the narrative and urges Igunnu to unravel the story in form of a riddle of why a man must not marry a river (prologue: 146). A member of the integrated audience is also allowed to participate in the play during the riddle scene involving Alagemo and the ants:

**Ant:** Now the last one! What is-

A member of the audience breaks in

**Member of the Audience:** can I ... will you, please, allow me to propose the last riddle?

**Ant:** Who are you?

**Member of the Audience:** I need to be sure you're not cheating.

**Ant:** And what business of yours is it if we do?

**Member of the Audience:** I bought a ticket! If Alagemo is not released, how will I see the end of the story. (2.24: 210)

### Multiple role-playing

Osofisan uses the dramatic technique of multiple role-playing in advancing the major themes of his plays. This is a process whereby the characters come out in full view of the audience to take on other roles; different from the ones they have been playing. Besides enhancing the Alienation Effect where the actors are detached emotionally from their roles, the technique also de-mystify

any ritual significance of roles such as empyrean figure, where the character utilizes a mask prop like the Igunnun masquerade in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*. The eventual de-robing of Igunnun in the full view of the audience, in the event of a change in his earlier role as a masquerade, to Alagemo, the chameleon in human form, completes the de-mystification of the ritual significance of the mask; "it also emphasizes the contemporary relevance of the festival" (Osofisan, 1974).

Taking out his sword, he attacks the tree, joined by his generals. Soon, we heard a loud groan, and the fruit comes crashing down. Shouting with triumph, SANGO goes to the fruit. As soon as he touches it, it splits open, and ALAGEMO, the human incarnation of the chameleon, dances out. It is preferably, the same actor who played IGUNNUN.

**Sango:** You again, Igunnun? How did you-

**Alagemo:** No, not Igunnun any more, that was only one of my masks! Call me Alagemo, Kabiyesi. (1.1: 156-157)

### Magical devices

These are employed in many of Osofisan's drama as a means of adding colour to the play, and also make the audience believe that the extraordinary can be attained. In *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*, the magical device is applied in instances of transformation particularly the clothes changing acts performed during Sango's courtship with Oya. The magical formula here lies in the music and song played by Sango. It serves as catalyst for Alagemo to achieve his magical feat of changing his clothes and that of Sango to exactly that of Oya and Ireti, her attendant.

**Alagemo:** Ah Princess! How beautiful you are. If you'll change into something befitting to accompany you. Such were the order of our King.

**Oya:** It's all right.

**Alagemo:** Can you please turn your backs? ... They do so, and Alagemo signals to Sango to play. As he plays, both their clothes change to the same colours as the princess's... (1.2: 162)

Other extraordinary acts displayed include: the transformation of the Iroko tree to Odon tree (1.1: 155), the transformation of the Odon fruit to Alagemo (1.1: 156), changing of the drab-coloured birds to beautiful colours after embracing Alagemo (1.7:170), emergence of the goddess of Iroko tree from the belly of the tree which opened like a door (1.17: 191) and Alagemo's transformation to Oya's baby when he was about to be sacrificed (2.38: 233).

## Personification

This technique invests abstractions or inanimate objects with human qualities. It is borrowed by the playwright from the African folktale tradition which is usually of stories woven round animals that converse like human beings such as tortoise, dog, elephant, lion, and rabbit and so on. In the play, Osofisan personifies animals such as birds as he makes them to talk and sing during the period Alagemo and Sango were in the forest to woo Osun, (1.7-8: 169-171), turtle as a messenger that spoke to Oya and also ushered in Alagemo and Sango at Oya's palace, (1.2: 159-160), and ants who were made to engage Alagemo in a dialogue inside the cave where he was left to die. He also regained his freedom through their help after passing the riddle test they subjected him to. They dug a tunnel leading to the outskirts of the town through which he escaped. Imagine, ants achieving such strenuous and difficult task! It translates that our leaders can achieve the almost impossible too if only they make genuine and concerted efforts. Plants, such as food crops and flowers were also personified as they are made to take human form in Osun's procession when she was leaving the land of Igbeti, (2.22: 202).

Apart from giving the play a folktale outlook, personifying inanimate objects by Osofisan also stirs the emotion of the audience. Take for instance, the ants rendering assistance to Alagemo, when human beings whom he had laboured for treated him unjustly.

**Member of the Audience:** Yes, that will satisfy you, no doubt. You're ants!

Ants: Listen to that. "You're ants!" as if we're not the ones to do the digging, while you just sit there and watch!... We'll get out of here. Come my friends. Let's start digging! We'll make a tunnel from here, to the outskirts of the kingdom. (2.24-25: 210-211)

## Narrator technique

This folkloric device is used in the play to offer background information, fill in the gaps between events and enhance audience's direct interaction with the stage. Osofisan's narrator as in folktales, displays power of oratory and corresponding body movements that motivate the theatre audience, he also appropriately directs other stage actions. These characteristics are aptly displayed through Iggunun who is the narrator in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*.

The narrator not only functions as a guide to make the audience understand the story better, his appearance also removes all forms of illusions about any direct relationship between the story and the audience's reality. As the narrator calls for a dramatization of events, the dramatization mellows the fantasy attributed to fairy tales.

In addition, the technique establishes a rapport between the actors and the audience in a manner analogous to the folktale tradition. In the play, the crowd joins Iggunun, the master storyteller, in the familiar dancing steps that characterize the annual event (prologue: 147).

## Relevance of usage of oral literature in Nigerian literary works to the society

Osofisan consciously employs the devices of oral literary arts and the traditional performance mode in his plays. His conscious intention is to create a popular theatre form, with which the masses can easily identify. Through this form, he is able to elicit responses from his audience and mobilize them to participate in the drama, thus breaking the barrier and bringing drama to function at the level of the popular audience.

Oral literature provides a way in which the nation's history, culture and tradition are preserved. With them, the people will understand their values and norms better and aim at building on the achievements of the past rather than destroy them. This role performed by oral literature is emphasized by Achebe (1964) thus:

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity... the worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it, by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Igbo that a man who cannot tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell where the rain began to beat them. After all, the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality; it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history. (1964: 157).

A literary work built on Nigerians' history, songs, drama, dances, drumming, masquerades, puppetry, folktales, and proverbs and so on, mirrors the tradition, culture and ways of life of the people and captures the reality of their existence. It is a means of building a critical consciousness in the masses, mobilizing them for action, engaging them in struggle and reflecting on the struggle. Such work becomes an instrument in the hands of a greater number of people in their struggles for better living conditions, for more rights, for peace, security, more access to basic amenities, provision of quality education and even for food or more food in their stomach. Essentially, such work is used to resist several forms of oppression whether social, economic and/or political. The people are challenged to look critically at their situation and compelled to want to change it.

## CONCLUSION

Oral literature serves many functions in African society. In addition to providing amusement, they are used to educate the young, to validate rituals and beliefs, to promote conformity to cultural norms, and to provide psychological release in an institutionalized manner. This study brings into focus the identifiable traditional aesthetics deployed in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* as a means of satirizing Nigerian leaders and also for possible re-construction of their characters towards enhancement of a better society. One can as well proffer that Nigerian leaders should go back to their traditional roots to seek the basis for economic, political and social innovation and progress if they are to succeed in developing the country.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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