

The Limitations of the Marxist Ideals in the Plays of Femi Osofisan: A Study of *Once upon Four Robbers* and *Morountodun*

Nelson T. Obasi

nelsonobasik@yahoo.com

Ikechukwu, Aloysius Orjinta. PhD(Munich), PhD(Ibadan)

aaiggonzagas@gmail.com

University of Nigeri, Nsukka

Abstract

This work examines *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Morountodun* by Femi Osofisan to debunk the much touted assumptions by his readers and critics that his plays are pure Marxist dramaturgy. The work argues that though Osofisan is a Marxist writer who demands social change in favor of the oppressed and the downtrodden masses in the society as the themes of his plays express, the texts lack Marxist spirit to significant degree. The reason being that, difference, departure, and even superiority are often hastily read into his works. In addition, dialogues in the texts are intra-class rather than inter-class. This negates the concept of labour struggle and Marxist doctrines where dialogue is between two opposing forces. Moreover, as a dramatist, Osofisan's theory of aesthetics is sometimes compromised by practice. All these are what this work tends to examine and interrogate.

1. Introduction

This work examines Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers and Morountodun* to interrogate the limits and or otherwise of the author as a Marxist as claimed by many of his critics. The man, Femi Osofisan, no doubt, is a pillar in the sphere of dramaturgy not only in Nigeria but also outside the shores of Nigeria. He is many things in one. Osofisan is a consummate man of the theatre, a skilled playwright, a poet, an actor, a director, and an artist of great repute, while the province of his plays is neck-deep in the Yoruba culture. On the other hand, the major themes in his plays are corruption, injustice, oppression, treachery, self-reliance and perseverance. Others are determination, feminism, compassion, collaboration, blackism, and revolution, among others.

Like other theatre scholars, past and present, who have the singular task of making their societies conducive for human habitation, Osofisan focuses his energies on themes such as injustice and oppression, self-reliance, corruption, treachery, determination, collaboration, revolution, compassion, among others in their works. Time was when writers or poets were seen as mere entertainers or people not fit to leave in an ideal republic but be banished for simple reason that their works were seen as corrupting the minds of the people (*The Republic*, Book 3, 10). Others also feel that literature is nothing but a mere witnessing of a kind. Skeptics, according to Maxwell A. E. Okoli, "have never accorded it the force and vision capable of stirring up a revolution" (71). They thought of the writer as not more important in society as an ordinary dart player.

However, history has changed all these, for the writer has metamorphosed into a visionary, a soldier, an agent of social change, using his writing as a weapon. Great writers work for progress by transforming their societies and its conditions, arousing men from their apathy and servile sentence, delivering them from the shackles of enslaving traditions, religions, dogmatism and political dictatorship. They often times launches into militant literature, raising their ideals like a banner, like a light for the people, and pulls off a revolutionary change that leaves society, wiser and more progressive (*Literature and Social Change*, 72). Literature on the other hand, which is the product of the writer's thought processes is an excellent tool of propagating ideas and sensitizing men to dream and aspire in their society. It serves both social and political causes that could be used to hatch and realize revolutions. It has the power to destroy in order to reconstruct. Literature thus could be said to be a catalyst for social reform as well as a missile against all forms of abuse. These tendencies of the writer and that of literature are what Marxist ideology strongly seeks to espouse. For as Ken Smith submits, "any person seeking to change the world in a socialist direction, the ideas of Marxism are a vital, even indispensable tool and weapon to assist the working class in its struggle to change society" (1).

Perhaps there is no doubt that, Femi Osofisan could be classified as a Marxist writer who demands social change in favour of the oppressed and down trodden masses in the society as the theme of his plays expresses. But this Marxist ideology is limited to some degree, contrary to the views of his numerous readers and critics who see him as a consummate Marxist. It is on this note, and indeed, this popular believe that this work tends to differ and to interrogate these claims as contentious. The reason being that, difference, departure and even superiority are often hastily read into his works.

This work is based on the theory of Dialectic Materialism as propounded by Karl Marx. Since this work's main focus is to determine the degree of Marxist spirit in the works of Femi Osofisan, Marxism and

dialectical materialism will be explained. Karl Marx is the father of this universal movement known as Marxism. Initially, Marx's ideas were dismissed as irrelevant but today, his ideas have resurfaced time without number, challenging the unusual, unjust and exploitative nature of capitalist system. In order to change these capitalist tendencies, Marx's ideas came into force – a body of work collectively described as Marxism.

For anyone seeking to change the world in a socialist direction, the ideas of Marxism are a vital, even indisputable tool and weapon to assist the working class in its struggle to change society. Marxism recognizes that revolutionary theory is incomplete in itself, the praxis, the operation of that theory when power is seized by a revolutionary party that professes the theory is what constitutes the infallible test of that theory (Wole Soyinka, forward). As Ken Smith enunciates, "Marxism adds to an understanding of the capitalist world and how to change it (1). Change is the bedrock of Marxist ideas. No wonder Marx described capitalism as evil and called for its change while resorting to socialism. As Karl Marx himself has said, and which Marxists are fond of repeating - the philosopher has only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is, however, to change it (2).

2. Typical Attributes of a Marxist Play/Drama.

The nub of Marxism from the foregoing is on social change or revolutionary aesthetics. It is an indispensable tool and weapon to assist the working class in its struggle to change the society, especially in a socialist direction. The proponents of Marxism presumably noted with nostalgia the alarming rate at which the world economy was drifting into capitalist society, thereby creating a division between the "haves" and "have nots." Hence, they sought for a change from the status quo between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and enthroning a classless society. Capitalism enthrone economic exploitation, enslavement, marginalization and oppression which many governments use against the governed. No wonder Karl Heinrich Marx himself described capitalism as evil that must be expunged. Marxism, therefore, is a philosophy aimed at obliterating all traces capitalism.

Marxism emerged at once as a revolutionary transformation and a progressive unification of the society. To this end, Ernest Mandel asserts that, "Marxism does not believe in innate knowledge let alone intuition. Nor does it behave one-sidedly as the 'educator' of the proletariat, or the 'judge' of the historical movement (the various ups and downs of the class struggle). Instead, Marxism constantly learns from perpetually changing reality. It understands that the educators themselves need to be educated, that only a collective revolutionary praxis, rooted on the one hand in scientific praxis, and on the other in the real situation of the proletariat, can produce this self-education of the revolutionaries and all toiling humanities.

Marxism is a form of communism in which there are two distinctive classes – the production class on one hand and the working class on the other hand. The idea is that the two classes work together in order to create a society in which there is no real need for currency or private ownership but instead, it is a society by which both classes work together to achieve common goals.

Characteristically, Marxist play/drama deals with class analysis. To this end, Marxist themes center on the "haves" and "have nots" in which there is a palpable gulf between the rich and the poor or between the upper and the lower class. The arrangement is such that the proletariats are constantly being manipulated by the bourgeois in a given society leading to what could be regarded as social alienation – a situation where workers are simply regarded as socio-economic aliens in their own environment. As a result, there are always conflicts between the two opposing social class. The theme of alienation and exile is one of the most persistent themes in the literature of Marxist texts.

Marxist texts point out the inhuman conditions of existence in a capitalist system which results in tensions between the upper and the lower classes. The problem of such plays is human-centered. Human beings create problems for its kind. These create the necessity for change. Such a change or revolution is usually violent in Marxist plays.

Marxist plays are also replete with characters with leadership qualities rather than mere charlatans. Such characters or protagonists must be ready to survive the confrontation with the forces that exist within the dangerous terrain of transformation. A kind of transformation of the radical, from individual to the collective and back (Victor Ukaegbu, 42). Marxist characters must be able to rise above human frailties and possess the necessary revolutionary credentials.

Marxist literature avoids the issue of religion but rather deals with concrete history (facts) and not myth or guesses. Myth and history are not subverted in any way for purposes of clarity.

Thematically, Marxist plays are devoid of ambiguities and contradictions. It should not convey multiple interpretations to the audience but uses direct statements. Problems propounded by Marxist texts should be forthcoming with the attendant solutions

Moreover, dialogues in Marxist plays are intra-class rather than inter-class. In effect, dialogue is between two social forces or classes – the oppressed and the oppressor; between a dominant class and a toiling class

3. Femi Osofisan's Marxist Ideals:

Irrespective of the critique on the degree of Femi Osofisan's Marxist ideals, he is no doubt, one of the second generation of Nigerian dramatists whose plays portray a radical revolutionary perspective on contemporary socio-economic and political issues. Osofisan devotes his plays to championing the proletariat revolt against oppressive state structures. His drama charges the poor and the down-trodden to shake off the shackles of docile acceptance of the tyranny and authority, and rebuff the oppressor and all his agents. The plays seek to evoke instant change by inciting the audience to action, using theme and language as vehicles. The main objective for such usage, according to Muyiwa P. Awodiya, "is to dislodge and alter the status quo, by sensitizing the oppressed, to revolt against the oppressor" (25).

As a Marxist or revolutionary writer, Osofisan strongly believes that for a harmonious co-existence, the system of deprivation that pauperizes the people through economic exploitation must be changed through forceful means. He also believes as well as recommends, in the opinion of Lawal Oshioke, "the overthrow of any draconian government that dehumanizes and exploits the masses which could be a viable solution to the exploitation in the social system" (5).

His works highlight the necessity for the masses to struggle both from the cultural and political perspectives and to express consciousness towards the fight against oppression. The continuous struggles of the oppressed against their oppressor, he believes, will certainly lead to justice one day, no matter the adamant nature of the oppressor. In a Osofisan's *Morountodun*, for instance, the audience is faced with the peasant's revolt against what they described as exploitation of the government against the people.

As Muyiwa P. Awodiya submits, "Osofisan's themes center mostly on revolution, collaboration, blackism, compassion, women, treachery, corruption, injustice and oppression, love, determination, self-reliance and perseverance (80). Pontificating on Osofisan's Marxist inclination, Harry Garuba points to the fact that, he has emerged clearly as a revolutionary ideologue and the most consciously intertextual Nigerian playwright, basing his work on the idea of cultural renaissance and nationalism. Sharing similar view, Chidi Amuta posits that, "Osofisan's works are characteristic not just by their accent on political commitment but also on a certain ideological predilection that is class-partisan and sees socio-political salvation mainly in terms of the revolutionary transformation of society (167).

Osofisan navigates into the realm of myths, history, as well as the contemporary environment to engage in ideological stance about his society in a way that is both revolutionary and subversive. The recourse to myths and history, according to Tejumola Olaniyan is to question the political tyranny which serves to distance and shelter the writer from the menace of present terrors, from the tyranny in the corridors of power on the African continent (74).

Osofisan also believes that, "though plays do not have the power to topple governments, but they can in the words of the Latin American writer, Mario Vargas Llosa, "become a meaningful and positive activity, which depicts the scars of reality and prescribes remedies, frustrating official lies so that the truth shines through" (29).

4. Limitations in the Marxist Ideals of Femi Osofisan's Plays

Though some scholars argue that Femi Osofisan is a complete Marxist, this work debunks these prevailing assumptions and states that some of his texts lack Marxist spirit to a significant degree. This view is supported by some scholars like Dapo Adelugba who argues that, Femi Osofisan espouses Marxian doctrines, that are inadequate to classify him as a Marxist as propagated by many critics who are unable to justify such descriptions (39). He rather qualifies his works as proto-Marxian. Adelugba's view is that Osofisan is not a pure Marxist but expresses Marxist tendencies based on his appropriation of intertexts or borrowings from other writers. Such borrowings, according to Tess Onwueme, "connotes multiplicity of meanings and forms that oscillate between old and new theatricalities, between liberal and radical ideologues, between retrogressive and progressive world-views."

Niyi Osundare in like manner describes Osofisan's plays as mere tendencies without a hard-and-fast or a clear-cut ideological stance... tendencies that range from liberal through the radical to the revolutionary (26). What Osundare meant is that, it is difficult to place Osofisan's plays as pure Marxism considering the nature of his plays.

Both Brecht and Osofisan's works have contempt for traditional or liberal humanist drama which sees human nature as fixed and unchanging. Yet they hardly depart completely from it. Whereas Brecht deploys the epic theatre in contradistinction to the traditional order, Osofisan deploys popular theatre tradition to a similar effect. Onwueme, therefore, argues that in spite of their innovativeness and experimentations, they do not achieve a clean break from the traditional liberal humanist theatrical modes and their attendant problematics. Rather their hybridity and hybridization of theatrical traditions have created aporia in the very process of filling the gaps created by earlier works and dramatists (62).

Apart from oscillating between the tenets of traditional liberal humanist theatre and modernist radical aesthetics, Osofisan's dramatic theory of aesthetics, are sometimes compromised by practice. Even Muyiwa P. Awodiya, a stout defender of Osofisan's Marxist ideals surprisingly shares Osundre's view that, "although Osofisan's plays advocate social change, they do not have a clear-cut ideological leaning" (38). The implication being that, critics differ markedly in their opinions in categorizing his works because they cover a wide range of doctrines.

Mohammed O. Bhadmus posits that, "differences, departure and even superiority are too often hastily read into Osofisan's plays" (73). These hurried assumptions are made by these critics as a result of what Norbert Oyibo Eze describes as "commitment to predetermined schema, which hardly affords the critics the opportunity to treat individual plays as unique literary creation, and those that depart from the tradition" (21). This is because a work of art ought to be well-read, well-examined and well-analyzed in order to determine its proper ideological bent.

Osofisan's plays are fund of identifying problems without proffering solutions to them, while throwing the equations back to the audience to find the solutions themselves (Sola Adeyemi, 5). For instance, in *Once Upon Four Robbers* which centres around the debate on the public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria, Osofisan advances the argument that it is in fact the society that is criminal minded. He rationalizes that there is no reason behind executing armed robbers while neglecting fraudulent civil servants, corrupt law officers, politicians and profiteers, but he stops short of prescribing an alternative solution.

Victor Ukaegbu one of the most critical of Osofisan's works faults him for creating fictional women in his plays who fail to transcend the culturally constructed patriarchal myths and stereotypes that locate them always on the margins of the society. Citing *Morountodun*, for instance, Osofisan created a woman character (Moremi) that is unable to rise above the human frailties she berates in others, although these shortcomings are found whenever unproven polemics and self-preservation collide (184-5). The effect is that, in *Morountodun*, Moremi's action is said to be debilitating and hardly enhances her revolutionary credentials.

5. Limitations in *Once Upon Four Robbers*:

In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, dialogue in the text is intra-class because no character or group of characters can be designated as representative of the dominant class. The encounters in the play between the robbers and the market women, the traders customers and the soldiers clearly show that they all belong to the same class – the down trodden. The soldiers whose images in the play are created as pro-establishment are contradicted by their activities as guards and keeping watch over the market. The implication is that they are rather portrayed as toiling men. In a true Marxist text, conflict is waged between two social forces; between a dominant and a toiling class.

It is noteworthy that in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, myth and history are subverted. However, Saint Ghilekaa believes that the playwright uses them as pegs to hang his ideological and political idiosyncrasy. The implication is that Osofisan abandons the mystical ways of achieving myth and concrete history in this play. The use of charm by the robbers to dispossess the market women of their wealth promotes spiritual and subjective experience. This also annuls labour on the part of the robbers as well as denies the market people of consciousness, for Marxism thrives on interrelationship between two opposing social forces. The historical world for Marx is the product of human industry or activity. Labour, therefore, demands that all that man needs is not provided by nature in ready made form but to work hard to satisfy his needs.

6. Limitations in *Morountodun*:

One of the major Marxist flaws in *Morountodun* is the attempt by the playwright to create a woman character or a heroine that is unable to accomplish the revolutionary aesthetics demanded of her as the chief protagonist in the play. Titubi was neither consistent nor persistent in her struggle to defend her people against the revolting peasant farmers. Her emotional state and subsequent renouncement of her bourgeois heritage robs her of the heroic character the playwright may have tended to achieve. A tragic character must be appropriate or true to type, and should neither blow cold nor hot. Also, a tragedy deals with positive and active protagonist caught in sharp conflict with opposing forces. The tragic hero suffers greatly and goes to disaster in the midst of the struggle. To this end, A. B. C. Duruaku posits that, the dramatist does not contrive a denouement to save the hero or heroine from catastrophe or to safe him/her from suffering (77).

Morountodun also portrays characters that vacillate as well as oscillate in their deeds and behaviours without being firm in their struggle. For instance, Titubi (Moremi) plans to join forces with the peasants, the Superintendent raises propaganda against the State while Isaac and Buraimoh decamped from the farmers struggle and aligned with the oppressor. Osofisan, according to his critics, believes in collectivity as a strong

instrument to fight against the oppressor but the flirtation of his characters in the play undermine his Marxist ideal and labour struggle. Also the use of poison by the Igbo warriors robs the Ife people of consciousness. This negates labour struggle and moves the text away from Marxism to idealism. Marx condemns idealists for mystifying the world and taking people away from concrete history. He advocates the need to move from the world of idea championed by Hegel to that of experience. Moreover, use of poison is anti-labour, for labour is man's purposeful activity through which he adapts natural objects and uses them to satisfy his needs. In labour process, man expends his physical, nervous and mental energy.

7. Conclusion:

Marxist ideology, principles and practice and the extent to which Femi Osofisan adopts them in his dramaturgy, is the focus of this discourse. Marxism as we know it today predated Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) but he popularized and ennobled its practice. Marxism arose out of the need to wrestle power from the tyrannical and despotic hegemonies that has expropriated and appropriated the commonwealth of the people for their selfish ends.

From his days, Marx knew that there was an ongoing dialectical struggle between two different classes, whether it was the lord and serf in the feudal days, or capitalist and workers in his time. Each time the battle would lead to mutual destruction or a revolution in society. The evils Marx saw, fought and died for in his days, not only still manifest today but have become commonplace. In many parts of the world, especially in the Third World countries, it is the same story of exploitation, corruption, embezzlement of public funds, injustice and oppression, insensitivity, extortions, mismanagement of public tilts, policy somersault, irregular and sometimes outright non-payment of salaries and pensions of retired workers who have served their countries meritoriously, among others. Marxism was, therefore, enthroned to give free reign to these suffering masses who have for long been emasculated and ramshackled by the power-brokers.

Like Marx, Femi Osofisan hopes for an egalitarian society. He is without doubt, a Marxist and a radical writer whose plays, according to Muiyiwa P. Awodiya, "are revolutionary in that they propose radical political alternatives for the present social orders and who uses literature as a weapon of social change" (25). However, the point of departure for which this work seeks to interrogate is that, from the analysis of the plays: *Once Upon Four Robbers and Morountodun*, the playwright falls short of and/or negates Marxist doctrine to certain degrees. This is in contra-distinction to the popular view that Femi Osofisan's plays are complete Marxist ideology.

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