

THE BARD, THE TEXT AND GENDER CONTEXT: A FOCUS ON FEMI OSOFISAN'S *TWINGLE-TWANGLE*: A TWINNING TAYLE AS A STORYTELLING FESTIVAL

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Abstract

Bards as verbal artists existed in Africa eons of time ago. Although the bardic art has undergone several changes over time, many African societies had and still have bards, narrators, storytellers and other lyrists in the folk, traditional, and other modern media of communication. The narration and perception of verbal art centre on and are greatly influenced by the channels through which they are performed and communicated. Some of the means of communicating them are the traditional and unmediated, while others are mediated yet traditional. Others are scripted and become literature, while retaining aspects of traditional lore and folk performance even in full festivals. Several written texts draw a lot of inspiration from the oral or verbal arts and vice versa. Many of the texts for performance have been adapted from the oral forms. These have contributed a great deal to the growth of written plays based on the culture and tradition of Africa. They also signalled a change from traditional contexts to modern ones of performance. The main thesis of this paper is that bards often expose the gender relations within any community. The demonstration is often replete with lore that is in itself a textual manifestation of the social conditions in which the people live their lives. Context here stands for the social or performance contexts like festivals and other ceremonies in the community. The bard can be seen as the dramatist who tells the story, as well as the lead character, narrator, lyricist, or any character by another name in the play. The bardic tradition manifests in narration, song, chant, incantation, poetic rendition, call and response, storytelling, among other aspects of bardic presentation. The bardic has been embraced by some Nigerian

dramatists, like Zulu Sofola, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Tess Onwueme, Wale Ogunyemi, and Sam Ukala (who terms it folkism) in play texts featuring aspects of African culture and tradition. This paper shall focus on the bardic tradition in Femi Osofisan's *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle* in order to assess how the chosen dramatist has engaged the text in narrating some contextual evidence as regards storytelling festival and gender constructs in the African society.

Introduction

The plays of Femi Osofisan have been approached from different perspectives and stances. These analytical approaches have made it possible to access meaning and significance in his works. Some of these approaches range from the feminist-womanist, through the populist-Marxist and the folklorist-cultural, to the deconstructive-semiotic. Femi Osofisan's plays arrived on the Nigerian theatrical and literary scene at a time the first-generation dramatists like Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Zulu Sofola, James Ene Henshaw, Kalu Uka, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and many others had explored colonialist and post-colonialist, cultural, political and national themes in their plays. Second-generation Nigerian dramatic creativity had started to unfold and Osofisan's plays dwelt on the failing structures of national and traditional life in the forms of corruption and injustice among several of such. His approach to drama was new at the time as regards the use of the hero in the play, mass action, the foregrounding of women, and revisionism of earlier plays by other dramatists as well as the open-endedness of his plays. This allowed the audience to independently judge proceedings in the play from their perspectives, whether correct or wrong and reach its verdict. Long before democratic ideals were applied to national events, Osofisan had proclaimed some of such in the realization of his play's plots and the crafting of his characters. The cultural economy of storytelling, masquerade festival and other indigenous theatre forms thus gained a boost through the unearthing of their features in performance texts.

Most African plays have oral, bardic or folkloric components which are basically rooted in customs and traditions. This stance in literature termed folklore is considered by Bernth Lindfors (2002) "in its broadest sense to include popular beliefs, stereotypes and verbal performance style as well as folktales, proverbs, and other forms of patterned oral art" (3). When realized before an audience, or read as text, these bardic elements assist in making meaning and become message carriers. Some of these elements revolve round the playwright, the characters, and the actors who interpret the text as well as the audience who receive the text and are all

involved in the performance within any social context. Some Nigerian dramatists who have used bardic or storytelling elements in their plays include Zulu Sofola, Wole Soyinka, Tess Onwueme, Sam Ukala, and Wale Ogunyemi among several others. In the concerned texts, communal ways of life based on myths, history and legends as well as real events like festivals are mediated by these dramatists. Through the relaying of the textual events before us, no matter their origin, these dramatists succeed in using bardic elements to embellish their texts.

The Bard

The bard in theatre, indigenous performance, or festivals enjoys protean manifestations as the playwright, the characters in the text, the actors engaged in role play, and the audience who enjoys the finished product and gives authentic and immediate feedback during performance. In the first instance, the dramatist is the chief bard, or lyrist, telling tales through the play text. The bard does not only exist in context, in flesh and blood, but functions as a communal or social loyalist obtaining his raw material, or the story from the community. The bard in several fora is considered a poet, a narrator, minstrel, singer, storyteller, commentator, and folklorist. In the play under scrutiny, we see the bard in several manifestations engaged in descriptive, incantatory, spoken, narrative sequences, providing explanations, linking images or episodes, and describing unfolding actions. These elements are used in traditional African theatre and are called techniques by Awodiya who says they manifest as “folklore, oral history and beliefs, myth and narrative, magic and incantation, mystery, ritual and sacrifice, festival, proverb, music and song” (223). The play text therefore provides a growth in bardic tradition from a dominant traditional context of divination, to a modern commentary on war and peace, violence and disarmament, through the *Odù Ifá*.

John Fiske and John Hartley in their comments on bardic elements in the audiovisual context of the television, see the medium as a cultural bard in its role for culture and individuals. In their opinion, the bard is a mediator of language, organizer of messages centralized in a context and is oral and not literate (85). Their treatise becomes important in the correlation between the diviner's slate and tablet, likened to a projector, television screen or present-day telecommunication devices like tabs, pads, or mini computers. Furthermore, the Ifá Priest's 'divination lore' is akin to news items, forecasts and social prognoses feedback. The seven bardic rudiments, according to Fiske and Hartley, function:

to *articulate* the consensus about the nature of reality and the reality of nature;

to *implicate* individual members of the culture into its dominant value-systems, by exchanging a status-enhancing message for the approval of that message's dominant ideology as expressed in its mythology;

to *celebrate*, explain, interpret and justify the doings of the culture's individual representatives in the outside world; using the myth of individuality to prevent such individuals from any eccentricity to a position of socio-neutrality;

to *assure* the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the universe by affirming and confirming its ideas and myths in an active engagement with the practically unpredictable world;

to *expose*, conversely, any practical inadequacies in the culture's sense of itself which may result from changed conditions in the world out-there, or from pressure within the culture for a re-orientation in favour of a new ideological stance;

to *convince* the audience that their status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole; and

to *transmit* by these means a sense of cultural membership, in terms of security and involvement (88).

In essence, the bardic functions paraphrased above articulate, implicate, celebrate, assure, expose, convince and transmit individual, collective and cultural ideologies and mythologies through channels of communication like the storytelling festival.

Uses of Bardic Elements

The bardic components in plays help to among other functions:

- inform those who read, act in and watch the play on stage, establishing a link between the page and stage;
- teach values to or educate the participants in the worldview of the text or performance at the village or community square, or even at diasporic arena;
- sanction opinions and attitudes to conform to commonly-held views;
- codify culture and tradition in visible forms that can be appreciated or marketed for profit;
- historify or document events, so coming generations may have a link with events that make history, be they present or past ones;

- entertain, helping to relieve audience or readers' tension;
- censure and condemn opinions, acts, which are against culture and tradition;
- watch over individuals and groups via surveillance to encourage group cohesion;
- explain action to members of any social group so people are carried along;
- advance the play's movement by introducing cues which are verbal; and visual to bring in additional images and action to the text and performance, and;
- -reveal identity themes present in the play which the writer encodes or are brought in by participants or audience in the production team like the play director, actors, costumier and designer.

The playwright as bard, therefore, attempts the control of the plot, as well as introduces new elements or images to complete the theatrical *mise-en-scene* of the play. The introduction of inter-character tension as a means of plot expansion is therefore his forte'. Other supra-linguistic features in terms of kinesics, meta texts, songs and subplots may also be used to complement other bardic elements in the play. These may be seen in relation to preserving oral literature and tradition, by infusing literature into orature and *vice versa*. The bard also attempts to communicate his or her personal as well as public or communal ideology through the text or theatre.

With regard to the audience, their role as bard centres on comments, active participation in the action physically (happening) or prompting the act on stage or any other performance space through criticisms. In terms of the actors or performance, the play or story has no 'life' until it is staged or performed before an audience. The sundry actors' roles in the production of *Twingle-Twangle* are relevant here. They were able to arbitrate group dynamics between the audience, the dramatist and themselves. Of particular mention is the Ifa Priest, whom Olu Obafemi sees in Osofisan's plays as a 'votive protagonist' who uses 'oracular form of heightened elevated speech'. There are also Mama Ibeji, whose tirade portrays many views of womanhood and motherhood, and the chorus that functions as vital choral advancers of the plot, implementing the call-and-response element in the text, as well as enhancing the rhythm of the play. The kinds of choral/song delivery in the text are for celebration, war, dirge/elegy, wrestling or games, marriage and competition. To stress this aspect of the play, during the performance, drumming and dance are dominant and the drummers are visible. To Ademola Ademeso, in most of the plays by Femi Osofisan like *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle*, "the musical and song renditions are culturally and historically appealing in style, considering the story-telling

