

## Osofisan's Women in Open Struggle: A Sororal Encounter with Morountodun

---

\* Mabel I. E. Ewwierhoma

*Morountodun* is divided into sixteen parts and these episodes, need one say, represent the sixteen palm nuts which are Orunmila's repository of wisdom.

– Harry Garuba

*Morountodun* recreates the Moremi myth of salvation to meet the present needs of the Nigerian society: a struggle to defeat forces of oppression, tyranny and injustices.

– Muyiwa Awodiya

ONCE upon a legend, the Igbos always harassed the Ile-Ife people. They disguised as masquerades in raffia costumes and frequently raided, plundered and captured the goods and citizens of Ile-Ife. This made life and property unsafe. The people made sacrifice upon sacrifice, but the solution to this problem was not forthcoming. Moremi, a woman of the city, offered to go into the midst of the Igbos and discover the secret behind their fearful appearance. To the goddess of the river Esimirin she went and pledged her only son and child, Oluorogbo. Offering herself to be captured, she infiltrated the Igbo fortress, got their secret – that the masquerades were men disguised in raffia costume

---

\* Mabel I. E. Ewwierhoma, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja, Abuja FCT, Nigeria

Rama, Adunni and Niniola who belong to the Yeye Oba group, and Alhaja Kabirat. These extras are anti-progressive in their thinking, words and actions. Like Niniola and her Yeye Oba group, they lack the vision that motivates Moremi or Titubi. In Alhaja Kabirat, we see a mogul of the market place, whose faith is in money. Money achieves a lot of results for her: it buys Alhaji Buraimoh and Lawyer Isaac, gets her into a maximum security prison, and brings other benefits. But this money does not earn her any awareness for her to contribute to the progress of her society, except to exploit others.

### Conclusion

Osofisan's progressive women prove that as society is in evolution, so are women's role from what they were in the past. No wonder F. O. Balogun observes that

Our written literature shows a lot of discrimination in the choice of characters as the embodiment of heroism. The bias is in favor of male characters (p. 57).

Through Osofisan's freedom from this blame, it is then evident that we need multiple 'Morountoduns' in our society if we are to thrive on the ideals of equality, justice and freedom, and at the same time seek to achieve the goals of human rights. Katwiwa Mule sees the "importance of theater and performance as a site for active political and social agency" (7). *Morountodun* epitomizes this activity as she performs in the theatre of open struggle against sexism and oppression. Osofisan uses these women to probe and end social ills, economic exploitation and political oppression on behalf of the peasants (especially Titubi). Titubi declasses herself and does not return to her erstwhile class that was the oppressive one.

Through them, Osofisan condemns the inequality that

– then escaped from their midst and went back to her people. At their next raid, Moremi single-handedly sets fire to the Igbos, and they flee. The Igbos no longer trouble them after this. Moremi became a heroine, and till this day, sacrifices are made to her in the ancient city of Ile-Ife.

Once upon another time, 1969, in the village of Wasimi, there was a group of subsistence farmers. They were oppressed by the ruling class – the government and people who were supposed to see to their welfare. The injustices were too much to bear, and since they did not benefit from the government, the people revolted. This revolt is popularly known as the ‘Agbekoya’ revolt – ‘farmers resent oppression’. The farmers were mostly against the menace of the council officials, the harassment of ‘akodas’, sanitary inspectors, the Marketing Board officials, lack of electricity and pipe-borne water supply. They almost overran the western region of Nigeria, until calls for armistice and negotiation on both sides ended the revolt.

The play *Morountodun* recreates the first legend and is based on it, and refashions the Agbekoya incident on 1969. The revolt was a mass revolt, a rebellion that actually did not lead to a bloody revolution, but expressed the people’s grievances. The civil war was still on in the country, and Nigeria was just nine years old after independence in 1960. Femi Osofisan thus re-creates history through this creative effort. Also he demythologizes Moremi, and in Titubi he entrenches the perspectives of the mythical figure that are essentially human. Moreover, Titubi sees in her a female predecessor. Osofisan’s treatment of the material allows for a social indictment of his society. His refusal to be awed by myth signifies the need for history to be confronted and interpreted to aid the understanding of present events.

To Harry Garuba, the play,

*Morountodun*, is therefore not only an epic of struggle in the historic sense of the farmers' collective confrontation with the state, but also on the personal level in Titubi's battle with the mythical socio-historical forces that have formed her (p. 12).

The historical incident that fashions Titubi is the Moremi motif brought into the play by the writer. Moremi lived in a feudal society, but Titubi's society is a pro-capitalist one, a society in a transformatory process, not up to a decade old (post-independence). A re-interpretation through real, contemporary events may in fact lead to a transformed prospective society. We see this in the re-assessment of Moremi's role, and the presentation of the staged Agbekoya revolt. Again to Garuba, one possibility is open before us, this is "A way in which we can look into the past with the eyes of the present and modify or change the meaning it held for our ancestors" (p. 15).

In re-interpreting this history, therefore, Osofisan brings in the trickster element of ESU of betrayal. This is evident in Titubi who betrays the cause of her class and the government which she originally stands for. This class she represents when she 'volunteers' to capture the peasants' leader, Marshal, and hand him to the authorities. Titubi, therefore, re-interprets the role Moremi played in Ile-Ife when she infiltrated the Igbo camp. Osofisan, according to Garuba, "emphasizes changes in recurrence" (p. 15). Evidently, this comes about because "Titubi carries within her, the possibility of Moremi" (p. 14).

The social incident that moulds Titubi is multi-faceted. There is the 'grab-grab' society that produced her and we have her mother's wealth and control of their town. As an

offspring of single-parentage, Titubi's social conditions can be seen in another light. Moreover, the people within the society are sensitive to social criticism and would not hesitate to support the rich against their critics to ensure their means and source of livelihood – the pockets of the wealthy. Similarities between Titubi's and Osofisan's society can be recognised. As in the writer's society, "the state of the play too is exposed as being corrupt, exploitative and dehumanizing" (Uji 38). In the same vein, Uji reiterates his opinion on the social conditions existing in the play: "the state of the play which is wholesale capitalist, serves the interest of the privileged few" (p. 38).

It is not surprising, then, that Osofisan presents the Agbekoya versus the government conflicts as a picture of class antagonism in a capitalist society. His option, therefore, is for a revolutionary reconstruction of the society. In *Morountodun*, Femi Osofisan's anti-egoistic stand is evident. Though the play bears the name of a single character and her exploits in the armed struggle exhibited, nevertheless the revolt is not hers alone, but also that of the masses. By design, Osofisan unfolds before us a vision that is collectively pursued and attained. The hero does it not alone, but sticks with the other characters – Titubi and the women, Marshal and the men. These peasants make and change their own history, with no reliance on magic, gods, but their will and right to a better life.

Osofisan's ideas in the play's universe become linked with contemporary issues in the Nigerian society in particular and the African continent in general. For in a situation when money earned has no value, when violence, political instability, lack of peace, corruption, bribery, and inflation are nooses round the poor man's neck, the rich getting richer and the poor poorer, the peasants' uprising, their gathering

