REVOLUTIONARY DRAMA IN POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA:
THE THEATRE OF FEMI OSOFISAN

by

Chima Julius Osakwe

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies

University of Toronto

© Copyright by Chima Osakwe (2014)
Abstract

Revolutionary Drama in Postcolonial Nigeria: The Theatre of Femi Osofisan

Chima Julius Osakwe, Doctor of Philosophy (2014)

Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
University of Toronto

This work examines the use of theatre as an instrument of socio-political revolution in selected works (*Morountodun, The Chattering and the Song, No More the Wasted Breed, and Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*) by Femi Osofisan. Osofisan is the indisputable leader of Nigeria’s second generation of playwrights. Driven by Marxist ideology, this generation, which also includes Bode Sowande and Kole Omotoso among others, rose to prominence in the 1970s after the nation’s civil war. Since then, it has continued to produce revolutionary dramatic works calling for the immediate transformation of Nigeria’s repressive socio-political order. Although the concept of revolution as dramatized in the works of these playwrights has been influenced by the political notion of revolution, especially the Marxist notion that revolution is the substitution of one ruling class for another after a class struggle resulting in the enthronement of communism, my study’s theorizing of revolutionary drama has not been strictly determined by the political theory of revolution. The most important criterion used to determine what constitutes revolutionary drama in this study is the liberatory *intent* rather than the actual liberation accomplished in a given play, although the selected Osofisan titles all conclude with the liberation of the oppressed.
As the most prominent member of Nigeria’s second-generation playwrights, Osofisan has produced works that are widely considered paradigmatic articulations of revolutionary theatre. Mindful of the fact that his works have yet to precipitate a revolution, and eager to investigate why, I examine his language, performance venues, dramatic techniques, reception, politics and ideology. Acknowledging that the perception of a direct link between theatre and revolution appears to be exaggerated and misguided, I also cite several other dramatists, playtexts and theatrical experiences from around the world to argue that the potential of theatre as an indirect or contributory instrument of revolution may not be completely discounted. My study concludes by validating the study of theatre as a force for socio-political change and suggesting strategies by which Osofisan’s revolutionary theatre could actually inspire social transformation in postcolonial Nigeria.
Dedication

To every individual of any cultural background, dead or alive, who may or may not have suffered persecution but has dedicated their life or used their talents or resources to champion the cause of the underprivileged.
Acknowledgements

I have inevitably incurred a debt of gratitude while completing this work. I am grateful to my supervisor Professor Uzoma Esonwanne for his patience, guidance and rigorous supervision. Even when on sabbatical, far away from Canada, Professor Esonwanne constantly found time to read the draft chapters and provide a comprehensive feedback. He was quite generous with his time; in face-to-face meetings, e-mail or telephone correspondence he gave my work the kind of attention that demonstrated unflinching commitment. The rigorous drill I experienced at his hands constantly challenged me to do my best. My gratitude equally goes to Professors Neil ten Kortenaar and Victor Li. Professor Kortenaar and Professor Li always read my entire drafts with minimum delay and provided constructive feedback that assisted me in my revisions. Both of them also found time to engage me in one-on-one conversations geared towards the improvement of my work. And my general meetings with the entire committee members were characterized by fruitful and productive discussions that immensely benefitted my work. Each member of my committee also contributed significantly in improving my knowledge of postcolonial theory and literature in the courses I took with them.

Like the three-man committee, the three interviewees for this dissertation, Professors Femi Osofisan and Eugene van Erven and Mr. Sudhanva Deshpande were wonderfully cooperative. The Osofisan interview was the high-point of my research trip to Nigeria. I am very grateful to Professor Osofisan for finding time for a particularly marathon chat that covered various aspects of his dramaturgy. I am also indebted to Professor Van Erven and Mr. Deshpande, both of whom granted me impromptu interviews upon my arrival in the Netherlands for a research fellowship at Utrecht University. Professor Andrew Buckland, Mr. Robert Haxton
and Ms. Sophie Marcus also deserve to be thanked for granting me permission to use some production pictures of some of Osofisan’s plays or for facilitating the process leading to the granting of permission.

I am highly grateful to the Chair of the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, Professor Stephen Johnson. My studies benefitted from his caring and compassionate disposition. He was quite supportive and repeatedly encouraged my effort to complete the program sooner than later. His approach and responses to all matters related to my studies gave me the effect of a healing spiritual tonic. Under Professor Johnson’s leadership, the Drama Centre provided me with some financial assistance that enabled me to undertake some research trips in connection with my dissertation. His advice and guidance was particularly useful in the process of writing a thesis proposal and achieving candidacy. I enjoyed every moment my colleagues and I spent in Professor Johnson’s office for this exercise, and do consider myself fortunate to have done this program under his administrative leadership. I must equally thank Professor John Astington for his encouragement and for the advice that helped me select my dissertation topic. As Graduate Coordinators, Professors Bruce Barton and Antje Budde were equally helpful. By assisting me at specific moments, they gave me the strength I needed to persevere. To Robert Moses, Samiha Chowdhury and the late Lou Massey, I say thank you for giving me administrative support. My gratitude also goes to the University of Toronto’s School of Graduate Studies for providing some financial support for my research trips.

I also appreciate the moments I shared with my colleagues Noam Lior, Sasha Kovacs and Shelley Liebembuk. To Kaelyn Kaoma who became my closest academic colleague because of our mutual interest in postcolonial theory and literature, I will be ever grateful for our stimulating conversations.
At Utrecht University where I began drafting the preliminary chapters of the dissertation, some faculty and staff members were supportive in providing material assistance and words of encouragement besides giving useful feedback to my talk on the dissertation prior to rounding off my fellowship at the university; they also offered some advice that enabled me to adapt to a foreign environment. In this regard, I would like to thank Professors Sandra Ponzanesi and Rosemarie Buikema as well as Trude Oorschot, all of the Media and Culture Department, and Karin Keulers, Zarah Farhan and Laura Tankink, all of the Research Institute for History and Culture.

Let me thank my friends Professors Kolawole Olaiya and Ifeanyi Ezeonu whose advice and suggestions helped to convince me on the need to pursue a doctoral program. And when I commenced the program, Professor Ezeonu was a constant source of inspiration, always providing a word of encouragement and offering some useful suggestions that assisted me in resolving some issues pertaining to the program. Other friends who are worthy of appreciation are Pastor Francis and Deaconess Ada Orji and the rest of the members of the King Palace Church especially for praying for me and encouraging me to forge ahead with my studies despite the illness that once threatened to destabilize me at the dissertation stage of my program. Guinness Ohazuruike, Arua Oko, Muyiwa and Toyin Olaniyan are all valuable friends that offered me a word of encouragement from time to time in the course of the program.

Some relatives deserve special thanks for their persistent word of encouragement and support for my studies and overall well-being. In this regard, let me thank Mr. and Mrs. Silas Soronnadi who have served as my parents in North America. My brothers-in-law Nnamdi Nwoke, David Hibbert, Christian Iwuchukwu and Tobechi Asoh together with my sister in-law Agbenu Osakwe are equally worthy of special appreciation for either assisting with some crucial
errands pertaining to my dissertation, making special efforts to make me feel at home during my research trip to Nigeria or achieving both. I am proud of my parents Chief Donatus and Mrs. Gladys Osakwe and my siblings Nneka, Ekeoma, Stella, Modestus (Abobo), Ugochi, Obi, Emma and Okey for their ceaseless prayers, motivational words and various kinds of assistance geared towards the success of my studies. And a special thanks to my wife Dr. Odilia Osakwe who stood by me right from the beginning of the program and provided the much-needed companionship. Her support was quite enormous.

For those whose names have been erroneously omitted, I am ever willing to apologize. But let me conclude by thanking almighty God for giving me the spirit of perseverance to proceed with my studies especially when I was ill.
Table of Contents

Title Page ........................................................................................................................................ i
Abstract........................................................................................................................................ ii
Dedication....................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements.......................................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents............................................................................................................................ ix
Illustrations ...................................................................................................................................... x
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 1
  Chapter One: Language, Methodological Approach and the Revolutionary Potential of Osofisan’s Theatre........................................................................................................................................ 47
  Chapter Two: Class Struggle, Ideology, Politics and Violent Revolution in Morountodun and The Chattering and the Song .................................................................................................................................. 104
  Chapter Three: Class Oppression and Revolution in Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen and No More the Wasted Breed ............................................................................................................. 165
Conclusion....................................................................................................................................... 207
Bibliography ..................................................................................................................................... 213
Illustrations

Photo 1. A scene from *Morountodun* as directed by Andrew Buckland for Rhodes University. April 2010. © Copyright by Sophie Marcus and Rhodes University Drama Department. Reproduced with permission from the copyright holders.
Photo 4. Chima Osakwe (L) interviewing Sudhanya Deshpande of India’s radical street theatre outfit Jana Natya Manch (Peoples Theatre Front). Amsterdam, 28 September 2011.
Introduction
Over the years, theatre has served as an instrument of socio-political revolution around the world. This has been the case where and when the excesses of the ruling class, state-sponsored oppression, economic exploitation, unfair discrimination or unjust socio-cultural practices have grievously impaired human rights. Theatre that serves this purpose is revolutionary because its aim is to facilitate liberation. Through dramatic presentation, such theatre rejects the status quo and advocates radical social transformation and freedom of humans from all inimical forces.

The term “revolution” can be examined from a multitude of perspectives or interdisciplinary angles. A dictionary\(^1\) definition of revolution includes but is not limited to the following: (a) “the forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favour of a new system”; (b) “the replacement of one ruling class by another; the class struggle which is expected to lead to political change and the triumph of communism;” and (c) “any fundamental change or reversal of conditions.”

The first two definitions are informed by political considerations. The second definition in particular, as rightly noted in the dictionary, is usually associated with Marxism. The third definition transcends the political context by suggesting that a revolution could possibly occur in other activities or be evaluated from multiple standpoints as earlier hinted. For a doctor, engineer and information technology expert, “revolution” evokes different meanings. For the information technology expert, for instance, revolution might mean the rate at which computers and the internet have greatly advanced mass communication and globalization, while a doctor might consider as revolution a medical breakthrough in the search for treatment of a disease. The industrial revolution that occurred in Western Europe and the United States between 1760 and 1840 has a meaning that is also more clearly related to temporality and periodization than to

\(^1\) The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English. Ed. R.E Allen, p.1032
politics; the “revolution” refers to new manufacturing methods that saw a transition from manual to mechanical and innovative chemical manufacturing processes. However, in this dissertation I am mainly interested in the political concept of revolution since it is the nearest in meaning to my notion of revolutionary drama.\(^2\)

The political concept of revolution is usually traceable to the Italian word *Rivoluzioni* which “originated in…the late fifteenth century” to indicate “sudden changes in political matters” (Calvert 2). Since then, it has acquired “a predominant and specialized political meaning” (Williams, *Keywords* 270). We can discern this “specialized political meaning” in the following definition by David Robertson:

A revolution, properly so called, is a violent and total change in a political system which not only vastly alters the distribution of power in the society, but results in major changes in the whole social structure…[I]n political science the primary meaning must be the deliberate, intentional and most probably violent overthrow of one ruling class by another which leads the mobilized masses against the existing system (290-91).

Robertson’s definition has been corroborated by several scholars\(^3\). Revolutions do not occur in a vacuum; they are a product of accumulated grievances occasioned by unwarranted social inequality. They are liberatory acts of resistance that validate the view which Albert Memmi has expressed in a related context: “After having been rejected for so long by the colonizer, the day

---

\(^2\) Theatre and drama are used interchangeably in this dissertation

\(^3\) Anthony Giddens defines revolution as the “seizure of state power through violent means by the leaders of a mass movement, where that power is subsequently used to initiate major processes of social reform.” *Sociology*, p.605. For Eugene van Erven, revolution is “a quite intense, very radical upheaval of a political status quo by all kinds of instruments including armed struggle.” Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Revolutionary Theatre in Postcolonial Asia and Africa,” p.102. (See interview photo on page xii of this dissertation). Samuel Huntington considers revolution as “a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activity and politics.” *Political Order in Changing Societies*, p.264. And Peter Ukpokodu is at pains to emphasize that revolutions do not “rest on beds of roses” and further points out that “[o]ften times, revolutions are bloody: there is violence and pain, suffering and death, with an intensity that depends on the degree of resistance put up by the dominant classes to the eruption of the new.” *Socio-Political Theatre in Nigeria*, p.178.
has come when it is the colonized who must refuse the colonizer” (128). Though Memmi’s observation applies particularly to the context of the French colonization of Tunisia, it is not limited to it. “Colonizer” and “colonized” can mutatis mutandis represent other instances of unequal power relations where someone or a group of people have subjected others to socio-economic exploitation and oppression. Broadly speaking, then, revolution is a terminal signal of rejection by the underprivileged of the unjust social order that oppresses them. This question of unjust economic disparity and unequal political privilege among the various members of any society is what Hannah Arendt labels the “social question” and what she seeks to emphasize, at least in part, when she observes that

The social question began to play a revolutionary role when, in the modern age and not before, men began to doubt that poverty is inherent in the human condition, to doubt that the distinction between the few, who through circumstances or strength or fraud had succeeded in liberating themselves from the shackles of poverty, and the laboring poverty-stricken multitude was inevitable and eternal (15).

Both Raymond Williams⁴ and Kole Omotoso⁵ corroborate Arendt’s view on the socio-economic motivation for revolutionary change. However, Arendt’s argument suggests that revolution is a “modern” phenomenon. Since “modern” is traditionally regarded as the opposite of “ancient,” Arendt’s argument implies that revolutions did not occur in ancient times. How could revolutionary change not have taken place in the pre-modern era? Arendt explains:

---

⁴ Williams observes that “Revolution remains necessary…not only because some men desire it, but because there can be no acceptable human order while the full humanity of any class of men is in practice denied.” “Tragedy and Revolution,” p.103.

⁵ From Omotoso came the observation that the revolution is the “day when those who have not shall not be satisfied with their nothing.” Shadows in the Horizon, p.vi.
It is true, medieval and post medieval theory knew of legitimate rebellion, of rise against established authority, of open defiance and disobedience. But the aim of such rebellions was not a challenge of authority or the established order of things as such; it was always a matter of exchanging the person who happened to be in authority, be it the exchange of a usurper for the legitimate king or the exchange of a tyrant who had abused his power for a lawful ruler. Thus, while the people might be admitted to have the right to decide who should not rule them, they certainly were not supposed to determine who should, and even less do we ever hear of a right of people to be their own rulers or to appoint persons from their own rank for the business of government (33).

What emerges from Arendt’s explanation, and quite rightly in my view, is that not every kind of change or insurrection constitutes revolution. A military coup, for instance, is hardly a revolution. In Nigeria, the primary location of reference for this project, there have been several coups and countercoups but none has led to the socio-political and economic empowerment of the people. They are, as Arendt might say, “mere changes” (13). Such changes are not revolutions because they simply entail the overthrow of one set of oppressors by another. As David Jefferess has rightly argued, it is only the changes that make “liberation” of all possible that are revolutionary (9). In the light of this, historical examples of actual revolutions include but are not limited to the French Revolution (1789-1799), the Haitian Revolution that overthrew French plantation slavery in the Caribbean (1791-1804), the Bolshevik/Russian Revolution (1917-1918), the Chinese Revolution (1949-1950), the Cuban Revolution (1953-1959) and the Arab Spring in North Africa and other parts of the Arab world (2011). In each of these experiences, the people did not only successfully terminate unpopular regimes but collectively decided how they should be governed and who should govern them.
It therefore stands to reason that in the wake of social transformation arising from revolutionary action, life can no longer be the same for anyone, especially for the members of a mistreated and dominated group, be they domestic servants, underpaid workers, the unemployed, women, social outcastes, and racial or sexual minorities among others. For each of these groups, the night of pain and misery gives way to the morning of joy and cackling laughter, the rains of socio-economic fertility replace the scorching heat of bareness, a brutally suppressed voice is now quite audible, the man or woman whose movements were arbitrarily restricted and constantly monitored can now walk confidently on previously prohibited territory. Indeed, for the change to be deemed revolutionary the transformation must be such that “the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide” (Arendt 21-22) in it. For Arendt, such coincidence could be said to have occurred only when “those who had always lived in darkness and subjection to whatever powers there were, should rise and become the supreme sovereigns of the land” (32-33). From the foregoing, the following may constitute the typical attributes of a revolution:

a) Alteration of the social structure

b) Alteration of the basic myths and values of the society

c) Transformation of social institutions

d) Transformation of the structure of leadership, either in the personnel of the elite or its class composition

e) Presence or dominance of violence in the actions leading to the collapse of a regime (Cohan 14).
Of these attributes, the last is the most disputed. Does revolutionary change actually require the violent expenditure of life? As some of the plays analyzed below suggest, radical changes of the kind made possible by revolutionary action may be instituted without armed struggle. Nor must revolution be radical transformation directed exclusively against a government or political system. On the contrary, radical change on the scale we designate as revolutionary may also be directed against any social institution, political system, economic process, or cultural order that debases life and dehumanizes humans. A revolutionary action must seek to validate the humanity of the subaltern by dismantling a world that has permanently reduced some people to the status of hewers of wood and drawers of water, a class-divided society that tends to associate “intellectual work” with the bourgeois and “physical work” with the subaltern (Trotsky 11). It logically follows that “the Revolution is the work of men doing physical work” and that “[o]ne of the ultimate aims of the Revolution is to overcome completely the separation of these two kinds of activity” (Trotsky 11). A revolution appears to be the simple answer to the following questions posed by Jesse Smith:

Why should there be a few rich and many poor? Why should there be wars of plunder against colonial peoples and among the rulers of competing empires? Why should ruthless exploiters be allowed to keep their stolen wealth? Why shouldn’t everyone join in a cooperative effort and share equally in what they produce? (5).

If a revolution does not result in a song of freedom for “everyone,” particularly the members of a previously disenfranchised group, it must significantly improve the material conditions of the majority of its members or the average member of the group in order to be valid. A genuine revolution is geared towards the collective well-being of a given national population rather than a select few from any social class.
Indeed, although what constitutes revolution may probably not be permanently settled, I hope that the foregoing discussion has substantially illuminated the concept. More importantly, I hope that it has provided us with a useful foundation for broaching the concept of revolutionary drama. The political notion of revolution as expressed here does not automatically influence my notion of revolutionary drama. My conception of revolutionary drama partly tallies with and partly deviates from the political theory of revolution. My notion of the underprivileged in revolutionary drama is not strictly limited to a group of people but includes private individuals in various oppressive relationships. Again, a play must not automatically conclude with the overthrow of the government to be deemed revolutionary. Williams’ argument that revolution is not determined by the “capture of power” but by the transformation of society’s “deepest structure of relationships and feelings” (“Tragedy and Revolution”102) is useful to my understanding of revolutionary drama. A play in which the characters representing opposing ideological positions are locked in a class struggle, especially between an oppressive state and the oppressed masses, is revolutionary if it concludes with the oppressed characters winning their legitimate demands and are likely to be living happily henceforth even if the liberation did not result in the downfall of the government. Such a play has captured the essence of revolution which Williams has rightly described as “total redemption of humanity” (“Tragedy and Revolution”103), or rather the recognition of the humanity of the other. In fact, my notion of revolutionary drama is such that a play must not necessarily conclude with the emancipation of the oppressed to be deemed revolutionary, although the plays by Osofisan that I have selected for my study all conclude with the liberation of the oppressed, including the overthrow of the government in some of the plays. My primary criterion for determining what constitutes revolutionary drama has far more to do with the liberatory intent than the actual liberation
accomplished in a given play. This notion differs from that of Udenta O. Udenta who sees it the other way around. Udenta has, for instance, observed that Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s and Micere Mugo’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, a historical play about Kenya’s violent anti-colonial struggles is not actually revolutionary because it does not conclude with victory for the oppressed. “[If] Kimathi had triumphed and a revolutionary government established in Kenya,” opines Udenta, “the play would undoubtedly have marked the acme of revolutionary aesthetic writing in Africa” (34). Contrary to Udenta, the play is revolutionary in the same way as Ebrahim Hussein’s *Kinjeketile* and Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* are. That the oppressed characters in these plays do not win their demands or overthrow the government is not the main issue. Rather, the main issue is the fact that they have strongly attempted to achieve liberation. The inability of the underprivileged classes to completely eliminate oppression in these plays despite their spirited effort constitutes not failure but deferred success. It is not the will of the underprivileged to be defeated. Surprisingly enough, Udenta lists Osofisan’s *Morountodun* among the examples of “revolutionary art” (xxiii) even though the play does not conclude with a change of government after the underprivileged class has won its legitimate entitlements. His apparent inconsistency actually validates my earlier-stated position that a play is revolutionary if it concludes with victory for the oppressed without a change of government.

As primarily understood here, a play is revolutionary so long as the oppressed characters are actively involved in the process of liberation, whether or not their effort is successful. That means that, rather than continue thinking of themselves as victims and simply lamenting or bemoaning their fate, the oppressed are clearly depicted as fighting back. The technique of fighting back may comprise only action, words or both, but it must be such that we get the impression that the underprivileged are not willing to accept oppression with stoic resignation. In
the light of this, a play that exposes or condemns tyranny, unfair discrimination and political oppression like *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, is not revolutionary. What we see in this play is how the oppressed black man has devised some tricks\(^6\) with which to survive the injustices of apartheid South Africa; there is no rebellion or concrete action geared towards the emancipation of black people from apartheid. My reading of this play varies from that of Peter Ukpokodu who lists it among the examples of “revolutionary masterpieces” (142) alongside Hussein’s *Kinjeketile* and Ngũgĩ’s and Mugo’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Fugard’s, Kani’s and Ntshona’s play portrays certain aspects of apartheid, a system it opposes but does not attempt to dismantle. A play could be radical without being revolutionary just as a festival could be dramatic without being drama or a country could be Islamic without being Arab.

Theatre-for-Development (TfD) claims to be people-oriented. However, though they may address community issues like social amenities, child abuse, women’s rights, public health or political matters, most TfD projects do not usually criticize the wider workings of government, attempt to dismantle existing power relations in various settings, or articulate an alternative social vision. Occasionally, TfD can be revolutionary, but the degree to which it is so depends on the ideological commitment of the practitioners, as exemplified for instance by Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s experiments at the Kenyan village of Kamiriithu in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But TfD generally lacks the ideological temperament of revolutionary drama. Osofisan concurs:

I know of course that among the peasants some valuable work has been going on under the rubric of the Theatre for Development. Nevertheless, while I recognize the potential

---

\(^6\) Such as the assumption of false identity in order to secure a job.
usefulness of this kind of work, and have on some occasions participated in it, my
feelings remain that in the age of marauding multinationals, and in our peculiar
circumstances as a fledgling, neo-colonial state trapped at the periphery of world
capitalism, these approaches are not enough by themselves. They are not only riddled
with self-contradiction, but are fundamentally insufficient to provoke the desired change
to the macro-society without some additional kind of intervention (“The Revolution as
Muse” 14-15).

Osofisan further argues that “TfD only deals with the outward, social aspects of the communal
life—things like crop failure or hygiene, or disease, or even official corruption. But…the inner
areas of the human experience, the intangible areas that require introspection and meditation” do
“need some kind of scripted drama.” It appears that the ideological vision of revolutionary
drama, whether as the creative product of an individual artist or the collective project of TfD, and
especially in relation to the developing countries, is such that it advocates absolute freedom for
the people. Revolutionary drama appears to be so aggressively committed to freedom that it
seeks to dismantle existing power structures with minimum delay. Van Erven argues that

Freedom in the “third world” context involves more than freedom from hunger, thirst,
political violence, homelessness, and physical abuse. It also involves the liberty to create
and enjoy the economic, political, educational, social, psychological, and cultural
conditions that would assure the maximum realization of the human potential (The
Playful Revolution 6).

He further states that

---

7 Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Metaphorical Language and Revolutionary Ethos,” p.156 (See interview photo on page xi of this dissertation).
In the developing world, progressive artists have recognized the power of art to stimulate the spontaneous creativity and emotional expression of the oppressed, and some of them have developed effective workshop methods at the grassroots level with the explicit aim of breaking through the “culture of silence” and promoting freedom in the broadest sense of the term *(The Playful Revolution 8)*.

Van Erven’s remarks stem from experiences in the theatre of Asian countries like India, Pakistan, South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia “where once there were staunch, severe dictatorships.”8 Perhaps it is only a genuinely revolutionary drama that represents the kind of art that seeks “freedom [for the underprivileged] in the broadest sense of the term.” A revolutionary play is therefore not the kind of drama that defends or promotes the interest of the ruling class. As Charles Uji has explained, “proletarian struggle against oppression is accorded prominence in…revolutionary drama” as opposed to “non-revolutionary plays” in which “apart from underpinning individualist, messianic heroes—who are usually monarchs—also present the common people as docile, sheepish and merely catalysts meant for the accentuation of the heroes’ stature” (“Theme and Technique” 111). A revolutionary play would normally “shun the elite and deal with the experiences of peasants, workers, the urban and rural masses and their leaders” (Amuta 155). In a non-revolutionary play, “the emphasis is on individual will” while a revolutionary play would “underline the class or group determinism of individual action” (Amuta 155).

From the foregoing, what constitutes revolutionary drama may have gradually emerged but it has yet to be formally or specifically defined. For greater clarity, I use the term “revolutionary drama” to mean drama that seeks through the conscious manipulation of content

---

and technique to empower the underprivileged, whether as an individual or a group, to gain socio-political and economic rights and privileges or overthrow an oppressive political system or repressive institutions of civil society. Such institutions include the patriarchal family system, the caste system, exploitative religious practices, racism, unequal gender relations, sexual oppression, feudal politics and political patronage, and their overthrow is meant to facilitate the achievement of a better quality of life and to ensure a relationship of mutual respect and recognition of the human rights of all peoples. I am particularly interested in the brand of theatre where the chains of bondage are cut off or are about to be cut off rather than those in which they voluntarily fall off. Therefore, I am interested in theatre in which the persistent will of the oppressed has defeated or is threatening to defeat the human or supernatural forces of oppression, either through violent or subtle means, in a nutshell, a theatre that deliberately incites the oppressed to achieve liberation from oppression as exemplified by the theatre of Osofisan, Boal and Ngũgĩ among others.

Osofisan is my primary focus here. With over fifty plays to his credit, he is probably the most performed dramatist in Nigeria today, and he is the indisputable leader of the nation’s second-generation dramatists and one of the most prominent playwrights in that country. The second generation, which also includes Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso and Tunde Fatunde among others, arose in the 1970s after the nation’s civil war and has continued to produce revolutionary dramatic works calling for the immediate transformation of Nigeria’s repressive socio-political order. As the most prominent member of this generation, Osofisan’s works are traditionally considered paradigmatic of the alternative social vision articulated by the members of this generation. “In sheer versatility, prolificity, and knack for frequent experimentation,” writes Niyi Osundare, “Osofisan’s output can be seen as both model and representative of this
generation” (Thread in the Loom 68). Osofisan’s central position among the members of Nigeria’s second-generation dramatists justifies my specific interest in him. I make Osofisan’s works (The Chattering and the Song; Morountodun; No More the Wasted Breed; Aringindin and the Night Watchmen) the site of an investigation of the revolutionary potential of drama in postcolonial Nigeria.

Over the years, studies of Osofisan’s contributions to Nigeria’s revolutionary drama have attempted to reconcile his thematic pre-occupations, dramatic technique, literary and aesthetic qualities and issues of interest in Yoruba cosmology with his social vision. Generally, these studies are quite brief (a few paragraphs or pages in book chapters and essays on one or two plays, or cursory remarks about language, location of performance or process leading to the performance) rather than substantive, and some draw on outdated versions of plays such as Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen which lack the additional details provided in the updated versions.

We can better understand why these approaches to Osofisan’s drama have failed to explain its potential impact on local politics by reviewing a few critical studies of Morountodun and The Chattering and the Song (hereafter entitled The Chattering). Virtually all of the scholars who have examined one or both plays have drawn attention to how Osofisan has re-interpreted narratives culled from mythological and historical sources for his ideological vision (Garuba, “The Poetics”; Obafemi, “Revolutionary Aesthetics”; Contemporary; Richards, Ancient Songs; Olaniyan, “Femi Osofisan”; Dunton, “Political Theatre”; Make Man; Dugga, Creolisations; Amuta, The Theory; Awodiya, “Oral Literature”; The Drama; Onwueme, “Visions”; Hutchinson, “Riding”; Iji, “From Mythology”). As evidence of this re-interpretation in Morountodun, these scholars have pointed out how Titubi, the play’s heroine and a member of the ruling “class,” is
made to deviate from the mythological “Moremi” on which her character is based by finally choosing to align herself with the down-trodden rather than with the state and, thus, committing class suicide. They also observe that, in *The Chattering*, a historically generous king is made a dictator in order to justify being challenged by a rebel character and that this rebel succeeds in contrast to historical fact.

Olaniyan’s study actually dedicates some space to the revolutionary potential of Osofisan’s works, referring closely to the earlier version of *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* and focusing entirely on the issue of language—that is, the relevance to African masses of African literature written in European languages. Olaniyan believes that a people’s ability to determine their destiny transcends the issue of choosing between indigenous African languages and European ones. Unlike him, Yetunde Akorede insists that writers like Osofisan must compose their plays in indigenous languages or Pidgin English in order to perform the communicative and pedagogical functions of revolutionary drama (58). The language question is a perennial source of critical debate in African literature and I demonstrate in subsequent chapters why exploration of the issue should not be limited to only indigenous or European language or pidgin.

Both Omofolabo Ajayi (“Gender”) and Martin Banham (“Subverting”) have examined *Morountodun* in particular, focusing respectively on gender politics and Osofisan’s anti-illusionistic techniques. Ajayi’s main point is that, despite the prominent role accorded to female characters as exemplified by the heroine Titubi, the play’s handling of male-female power relations remains tilted in favour of men, while Banham’s primary argument is that Osofisan’s presentational techniques amounts to breaking the illusion of reality in order to elicit critical
response from the audience. I suspect that Banham’s observation is an allusion to the influence of Bertolt Brecht on Osofisan, but the critic is absolutely mute on that.

The influence of Brecht’s alienation or epic style on Osofisan has been examined by critics such as Modupe Olaogun (“Parables”), Chris Dunton (“Political Theatre”), Eliane Utudjian (“Ghana and Nigeria”), Olu Obafemi (“Revolutionary Aesthetics”; Contemporary), Chidi Amuta (The Theory), Tess Onwueme (“Visions”), Peter Ukpokodu (Socio-Political), Jane Plastow (“A Debate”) and Yvette Hutchinson (“Riding”). The Chattering, Morountodun and Another Raft have received attention from these critics in a bid to illustrate their thesis. Olaogun, for instance, rightly observes the influence of the Brechtian alienation technique in Morountodun as exemplified by the role of the Director who addresses audience members directly at various moments, providing them with some information about the play unfolding before them. She equally has a point when she observes that the play-within-a-play in The Chattering does not actually end but is interrupted at a crucial moment when the audience, like those of Brecht, has been encouraged to take their destiny in their hands. However, not every scholar agrees with Olaogun and other like-minded scholars. In the “Politics of Aesthetics,” a study in which he refers to Morountodun and other titles in examining how Osofisan has utilized the rules of traditional storytelling, Sam Ukala concludes that Osofisan’s theatre actually amounts to a negation of Brechtian dramatic influence in Africa. Obafemi and Abdullahi Abubakar have pushed the anti-Brechtian case even further by attributing “Osofisan’s dialectics” to what they call “Africa’s functional theatre” (165). These views and disagreements are made more intriguing by Osofisan who appears to have neither completely rejected nor completely accepted the Brechtian influence. I will let him speak for himself:
When you talk of Brecht...was he himself not influenced by previous dramatists? Was Soyinka not similarly influenced? And Sophocles, Shakespeare, Shaw? All playwrights and artistes feed creatively on their antecedents. Brecht took a lot from Balinese theatre and other non-Western traditions. What is important about Brecht...is that he was the first...to formalize into a theory certain precepts and practices that were already there in traditional theatre. [W]hen you look at our traditional theatres here in Africa, you will find out that many of these features that Brecht talked about were there and are still there. So the question of is it Brecht or is it traditional theatre is a moot point and an unnecessary one...as far as I’m concerned. What we were taught as we grew up was that this traditional theatre was pagan; that the practitioners were devilish and satanic. But it took somebody like Brecht to jolt us back to take another look at our traditions and to say...but this is what we were doing; this is what still exists with us, in those rites and festivals.

The Brechtian theatre does share several attributes with the traditional African theatre, but the manner in which Osofisan has deployed some of these attributes in his revolutionary plays is particularly in accordance with the Brechtian technique. As we shall see in the analyses of his plays, Osofisan yokes the Brechtian and non-Brechtian dramatic aesthetics.

Other scholars have analyzed Osofisan’s works in juxtaposition to those of other African writers. Examples are Charles Uji (“Ideologico-Political”), Onwueme (“Visions”), David Kerr (African), Plastow (“A Debate”), Victor Dugga (Creolisations), Richards (Ancient Songs), Biodun Jeyifo (The Truthful Lie), Hutchinson (“The Seductive Dance”; “Riding”), Michael Etherton (The Development) and Utudjian (“Ghana and Nigeria”). Osofisan’s titles covered in

---

these studies are Morountodun, The Chattering, Aringindin, No More the Wasted Breed, Restless Run of Locusts, and Another Raft. And the works with which these plays have been directly or indirectly compared are Soyinka’s A Dance of the Forests, The Strong Breed, Kongi’s Harvest, Death and the King’s Horseman, The Lion and the Jewel and The Beatification of Area Boy. Others include Clark-Bekederemo’s The Raft, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s and Micere Githae Mugo’s The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, Kole Omotoso’s Shadows in the Horizon, Francis Imbuga’s Betrayal in the City, Duro Ladipo’s Moremi and Yemi Ajibade’s Mokai. Except for Plastow’s study, which identifies some similar empowering attributes in Morountodun and The Trial of Dedan Kimathi such as in the representation of women, virtually all the others agree that Osofisan’s manipulation of history and tradition is more optimistic and empowering than that of the playwrights with whom he is compared, since it portrays man as capable of re-directing his destiny. Such a verdict, in my opinion, is quite persuasive.

Osofisan’s works have equally been treated to a general examination under one or a combination of the following rubrics: theme, motif, language, symbols, structure, meaning, characterization and traditional techniques. Awodiya, for instance, undertakes this task in two separate studies (The Drama; “Structure”), one involving only The Chattering and the other including The Chattering, Morountodun, No More the Wasted Breed and some non-relevant titles. By the same token, Uji (“Theme and Technique”) and Utudjian (“Ghana and Nigeria”) address similar issues in connection with Red is the Freedom Road and The Chattering respectively. Concerning theme for instance, Uji, Awodiya and Utudjian agree that revolution is the main issue in Red, Morountodun and The Chattering respectively. And Chinyere Okafor (“Theatrical Negotiation”) has pointed out how Osofisan’s demystification of supernatural forces and the awakened consciousness of the oppressed in No More the Wasted Breed leads to the
emancipation of the underprivileged, while Dunton ("Political Theatre") also touches on thematic pre-occupation of the play as well as its structural weaknesses. And yet in another separate study, Awodiya ("Oral Literature") specifically uses *No More the Wasted Breed* to explain the function of ritual and sacrifice in traditional Yoruba life. Gbemisola Adeoti ("The Trope") uses *Aringindin* and some non-relevant titles to examine the thematic implications of the use of market in Osofisan’s dramaturgy, while Victor Dugga (*Creolisations*) examines the play’s political theme and dramatic devices in pointing out its relevance to contemporary Nigeria.

Festus Ogu Idoko ("Femi Osofisan") cites Osofisan’s aforementioned titles among others in a survey of Osofisan’s popularity at two Nigerian universities. That Osofisan’s plays have yet to mobilize the people towards revolutionary change, and that we still do not know how they could do so, are issues that Idoko’s study does not address. But it does address one question, that is, whether Nigerian society can “[be changed through his plays?]” (148). In their response, an overwhelming majority (92%) answered in the affirmative. Why the popularity with which these plays are received on campuses remains confined there is a mystery. Perhaps it indicates that there is a distinction between a popular reception of drama and its capacity for inspiring a revolutionary action. These are also issues I will address in subsequent chapters.

The foregoing literature review demonstrates that virtually all the studies on Osofisan’s works have paid very little or no attention to whether or not his works have led to a socio-political revolution. Nor have they probed the revolutionary potential of Osofisan’s theatre manifest in specific plays or in versions of the plays that I will address in this study. My study differs from all of the above because my interest goes beyond the analysis of theme, dramatic technique or the plain acknowledgement of the revolutionary intention of the plays or of Brechtian influence on Osofisan. I am particularly interested in the socially transformative
potential of Osofisan’s works. Why haven’t his plays inspired the audience to some action toward the liberation of Nigerian people? Can his plays possibly lead to a revolution? Is it impossible that his brand of theatre will ever inspire a socio-political transformation on the scale and with the punctuality assumed by Nigerian second-generation playwrights? These are the questions this study addresses.

That the ambition of Osofisan is to uproot the tree that yields the bitter fruit of social inequality, injustice, tyranny, intimidation, oppression, ignorance, illiteracy, poverty and degradation is not in doubt. As he explains, “I try to speak on behalf of those whom I consider marginalised, those who are oppressed through no fault of theirs, and who are the victims of our parasitic ruling class.”

He continues:

My target is the mind and the conscience of my audience; and the aim is to disturb, and to provoke questioning. Most theatres try, on the contrary, to put the audience at ease, to lure them into a state of self-satisfaction and of self-assurance. But for me, however, what I like to do is awaken people out of their usual complaisance, rouse them out of their usual feeling of helplessness, and provoke them into anxiety, into thinking, and ultimately into realising and accepting not just the possibility of action, but also the necessity for it. I want to challenge my audience to take another, possibly violent, view of their society, instead of merely helping them to reinforce those views. I want to push them to begin to ask if there are other possibilities than what we have now, and how to make those options real, now, today, and not in some imagined future paradise.

That Osofisan’s theatre seeks to empower the spectators to be the masters of their own fate is evident in the preceding remarks. It is a task that has been equally undertaken in one way or the

---

other by various playwrights and theatre practitioners from around the world. Because these numerous examples from other parts of the world assist in situating my concept of revolutionary drama in context, it is worth presenting an overview of some of them.

Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theatre practitioner, experimented with a theatrical style that deviates from Aristotelian principles and advances the revolutionary motive a bit further. Boal argues that

the *poetics of the oppressed* focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution (122).

I got a sense of this “rehearsal for the revolution” when I attended a workshop with Boal at the Market Theatre Laboratory in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 21 1997. Participants were asked to formulate and practice on the spot some dramatic skits that dealt with several issues including oppression and liberation. The one conclusive thing about the skits is their inconclusiveness. Every intervention by a spectator became an optional script which was developed as much as possible. The exercise makes quite clear what Boal means when he observes that “[t]he theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it” (122). Boal considers mainstream theatre a representation of the society: a few people act out a scripted story in front of the majority who sit and watch passively. Could it be that there is no better method of changing society than by changing such a theatrical style? As Lib Spry has noted, “by using TO
[Theatre of the Oppressed] as a tool to understand where we stand in the power structures we live in, we would be taking a first step in changing those structures” (173).

To speak, as Boal does, of revolutionary theatre as a “weapon” is, obviously, to view it primarily as instrumental. Yet in order to grasp what is most distinctive about Osofisan’s drama it is worth contrasting Boal’s version of the instrumental value of the theatre of the oppressed with that of Amiri Baraka, an African-American playwright. Like Boal, Baraka is concerned with the ideological value of theatrical practice. For him, revolutionary theatre is theatre that “must EXPOSE!” and “must Accuse and Attack because it is the theatre of Victims” (“The Revolutionary Theatre” 1164). Baraka’s theory is amply demonstrated in his plays, which provocatively engage racism in the United States as it affects the life of black people. He believes in the need for the black man to liberate himself in a society that hates him. Works of his that were performed in the 1960s during the Civil Rights struggles across the United States are intended to galvanize the audience, especially the black victims of racial discrimination, into revolutionary action. This intention is inscribed, for instance, in the following stage direction for a black paramilitary group in Experimental Death Unit # 1: “He gestures to one soldier, who goes over and cuts the white men’s heads off. Another soldier fits them on two poles” (15).

Clearly, Baraka views the white man as the oppressive enemy of the black man. As such, the white man must be combated and defeated for the black man to obtain his freedom. As he explains: “White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor” (“The Revolutionary Theatre”1164). Baraka’s utterances and cited stage directions appear to suggest that violence is the only path to the emancipation of black people. Olu Obafemi suggests that such militant anti-racist racism has been an “inextricable part of black radical/revolutionary
consciouness” since the 1960s (“Identity and Social Contexts” 34). It appears Baraka would not mind being labeled a reverse racist, since the scene of the decapitated heads of white men seems to replicate the very racism it opposes.

As I hinted earlier, contrasting Boal’s theatre with that of Baraka might enable us to appreciate what is most distinctive about Osofisan’s drama. As we can see, Baraka has no problem recommending a blood-stained path to freedom for black people; his revolutionary strategy appears to favour a strictly violent method. By contrast, Boal’s theatre does not prescribe the kind of method the oppressed should use to secure his or her freedom. Rather, because it has no pre-existing script, it leaves the choice of method to the oppressed. Osofisan’s theatre, like Baraka’s, is based on a written text. Boal’s is not. But like Boal’s, Osofisan’s theatre does not completely reject or approve of physical violence as a means to the revolutionary transformation of society. This is amply demonstrated in the selected titles analyzed in subsequent pages.

In a bid to champion the cause of the less privileged, revolutionary theatre has often called for a just society, one in which all are free, while strongly opposing all structures of domination that breed social inequality and stifle the freedom of the people. John McGrath, radical playwright and former director of the leftist British theatre outfit 7:84, wants a “non-exploitative, classless society, in which all…grow to the fullest possible experience of life on earth” (21-22). This vision of society is definitely what the Marxist-inspired Osofisan recommends for Nigeria, particularly as demonstrated at the end of Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen. McGrath’s company name stems from the fact that seven percent of the population in the United Kingdom owns eighty four percent of the national wealth. McGrath does not approve of such a scenario. As Nadine Holdsworth has observed,
7:84 wanted to echo the Workers’ Theatre Movement of the 1920s and 1930s to create a revolutionary theatre practice that used “theatre as a weapon”: a weapon that, by debating society and presenting oppositional agendas, could contribute to the broader climate of collective protest rooted in industrial action, class-based activism, the student movement and campaigns centred on identity politics such as civil rights, the Women’s Movement and gay liberation. (18)

Michael Billington corroborates Holdsworth’s remarks when he notes that McGrath’s “whole career as a dramatist was bent on making audiences see and understand and acknowledge the need for radical change while recognizing the idealist’s capacity for self-delusion. He was a good man writing in harsh times” (xi). The same issues of social inequality and unwarranted domination of a people by the privileged few received attention from the eighteenth-century French theatre which was central to the socio-political and cultural transitions culminating in the French revolution of 1789. As Susan Maslan observes, “[a] surprisingly large number of the Revolution’s leading figures were involved in the theater professionally”(15). She further explains that the theatre’s important role in the revolution stems from its “historical prestige and…the relation it established between the aesthetic and the social”(14). A play like Pierre Beaumarchais’s The Marriage of Figaro, which premiered in 1784 after years of censorship, validates Maslan’s position regarding the role of the theatre at this crucial moment in French history. The play satirizes the aristocracy and is believed to have prefigured the revolution in its denunciation of the privileges of the nobility. It is particularly intriguing to see how a highly placed character like Count Almaviva tries to snatch a woman betrothed to his valet Figaro. This sexual greed recalls the Biblical story of the Israelite King David’s lust for Bathsheba, the wife of citizen Uriah. But unlike the Biblical story that saw the sex-mad despot sleeping with Uriah’s
wife and masterminding his murder in the process, Beaumarchais’s play concludes with a humiliating defeat for the high and mighty. Listen closely to Figaro:

No, my lord Count, you won’t have her, you shall not have her. Because you’re a great nobleman you think you’re a great genius…Nobility, fortune, rank, position: how proud they make a man feel. What have you done to deserve such advantages? Took the trouble to be born—that’s all; otherwise you’re a rather ordinary man. (90)

For the French dramatist, it is crucial that “a nobleman who is vicious enough to make all his vassals contribute to his capricious wish to seduce every young maiden in his land finally becomes the laughing stock of his valets” (“Preface to The Marriage of Figaro” 308). Osofisan would have no problem validating Maslan’s position against the ruling class. “I come from a poor background,” admits Osofisan, “so…inevitably I tend to see things from the perspective of the poor. Maybe if I had come from a rich family, I would be seeing things in a different light. Deprivation and poverty have coloured my vision.”12

Russian playwright Maxim Gorkii (alias “The Bitter”) has equally used his art to advance the interest of the underdog. Gorkii fought the Tsarist Russian government with ruthless determination and wanted a revolutionary transformation of the society. His play, The Petty Bourgeois, which demonstrates solidarity with the worker, was staged by the Moscow Art Theatre in 1902 only after the authorities had censored certain speeches. And despite the censorship, the government still dispatched a team of security personnel to the theatre to prevent any uprising during the performance. This play features an intriguing class struggle. The privileged class is represented by Bessemenov, a landlord to whom the title of the play refers, his

wife Akulina, and their children Tatiana and Petr. And the underprivileged is represented by Stepanida, the cook in Bessenova’s household, Polia the itinerant seamstress and Perchikin, a petty trader and Polia’s father, and Elena, the widowed tenant living in Bessemenov’s house. The arrogance of the rich is portrayed in several ways such as Bessemenov’s and his wife’s strong opposition to their son Petr’s romance with Elena simply because the latter belongs to the subaltern class. Gorkii’s ideological spokesman in the play is Nil, the locomotive engineer and Bessemenov’s foster son. Whether at home or place of work his rebellious instincts are geared towards liberation from intimidation and harassment. He successfully incites Petr against Bessemenov as a result of which the former openly defies the latter and proceeds with his relationship with the woman of his choice. It is through Nil that Gorkii draws attention to man’s limitless potential to subvert any oppressive status quo:

What is repulsive to me is when pigs, fools, and thieves rule over me and other honest people…But life is not on their side, not entirely…not by a long shot; they will go, disappear, the way carbuncles disappear on a healthy body. There is no timetable or schedule that cannot be changed (73-74).

When Bessemenov insists on being consulted over Nil’s choice of marriage partner, Nil tells him that he is “also a master in this house. For ten years I have worked and given you all my wages. I have contributed a lot here, yes, right here (stamps his foot and makes a broad, enveloping gesture). He who works is the master!” (42). Nil is happy to announce his “brilliant victory” over a “bone-headed supervisor” at his place of work, and is convinced that “[t]he right is not given, it is taken. A man must win these rights for himself, if he doesn’t want to be crushed by a whole mess of duties, responsibilities” (72). Indeed Nil provides an insight into why the society
requires a revolutionary transformation: “[I]n Russia it is easier to be a drunkard and a bum than a sober, honest, and useful citizen” (71). Nil recalls Osofisan’s Latoye and Saluga in *The Chattering* and *No More the Wasted Breed* respectively. Each of these men serves as the voice of reason and plays a prominent role in arousing the consciousness of the underprivileged characters.

Observing that Gorkii “was the people’s angry man,” John Gassner notes that “[e]verywhere he came upon inhuman brutality that made his blood boil” (527). Gassner’s observation of Gorkii might as well apply to Osofisan, and the rest of Nigeria’s second-generation playwrights who have been described as “the angry generation” (Osundare, *Thread in the Loom* 64).

Meanwhile the socio-economic condition of early twentieth-century Russia that necessitated Gorkii’s sympathy for the worker in *The Petty Bourgeois* is replicated in *The Weavers*, a historical play by the German playwright, Gerhart Hauptmann. Hauptmann’s 1892 play is based on the Silesian weavers’ revolt of 1844. The insurrection was staged to demand a better working condition. Like Gorkii, Hauptmann demonstrates sympathy for the worker by manipulating dramatic characters and situations so that we can identify with the cause of the weavers and condemn the oppressors. Consider the following stage directions:

*A spacious whitewashed room in Dreissiger’s house...where the weavers must deliver their finished webs. Most of the waiting weavers stand like men before the bar of justice where, tortured and anxious, they must await a life-and-death decision. They all give the impression of being crushed like beggars. Passing from humiliation to humiliation and*
convinced that they are only tolerated, they are used to making themselves as inconspicuous as possible. (2)

The cotton manufacturer Dreissiger represents the rich/privileged while the poor/underprivileged are represented by the weavers. As exemplified by Dreissiger, the rich appropriate the labour of the common men and women, growing fat at the expense of the poor workers who are being deliberately underpaid. For the oppressive minority, reality is permanently fixed and divinely ordained while for the oppressed majority, the status quo must be uprooted. Determined to redeem their humanity, the weavers launch a violent revolt, invading Dreissiger’s home and destroying his properties including the textile stock before proceeding to other locations where they mobilize fellow workers, confront other oppressive employers, and destroy their properties as well. The weavers are so determined to fight for their rights that they clash with government security forces. Their quest for liberation is driven by the full recognition that they are the masters of their fate, and that not even the government can help them:

JAEGGER: If we could manage to stick together, we could start such an uproar against the manufacturers…We wouldn’t need the King for that, or the government, either; we could simply say, we want this and that, and we do not want this or that, and they’d soon whistle a different tune. If they once see we’ve got spunk, they’d soon pull in their horns. I know their kind! They’re cowardly bastards (32).

Hauptmann’s play dramatizes the class war in nineteenth-century Germany to justify the need for immediate social transformation. The Weavers particularly recalls Osofisan’s Morountodun which is equally based on a historical event and involves rioting farmers who are fighting for liberation from an unjust socio-economic order. But Hauptmann’s play, unlike Osofisan’s, does

28
not conclude with the underprivileged winning their rights and entitlements. Still, such a conclusion does not deny the play’s revolutionary credentials because of my belief that the attempt by the oppressed to achieve liberation, whether or not he succeeds, is more important in determining the revolutionary status of a play.

In his theatre, Brecht, Hauptmann’s younger compatriot, sets out to “teach the spectator a most definitely practical conduct that is intended to change the world” (The Mother 133). His *epic* theatre is antagonistic to Aristotelian dramatic technique. Unlike the Aristotelian technique in which audience members delegate power to the dramatic character to act and think on their behalf, the spectator in *epic* theatre allows the actor to perform on his behalf but reserves the right to interrogate his actions. Whereas Aristotelian theatre requires actors to identify themselves emotionally with their characters, *epic* theatre insists that the actor must approach his role in a manner that elicits critical response from the audience; he must remind the audience of who he is not by stating who he is. *Epic* theatre appeals to reason rather than emotion and is designed to engage audience members actively rather than passively. A play like *The Measures Taken* appears to signal Brecht’s intention to awaken the consciousness of the common man as to his ability to eliminate any obstacle in his revolutionary path. This play features four Communist agitators from Moscow who convince a Control Chorus of the reason they murdered their Chinese guide whose actions were beginning to pose a threat to the actualization of communism in China. As earlier noted, Osofisan is a stylistic disciple of Brecht. He has been influenced, at least in part, by the German playwright whose techniques he has employed in pursuing his revolutionary objectives. The subsequent analysis of *Morountodun* and *The Chattering* in particular will reveal how the Nigerian playwright has adapted Brecht’s anti-illusionistic technique in order to elicit a critical response from the audience.
Unlike Osofisan, Derek Walcott, the most prominent Caribbean playwright, is not a notable disciple of Brecht. But Walcott, like Osofisan, has used the medium of theatre to advance the cause of the underdog and advocate an all-inclusive society. The “future of West Indian militancy lies in art,” says Walcott, adding that “[a]ll revolutions begin amateurishly, with forged or stolen weapons but the West Indian artist knew the need for revolt without knowing what weapons to use” (“What the Twilight Says” 18). Indeed, Walcott seems to have found in the theatre an ideal “weapon” to give voice to the less privileged members of the Caribbean population. In Pantomime, a response to Daniel Defoe’s novel Robinson Crusoe, for instance, he revises the traditional image of master-servant relationship as represented respectively by the white colonizer and the colonized black. Rather than present the reader and audience with a weak, impotent and voiceless errand boy who is always pliant to the wishes of his master, Jackson, Walcott’s protagonist, is very bold, confident and assertive. Inverting the master-servant paradigm, he declares to his white boss:

I think it is a matter of prejudice. I think that you cannot believe: one: that I can act and two: that any black man should play Robinson Crusoe. This moment that we are now acting here is the history of imperialism; it’s nothing less than that. And I don’t think that I can—should—concede my getting into a part halfway and abandoning things, just because you, as my superior, give me orders. People become independent (140).

Jackson’s conclusion signals the rejection of his perceived inferiority and clearly demonstrates his desire to be treated as an equal. As he puts it, “That master-and-servant shit finish. Bring a beer for me”(149). Contrary to the colonialist scenario painted in Defoe’s novel, a scenario according to which the white castaway names everything around him, including Friday, his slave, it is Jackson who attempts to rename Crusoe. Although Walcott’s approach to revising
racial stereotypes in Defoe’s novel is comic, the play’s revolutionary intent is not in doubt. In its exploration of the complex issues of Caribbean identity and race relations as exemplified by the two characters, Walcott’s play concludes “not with a perfect relationship, but with the start of new identities for both of them” (Ford 8). The poetic license employed by Walcott in re-interpreting characters and situations in Defoe’s novel is akin to that of Osofisan who is noted for subverting historical characters and situations in accordance with his ideological vision. Despite acknowledging that the issues that are usually addressed in Wacott’s theatre such as the “problem of racism, of cultural alienation or miscegenation” are not exactly the same as daily problems in Nigeria, Osofisan still admits that “we do have some of it.”

The class oppression usually dramatized in Osofisan’s plays, for instance, is arguably as retrogressive as the racial problems in the works of Walcott.

As in Africa and the Caribbean, revolutionary theatre has been used to advance the cause of the down-trodden in India. The radical street theatre outfit Jana Natya Manch (People’s Theatre Front), popularly known as JANAM, is one Indian theatre outfit that has sided with the struggles of Indian people. This company has mounted numerous productions that expose the evil machinations of India’s privileged class while advocating a better life for the poor. A member of the group, Sudhanva Deshpande, noted in a 2011 public lecture that JANAM is a “theatre of the powerless” and seeks to demonstrate how the Indian people are “entrapped by the ruling class.” JANAM has a “tradition of dissent and liberation” in championing the cause of Indian people. As Van Erven observes, JANAM “reveals a radically different picture from the one presented by the international media and official records: no smiling, motherly Indira, no charming, chubby Rajiv married to an Italian hotel owner’s daughter but a ruthless dynasty of

---

13 Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Metaphorical Language and Revolutionary Ethos,” p. 156.
power-mongers keeping their …starving people in a stranglehold” (*The Playful Revolution* 143-44). As expected, India’s powerbrokers cannot smile in approval of such a theatre.

A high-profile member of JANAM, Safdar Hashmi, was murdered in the streets of Delhi in January 1989, during the performance of *Halla Bol (Attack!)*, a play that demonstrates solidarity with the labour movement. Hashmi’s murder is a clear signal that the productions of JANAM are considered in certain quarters to be cutting too close to the bone. As Deshpande explains, “the ruling politicians, the ruling party at that time, were involved in it.”¹⁴ The morally bankrupt politicians and powerbrokers that Deshpande and Van Erven talk about are certainly no strangers to Nigerians as demonstrated by some of Osofisan’s titles to be subsequently analyzed. A character like Kansillor in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, for instance, is similar to those politicians responsible for the death of Hashmi.

The “tradition of dissent and liberation” in which Deshpande locates JANAM vis-à-vis the welfare of India’s underprivileged is not actually limited to JANAM. His description applies equally to many works of apartheid South African theatre, particularly in connection with the plight of black people. Several South African playwrights and theatre groups wrote and/or staged plays that demanded justice and the immediate installation of a democratic government based on racial equality. As the title suggests, Benjamin Leshoai’s *Revolution* is primarily concerned with the radical change that will result in the liberation of black man in apartheid South Africa. We get a sense of the play’s political ambition in the heated confrontation between a white priest and a black servant hired to clean a church attended by white people:

PRIEST: (screaming) Shut your mouth! Who are you not to be screamed at in church?

---

¹⁴ Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Revolutionary Theatre in Postcolonial Asia and Africa,” p.110. (See interview photo on page xiii of this dissertation).
SABESTA: *(advancing angrily)* Just scrubbing this bloody floor to make it clean for white knees.

PRIEST: *(backing)* The devil strike you dead for your insolence!

SABESTA: *(adopting a threatening attitude)* You see now...You see! Now you are poking the snake in its hole!

PRIEST: *(backing toward the altar and looking this way and that way with fear in his eyes)* Your eyes are like the devil! Satan leave me!

SABESTA: *(in a crouching position)*: Ah! You look like a frog that is trapped by the hypnotising eyes of a poisonous adder. *(Barking at him)*. Ha! haha! ha!

PRIEST: Bloody snake, don’t bark at me like you were a dog.

SABESTA: It’s your blood...that I want, your blood! (39-40).

Sabesta eventually murders the priest, and after looking at his dead body, he happily proclaims the violent action as “The Revolution” (41). The confrontation between Sabesta and the priest is paradigmatic of the racial tension in apartheid South Africa. Like Baraka, Leshoai does not mind a completely gory path to the freedom of black people, even at the risk of being called a reverse racist. It appears that both the South African and African-American revolutionary playwrights are not interested in making a distinction between the white man and the unjust system set up in his name. Nkosi’s *The Rhythm of Violence* provides additional insight into the militant nature of South Africa’s revolutionary theatre in the apartheid era. In this play, a leftist, multi-racial student body led by a hot-headed black student bombs a city hall where a convention of the
oppressive, white ruling party is taking place. The revolutionary fervor of the play can also be
gleaned from the off-stage speech that Gama, the black students’ leader, makes during a rally:

Friends, today the young people are seizing the reins and we promise you plenty action!

Today, here and now, we pledge ourselves to act! Before you all we resolve to strike a
blow against apartheid! From now on we are serving notice on these arrogant men that
we can no longer tolerate white domination, subjugation and repression at their hands (6).

As one of the white, apartheid police officers acknowledges, this speech is an “incitement” (6) to
violence. It provides a glimpse into the resistance by the oppressed that finally results in the
bomb that explodes at the end of the play, killing delegates. As Mineke Schipper has stated,
black South African theatre of the apartheid era

became more and more a theatre of anger, a theatre that speaks to the black audience
about the ways and means to change their situations. South African black artists have
often felt closer to Afro-American liberation movements than to traditional African
literature. At the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, plays became more and
more radically committed to political change. (93-94)

As in Baraka’s plays, the speech and actions in Revolution and The Rhythm of Violence are an
attempt to incite the oppressed black population against the white oppressors. It encourages the
marginalized and humiliated blacks to wrest their freedom from the white man. Not surprisingly,
the white minority South African government cracked down on such dramatic presentations. The
authorities censored, disrupted and sometimes banned outright the performance of the plays.
Revolutionary theatre practitioners were hunted and persecuted by the authorities. Nkosi was
barred from returning to South Africa when in 1961 he left for studies in the United States. And
revolutionary plays such as *The Rhythm of Violence* and *Revolution* were all banned in South Africa. David Jefferes captures the mood of the South African theatre of this period:

> During the apartheid era, literary production challenged colonial authority and participated in the production of counter-narratives of South African identity. Many writers and artists were imprisoned or forced into exile. Alongside the rise of the Black consciousness movement in the 1970s, a genre of literature developed that conveyed narrative of protest. This literature of protest recorded a history of oppositional politics that was occluded from the official narrative of apartheid; further it sought to build community and inspire resistance (136).

The racist class structure captured in apartheid-era South African plays is as oppressive as Nigeria’s socio-political class structure as demonstrated in Osofisan’s plays. And the “socialist revolutionary action of the masses,” which Nkrumah prescribes as the only means of achieving “a non-racial society” (28) in South Africa, is precisely what Osofisan recommends for Nigeria’s class-divided social order. A somewhat intriguing characteristic that connects Osofisan’s theatre with South Africa’s anti-apartheid revolutionary plays is the romantic union or solidarity between some members of the opposing groups. In Nkosi’s *The Rhythm of Violence*, for instance, the relationship between the black male student Tula and the white female student Sarie recalls that of Titubi, a member of the rich class and Marshal the combatant leader of the revolting farmers in *Morountodun*. Despite belonging to diametrically opposed groups in the larger society, these couples are committed to the elimination of social inequality. Titubi’s class suicide and eventual marriage to Marshal clearly signals a recognition of the humanity of the underdog. Her action is akin to those of the non-black members of the militant student body in
Nkosi’s play who are mindful of the fact that they can be truly free only when everyone else is free.

And just as the notorious human rights records of South Africa’s apartheid regime received attention from the nation’s revolutionary dramatists, those of Kenya’s postcolonial autocrats have not escaped the attention of Kenyan theatre. Kenya’s revolutionary theatre provides some examples of an aggressive and uncompromisingly militant attitude towards the atrocities of the ruling class. As earlier hinted, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, a leading novelist, scholar, and playwright, spearheaded a popular theatre project in Kamiriithu, a poverty-stricken neighbourhood near the national capital, Nairobi. This project began in 1977. Working in collaboration with the peasants in Kamiriithu, he produced *I Will Marry When I Want*, a play that portrays the betrayal of Kenyan masses by the comprador bourgeoisie in cahoots with foreign (mainly Western) nations. Using two families—the rich Kios and the indigent Kiguundas as paradigmatic—the play dramatizes class struggle in post-independence Kenya. The following two sets of directions convey the picture of a single but divided world:

*Kiguunda’s home. A square, mud-walled, white-ochred, one-roomed house. The white ochre is fading. In one corner can be seen Kiguunda and Wangeci’s bed. In another can be seen a pile of rags on the floor. The floor is Gathoni’s bed and the rags, her bedding...In the same room can be seen a pot on the three stones...On one side of the wall there hangs Kiguunda’s coat, and on the opposite, on the same wall, Wangeci’s coat. The coats are torn and patched. A pair of tyre sandals and a basin can be seen on the floor (3).*

And now compare the following:
Kioi’s home...A big well-furnished house. Sofa seats, TV, radiogram, plastic flowers on the table, and so on. Electric lights. On the walls are several photographs...The table has all sorts of dishes (74).

The rich Ahab Kioi is so cruel that he swindles the wretched Kiguunda of his only piece of land. And the love affair between Kioi’s son Mhuni and Kiguunda’s daughter Gathoni does not call for celebration. Mhuni impregnates Gathoni and jilts her with the support of Kioi. As David Kerr has stated, “Mhuni and Gathoni are no Romeo and Juliet uniting families. Their affair reinforces the symbolism of exploitation” (244). But the oppressed are not willing to accept humiliation and exploitation with phlegmatic resignation. In a well-orchestrated and highly poignant scene, Kioi, acting on instructions from Kiguunda, kneels down and begins crawling on hands and feet, pleading frantically for the armed Kiguunda to save his life. Kioi and the other bourgeois characters such as Ikuua and Ndugire are “[l]ocal watchmen for foreign robbers” (31) since they collaborate with foreign powers to oppress fellow citizens in postcolonial Kenya. In the words of Ngũgĩ, the play “showed the transition of Kenya from a colony with the British interests being dominant, to a neo-colony with the doors open to wider imperialist interest from Japan to America” (*Decolonizing the Mind* 44). The play attempts to arouse the revolutionary instincts of the Kenyan people. Its final song that centres on the word “organization” which, by implication, means “unity” or “solidarity,” is an attempt to mobilize the underprivileged dramatis personae and the real peasants and workers among audience members. This particular moment is reminiscent of the conclusion of Osofisan’s *The Chattering* where audience members are encouraged to join the actors in the singing and dancing of the Farmers’ Anthem. During the performance of Ngũgĩ’s play, the audience actually participated and carried placards. In response to the play, the government banned further performances of the play after a seven-week run,
destroyed the venue of performance, and jailed Ngũgĩ (Kerr 244-47; Ngũgĩ, Detained 76-80; Ngũgĩ, Decolonizing the Mind 34-62).

The kind of class struggle we find in Ngũgĩ’s play is replicated in Ugandan playwright Mukotani Rugyendo’s *The Barbed Wire*. First performed at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1972, Rugyendo’s play is dedicated to “the struggling peasants and workers who can no longer be mystified that things have always been as they are and shall forever be” (1). The rich class in the play is represented by Rwambura who forcefully usurps communal land, an action the oppressed characters and co-owners of the land are determined to resist:

BIRAKWATE: In matters like these, a man can’t just keep quiet while his own is being taken. Are we to eat the slimy vegetable without salt while other people are driving cars? They are always saying that they worked for their money while we slept. But I know that most of them stole it. We can’t allow them to cheat us while we just look on (5).

Not even the eventual persecution of the people by the Rwambura-influenced security forces could tame their collective will to fight and reclaim their land. The play espouses collective heroism as exemplified by the people who, upon reclaiming their land, subsequently set up a cooperative society that will ensure their economic survival in addition to dealing with other problems. Rwambura’s monstrous image and intimidation of his people is clearly replicated by Osofisan’s Aringindin in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*. And the cooperative society established at the end of the play clearly replicates the brand of government about to be ushered in at the conclusion of Osofisan’s play.

Like her eastern African neighbours of Kenya and Uganda, Tanzania has produced some revolutionary theatre. Ebrahim Hussein’s historical play *Kinjeketile* is one such instance. It is
based on the Maji Maji uprising which took place in Tanzania during the early twentieth century. Led by the historical figure of the title character, the uprising was a collective resistance against the brutal and inhuman German colonialism. We get a sense of the justification for revolutionary action from the following passage:

MKICHI: The red earth is still in our country. What’s more, he has taken our country from us by force. And we like women just stare at him. Now he has forced us to cultivate his cotton plantation for him. We just stare at him. Is it for him to demand taxes from us? He should be paying us tax, but oh no! We, like women, just meekly sit, watching him do what he wants with us, with our land. How long are we going to remain weak and silent?

(5)

Determined to redeem the humanity of his people, Kinjeketile, who is believed to be possessed by the spirit of the Maji River, successfully unites the various Tanzanian tribes in order to launch an offensive against the alien invaders. Inspired by Kinjeketile’s prophecy that Hongo—the spirit of the Maji river—will protect them from German bullets even after Kinjeketile began to doubt the prophecy, the united tribes commence an armed confrontation against the Germans who eventually defeat them. The play’s revolutionary spirit is particularly manifest not only in the collective will of the oppressed to secure their freedom but in Kinjeketile’s refusal to admit to the German authorities that the Maji spirit is fake:

KINJEKETILE: He wants me to say that the water was a lie. Do you know what that means? The moment I say that, people in the north, south, east and west will stop fighting. They will fall into helpless despair—they will give up. I will not say that! A word has been born. Our children will tell their children about this word. Our great-
grandchildren will hear of it! One day the word will cease to be dream, it will be a reality! (53).

Thus the spirit of the uprising, though battered, remains defiant in anticipation of a better future. “Kinjeketile refuses, against the clamours and pleadings of the prisoners,” says Jeyifo, “maintaining that the myth is not ultimately a lie because it has produced a historical truth: the absolute necessity for the Africans to fight and defeat the German colonizers” (37). Kinjeketile’s inspirational leadership and uncommon courage are again reminiscent of those of Osofisan’s revolutionary vanguards such as Latoye and Saluga in The Chattering and No More the Wasted Breed respectively or even Akanji in Red is the Freedom Road. Although, Hussein’s play, unlike Osofisan’s three titles, does not conclude with the overthrow of tyranny, it remains revolutionary in my view for the simple fact of attempting to empower the oppressed people to achieve emancipation from oppression.

Unlike Hussein’s play and the earlier-cited The Trial of Dedan Kimathi by Ngũgĩ and Mugo, Ezenta Eze’s The Cassava Ghost, which is equally inspired by a historical uprising against colonial rule, concludes with victory for the oppressed. The play is based on the Aba women’s riot of 1929 that took place in Eastern Nigeria against British colonial administration. Like Osofisan, Eze has used poetic licence to alter historical accuracy in order to advance the cause of the underprivileged. Again, as in Osofisan’s Morountodun and Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen, female characters in The Cassava Ghost play a prominent role in securing freedom for the oppressed.

Some revolutionary plays have not focused on class war but have specifically addressed other instances of unequal power relations. Several works by Tess Onwueme, the Nigerian
feminist playwright, bear testimony to this fact. Onwueme’s works are driven by feminist ideology and are particularly geared towards the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchy. *The Broken Calabash, Tell it to Women* and *The Reign of Wazobia* are some of Onwueme’s titles that illustrate my point. In *The Broken Calabash* for instance, there is an outright rebellion against the restrictions imposed on women by a traditional culture. Ona, an educated young woman is an only child and must therefore marry within her community in accordance with customs. But the man of her heart is an outsider and her tradition-obsessed father is so antagonistic to their planned marriage that her fiancé finally marries another woman. In a calculated act of vengeance against her father, she becomes pregnant by a wretch as a result of which her father commits suicide. The young woman is not daunted by her father’s tragic demise and remains incredibly defiant in denouncing repressive customs:

> You people have a very ambitious murder-plan. You will not only slaughter me on the altar of decadent tradition, but would also want another female head. I say to hell with your tradition. Homestead! Norm. All. Let the wind blow—Let the shaky homestead be blown. Anything which cannot stand the face of change must be uprooted or be blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new season! (46).

Clearly, Onwueme’s heroines are not robots who accept punishment and ask for more. They are courageous gladiators who are determined to fight any obstacle to their self-fulfillment in a male-dominated society. Such an empowering portrayal of women has prompted Awodiya to observe that Onwueme “is a female voice that addresses a materialist-feminist perspective with theatrical forcefulness” and that “[i]n all her plays…she devotes considerable attention to feminist themes and radical transformation of static culture and hide-bound tradition in contemporary Africa” (“Uncelebrated Heroes and Heroines” 229). Therefore both Osofisan and Onwueme are
committed to the well-being of Nigeria’s underprivileged but from the perspective of class and
gender respectively. The class and gender oppressions which both playwrights have respectively
addressed seem to represent both sides of the same coin for “the two histories…of patriarchy and
class society,” as Eagleton has noted, “are so tightly interwoven that it would be hard to imagine
the overthrow of the one without great shock waves rolling through the other” (Why Marx Was
Right 213).

The foregoing, I hope, has further clarified my thinking about revolutionary drama in
general and in Africa in particular. That such theatrical experiments can be found everywhere
around the world is an indication that man’s inhumanity to man which precipitates this kind of
theatre is a universal phenomenon. The cited examples also demonstrate that where there is
oppression there will also be resistance to that oppression. As we can see, the various
practitioners of this theatre, despite their different geographical location and historical periods,
share a similar goal of eliminating the conditions that engender such a theatre of resistance and
revolution. The practitioners are at war with the society that generates the plays. Their literary
and theatrical activities are the type that “is…transgressive of negative limits” and “subverts
artificial borders, scales iron fences, breaks down walls. It interrogates oppressive customs”
(Osundare, Thread in the Loom 62). In championing the cause of the less privileged especially in
post-colonial Africa, revolutionary theatre is particularly eager to ensure a drastic overhaul of the
socio-economic order that has resulted in the “process of massive dispossession” such as
“dispossession of land through land grabbing, dispossession of the value of our wages,
dispossession of our ability to produce what we, rather than what international finance capital,
want” (Manji 9). But probably, “the most serious dispossession” which revolutionary drama
seeks to redress in Africa is “political dispossession” which has not only resulted in the denial of
basic human rights for the people but has ensured that “[o]ur governments are more accountable today to the international financial institutions, to the corporations that extract wealth without restriction, and to the international aid agencies that finance institutions such as IMF, than to citizens” (Manji 9). Says Biodun Jeyifo about Africa’s revolutionary drama,

Very consciously, very deliberately, active historical contents are played off against the old myths, the supernatural and magical explanations of man’s existence within society and nature. And no wonder, for quite often these plays deal with the more basic, more concrete problems that confront Africa and Africans: foreign domination, hunger, poverty, the degradation and oppression of the “little people,” that is of Africa’s vast urban and rural masses. The sights are focused more sharply on all the means of liberation, as much from foreign and domestic oppression, as from the systems of thought and the mystifications of reality inherited from previous ages unencumbered by the problems of the present epoch (62).

Revolutionary theatre is therefore a project of celebration and thanksgiving to the oppressed. And it is mainly a project of ideologically committed practitioners whose works generally seek to be “realistic, active, vitally collectivist, and filled with a limitless creative faith in the Future” (Trotsky 15).

As we can also see, the practitioners of this theatre tend to use different dramaturgical approaches to pursue their revolutionary objectives. While some have single-handedly written and directed their plays (Brecht, Osofisan, Baraka, Walcott, etc.) to dramatize how they believe change can be instituted, others (Boal, Ngũgĩ, JANAM etc.) have adopted a collaborative method by working with the people in an atmosphere of give-and-take associated with play-creating
rather than playwriting. And while some have embraced the mimetic illusionism of naturalist conventions, others, including Osofisan, have experimented with avant-garde techniques.

In selecting Osofisan’s plays as the objects of my study, I have been guided by several considerations. Perhaps the most obvious of these considerations is the fact that, as a citizen of Africa’s most populous nation and with such an impressive dramatic oeuvre, Osofisan has reached a wide audience and his works can be justifiably used to assess the contribution that Nigerians have made to socially transformative art. A less obvious consideration is the fact that as a playwright and scholar he enjoys considerable national and international reputation. His plays have been produced in virtually every continent around the world. In view of his “ever-rising profile,” it is hardly surprising that some have begun speculating that Osofisan “has. . . now reached Nobel Laureate potential” (Iji 439). But the question of his Nobel potential is not relevant to the issues raised in this study. What is relevant is the question of how his works can raise mass consciousness to the point of precipitating a socialist revolution in Nigeria.

Mindful of the fact that Osofisan has been influenced by Brecht, at least in part, I will also examine how his adaptation of key techniques of Brechtian theatre, especially historicization (viewing present social arrangements and institutions as historical, transitory, and subject to change), alienation (emphasizing the make-believe nature of a theatrical work in order to elicit critical response from the audience), and epic style (mixing narrative and dramatic techniques) have affected the reception of his plays. In doing so, I will endeavour to address the following questions: (a) How has Osofisan adapted Brechtian dramatic techniques? (b) Have the adaptations been effective? If not, why not? Are there better techniques he could have employed, or better ways of adapting Brecht to his audience’s tastes and his own purposes as a dramatist? (c) Do all members of the audience that gather to see his plays performed belong to his
ideological target group, or are they ideologically varied? (d) What difference, if any, does watching the performance of his plays make to his audiences’ understanding of theatre as political discourse?

To answer the above questions, I have employed a multi-pronged research methodology. First, I have conducted an interview with Osofisan and some other scholars and practitioners of revolutionary theatre such as the Dutchman Eugene van Erven and India’s Sudhanva Deshpande in order to define this concept as well as assess its strength and weaknesses as a revolutionary tool. The perspectives and insights from an African, European and Asian are intended to place subsequent analysis of Osofisan’s theatre in a global socially transformative context. Second, I analyze the dramatic form, structure, language, and content of the plays to understand their effectiveness and limitations as instruments of collective action. Third, I draw on my direct observation and audience responses to specific productions of Osofisan’s plays in Nigeria and elsewhere. Finally, I draw on studies of Osofisan’s drama and theatre productions as well as on postcolonial theory and revolutionary theatre in general to ground my arguments, discourses and conclusions in the broader field of postcolonial theatre.

In Chapter One I focus on language and non-linguistic factors while discussing the reasons why Osofisan’s revolutionary theatre may succeed or fail in having a socio-politically transformative effect upon his audiences; in Chapter Two I investigate Morountodun and The Chattering, two revolutionary plays that have in common their use of historical incidents and violent revolutionary method; in Chapter Three I examine No More the Wasted Breed and Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen, neither of which is based on historical and mythological sources and in both of which the oppressed achieve liberation without taking to arms. I conclude by arguing that theatre’s potential as a direct instrument of revolution appears to be unrealistic.
but observe that its potential as an indirect or contributory instrument of revolution may not be completely dismissed and then suggest how Osofisan’s revolutionary dramaturgy can be improved.
Chapter One

Language, Methodological Approach and the Revolutionary Potential of Osofisan’s Theatre
“Post-colonial theatre’s capacity to intervene publicly in social organization and to critique political structures can be more extensive than the relatively isolated circumstances of written narrative and poetry” (Gilbert and Tompkins 3). This assertion provokes the question: What is it that theatre does that a novel or poem cannot do? Osofisan clarifies:

First of all, it [theatre] has the advantage of immediate and direct impact on the audience. Secondly, the barrier of the English language can be greatly overcome on the stage, if you do the play well. This is because on stage, you can communicate with more than words. Thus, it is quite possible for you to sit down and watch a play in a language you don’t speak. So it’s not just the words you need in the theatre. And that’s the advantage of plays.¹⁵

These claims about the relative advantage of drama over other literary genres have been echoed by other scholars such as Chidi Amuta (156), Sam Ukala (29), Iyorwuese Hagher (140), Ajayi (89), Olaogun (45) and Tracie Utoh (273). It is due to these proclaimed “advantages” of theatre over prose and poetry that Osofisan has relied heavily on theatre as the means of pursuing his revolutionary message. However, despite these proclaimed advantages, Osofisan’s brand of theatre has not succeeded in mobilizing audience members to undertake a revolution in Nigeria. Stage dramatizations of revolution have simply not led to revolution. To understand why this is so, and whether his theatre could ever inspire a revolution in Nigeria, we must investigate a number of issues. Key among these are language, methodology, venue of performance and ideology.

1.1 Language

Language has been a perennial source of critical debate in African literature. As Tejumola Olaniyan has rightly noted, “[t]he ‘anomaly’ of ‘African literature’ in European languages is…an…undying problematic in African literary discourse. The dilemma is particularly poignant in the case of radical writers bearing an empowering message but in a language not understood by those they want to empower” (“Femi Osofisan” 121). Olaniyan’s observation is particularly relevant because it refers particularly to the works of Osofisan. Nor has the problem escaped the attention of Osofisan. Asked why he writes in English rather than his native Yoruba, he responds:

I am a playwright of limited possibilities in a sense that I write in English which already presumes an audience. I don’t write for the broad masses because I don’t write well in any of our indigenous languages. I was trained to write in a certain language. It is not that I can’t do otherwise. It is definitely good to write in the local language, to reach our people. But it is not bad either to write in the national language. And it does not also mean that by writing in English you automatically write for the elite alone. It depends on what you do with the language.16

Two main points that emerge from Osofisan’s explanation is that: (a) writing in either English or the vernacular is a valid option and that a writer will have to decide what to settle for, just as he has settled for English, (b) the English language is not the issue but how it is manipulated. His explanation, particularly on the latter point, seems persuasive especially since the subsequent analyses of his plays reveal that his manipulation of English has been able to capture a sense of African life and galvanize the oppressed characters into revolutionary action. Another justification for Osofisan’s choice to write in English, according to him, is the fact that the

16 Interview by Muyiwa Awodiya. Excursions in Drama and Literature, p58.
English language offers a better opportunity to reach more people in Nigeria than would be possible with Yoruba or any other Nigerian language.\textsuperscript{17} Osofisan captures the dilemma of African writers with regard to the language question. Could it be that African writers using a European language are doing the wrong thing for the right reasons? And that means they are doing the right thing? The dilemma posed by the language question has been observed equally by other scholars.\textsuperscript{18}

With particular regard to written African literature, opinion certainly differs as to what the appropriate language should be. Like Osofisan, several scholars have attempted to legitimize or justify the use of English and other European languages instead of African languages. As Anthony Graham-White has stated, in reference to Nigerian literary drama, “English has been a far more prestigious medium than any of the vernacular languages, in part because it has represented the chance of publication and production outside one country”\textsuperscript{(146)}. Graham-White’s position represents the kind of analysis that informs the view that “[c]ritics of African literature have always taken it for granted that African writers have to write in English” (Barber, “African Language Literature” 3). Besides Graham-White, other scholars who believe that Anglophone African authors have “little choice” but to write in English “if they wished to secure an audience worthy of the name” (Barber, “African Language Literature” 3) are Adetugbo (173), Povey (98), Larson (11) and Roscoe (4) among others. It is really not easy for the Nigerian

\textsuperscript{17} Interview by Muyiwa Awodiya. \textit{Excursions in Drama and Literature}, pp58-59.
\textsuperscript{18} Ato Quayson, for instance, has noted that “in multilingual environments all languages are not equal. As many Africans will readily attest, the first level of strangeness that attended our sense of self was that we were obliged to study in a language far removed from our ordinary everyday experience. We quarreled in Akan and played in Shona, woke up from nightmares in Yoruba and took parental instructions in Kikuyu. But the language of instruction was always European…This meant that we always had to go through a process of translating the language of the common place into the language of reason and vice-versa. These multi-lingual negotiations led to a variety of breaches in the commonplace, in their turn making an endlessly restless process of translating linguistically hybrid social forms a necessity of everyday life.” \textit{Calibrations}, p. xii. In a similar vein, Kwame Anthony Appiah has stated that “most African writers have received a Western-style education; their ambiguous relations to the world of their foremothers and forefathers and to the world of the industrialized countries are part of their distinctive cultural (dis)location.” \textit{In My Father’s House}, p.54.
dramatist to abandon English entirely. As Chinua Achebe has noted, “English is…not marginal to Nigerian affairs. It is quite central” (“The Politics of Language” 269).

The fact that the nation is a conglomeration of no fewer than two hundred and fifty ethno-linguistic communities further complicates matters for the dramatist. Graham-White and the rest of the pro-English critics seem to have a point, but should getting published and performed in several countries be the priority for a revolutionary playwright like Osofisan who is seeking to improve the life of fellow citizens? The primary purpose of revolutionary drama, as exemplified by the selected Osofisan titles, is not for the author to demonstrate his or her mastery of European languages or to seek international popularity, but for him to raise the consciousness of the public about the oppression by the ruling class and to make them consider why and how to liberate themselves. Van Erven again:

I haven’t made a study of this, and I think it will be an interesting one—of, say, who are the major African artists and what their social background is and what their ambitions are. Is it to win the Nobel Prize, for instance, or to genuinely make a change and share their sensibility and insights and poetic talents with the people who need it most?19

The above statement recognizes the right of an artist to produce the brand of literature he or she deems fit. But it should also serve as a food for thought for any author who is much more interested in the liberation of the oppressed than in seeking personal fame and recognition. Excellent command of European languages by African playwrights, for instance, does not necessarily validate their revolutionary plays. Despite stating that “[t]he world does not end at the edge of an African village but is now a big place where people communicate freely” in

making a case for African literature in European languages, Van Erven concluded that “it is more important to develop art in conjunction with local people and for that it’s unavoidable to use local languages.”

The use of native languages especially in the writing of African revolutionary literature has been advocated by other scholars. Yetunde Akorede, as earlier noted, recommends that Osofisan and the rest of Nigeria’s revolutionary dramatists should either write in Nigerian languages or Pidgin. For the Nigerian languages, she has specifically recommended “the three…languages of wider communication; namely Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa” (58). This recommendation strikes me as an intelligent one but what about those citizens who do not speak or understand any of these three major languages? Or the indigenes of one of these three major groups who do not comprehend the other two languages? Perhaps the use of Pidgin can better address the question since Pidgin is spoken across ethnolinguistic and social class boundaries, and so stands a chance of being understood by more people, from the beggar in the street to the king in the palace. But would the accessibility and efficacy of revolutionary drama be automatically guaranteed were a dramatist to completely discard English in favour of his native language or a patois like Pidgin? Akorede’s views are somewhat akin to a situation in which some English-medium universities give more preference to native English speakers in their admission process than to prospective students of other native languages. Such preference is usually demonstrated by asking only the non-native speakers of English to sit for and pass a language examination prior to admission. But many foreign students have outclassed their native-born peers in English-speaking countries like Britain, United States and Canada. That one is a native speaker of a given language does not necessarily mean one will understand or perform

---

well in everything taught in that language. While I think an English-medium university ought to emphasize proficiency in English rather than a student’s mother tongue, I believe a writer reserves the right to use any language of his choice and that what matters most is for him to manipulate the language in a way that will be understood by his targeted audience.

The success or otherwise of Nigerian revolutionary drama may not depend solely on linguistic choice. The members of a Nigerian university community in particular should have no problem comprehending Osofisan’s language. As we saw earlier on, in Idoko’s study, the vast majority (ninety-two percent) of respondents polled in two Nigerian universities expressed the view that Osofisan’s plays are capable of leading to social change. The respondents would not have sounded overwhelmingly positive on works whose language they cannot decipher. Having said that, it is the generality of the Nigerian masses whose lives Osofisan seeks to improve, although some members of the elite class may be sympathetic to the plight of the masses. He cannot therefore completely avoid writing in native languages or have his entire English-medium revolutionary plays translated into native languages despite his apparently good reasons for writing in English. As Olaniyan has noted, “[t]he masses do not speak English” and “[w]hat Osofisan does is to strip this class of its long-acquired privilege as the rallying point of radical change” (“Femi Osofisan” 122). Olaniyan is saying that by writing in English Osofisan is turning away from the revolutionary potential of the non-English speaking masses. And since the non-English speaking masses who are the majority have been alienated by Osofisan’s linguistic choice, the questions remain: how can they understand let alone listen to his message? What precisely is the best language he could possibly employ? A tripodal linguistic experiment involving English, Pidgin and indigenous Nigerian languages is a possible answer. I am proposing a simultaneous use of these languages in no particular order of priority. One of them
may have to be used at a time but they all deserve to be used in the final analysis. The people whose lives Osofisan is particularly seeking to change should also understand his chosen language of expression. Ironically, he concurs: “It is only when such dynamic and mutual work of translation is going on between our literatures that we can hope to talk directly to our people out there, and expect them to understand us” (“The Challenge of Translation” 227). Osofisan has gone ahead to specifically recommend a three-pronged methodological approach to translation: (a) “Translating English writers in Africa into French or Portuguese, and vice versa (b) Translating French/English/Portuguese authors, including foreign classics, into our indigenous languages (c) Translating works from one indigenous language to another” (“The Challenge of Translation” 226). This obvious support for vernacular translations as a significant linguistic strategy in reaching the people appears to contradict his earlier quoted remarks which demonstrate unflinching support for the English language. This is like the traffic lights shining both the green and red lights at the same time; you could be fined for proceeding while someone else might go scot-free for committing the same offence. Could it be that Osofisan is merely paying lip service to native-language literature? If not why would the vast majority of his plays, including the titles selected for this dissertation, exist only in English? No matter how successfully his English-medium revolutionary titles capture a sense of African life, the fact remains that they are still in English. A writer may do well to recognize the importance of the native language which he shares with the people. According to Raymond Williams,

for a writer there is something even more specific: that he is born into a language; that his very medium is something which he will have learned as if it were natural, although of course he eventually knows that there are other very different languages. But still it is the medium in which he will work, the medium which he shares with his own people, and
which has entered into his own constitution long before he begins to write. To be aligned to and by that language, with some of its deep qualities, is inevitable if he is to write at all. So, born into a social institution with all its specific perspectives, and into a language, the writer begins by being aligned (“The Writer: Commitment and Alignment” 216).

Williams’ observation recognizes that a writer is more likely to be initially familiar with his/her native language than with any other language acquired later. The language which Osofisan is first and foremost “born into” and hopefully “begins by being aligned” with is Yoruba. So the language of his revolutionary works may not have to permanently emphasize English at the expense of his native tongue. After all, “[t]here are more Yoruba speakers than speakers of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish put together: and no one suggests that the Scandinavians ‘have no choice’ but to stop writing in their own languages forthwith” (Barber, “African Language Literature” 13). Making the English language sound African is not an exact substitute for African-language literature especially in regard to revolutionary writing. Again, writing or translating into native tongues becomes particularly important in view of the fact that “most of Osofisan’s characters are not middle class and that, more important, the unmistakable inspiration, address, addressee in most of the plays are the lower classes” (Olaniyan, “Femi Osofisan” 123). Osofisan’s “poor background” has “inevitably” compelled him “to see things from the perspective of the poor,”21 as earlier noted, but this sympathy for the less privileged will be further strengthened by adopting the language of the masses rather than a foreign language with which the masses are not familiar. In a particular reference to African writers, Osofisan further makes the case for African-language literature deeply compelling:

---

we have some of the most respected names in the field of literature…But who outside our literary circle knows them? And even more distressing, who outside there cares? In which public bus, or local canteen, or factory, or post office, or market, can any one of us go now and shout out one of our titles, say The Voice, Les Soleils des Indépendences, or A Play of Giants, or Once Upon Four Robbers, and not be taken at once as someone in the first stage of delirium, to be helped quickly into a psychiatric hospital? But it is not the same thing, in Kenya, with Ngũgĩ’s Caitaani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross) (“The Challenge of Translation” 221).

The above testimony confirms Osofisan’s belief that Ngũgĩ’s Gikuyu title is much more popular than the French and English-medium works of African writers including those of Osofisan himself and his elder compatriot Soyinka. Is such a situation not thought-provoking? And does Osofisan’s testimony not contradict him yet again on his preference for English-language literature? In response to Soyinka’s works and his Nobel Prize, Van Erven makes an observation that is probably more relevant to the socialist Osofisan who remains the focus of this study:

I think it is important for the world to know that people with this kind of talent also come from places like Nigeria…and that it is not only white or Western artists who are the best in literary arts. I have no idea how Wole Soyinka’s work functions, if at all, in a small rural Nigerian village today in 2011. If his work has no resonance in a Nigerian village in 2011, then one can seriously wonder what the importance of Wole Soyinka is.22

If Osofisan’s English-medium revolutionary plays cannot function generally in a Nigerian village, that is, the rural areas where at least half of the population actually live, then how

---

effective are they? In fact, some advocates of African-language literature are so passionate that they have bluntly dismissed as non-African any work by an African writer in European languages, further accusing African authors writing in European languages of cultural betrayal. Among the most vociferous advocates of this position, Kenyan novelist and revolutionary playwright Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has emerged as the most notable. He is arguably the most prominent advocate of African-language literature especially in connection with revolutionary works. Hear him:

we as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages? (Decolonizing the Mind 26)

Going by Ngũgĩ’s assessment, a revolutionary writer like Osofisan is therefore actually serving the interest of the ruling class despite the Nigerian playwright’s avowed commitment to the well-being of the people. This is simply because of Osofisan’s choice of language. As Adeleke Adeeko has observed,

Ngũgĩ ruffled African Marxist activism with the claim that the language selected by a writer from the menu available in a stratified, multilingual, and ex-colonial society cannot but be of ideological significance. He premised his proposition on the belief that national languages in multilingual ex-colonies are not neutral communication instruments but partisan tools in the unending skirmishes between liberating and colonizing forces (238).
Therefore, as far as Ngũgĩ is concerned, the language is the message:

It seems to me that the African writer…who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival. In that situation, he will have to confront the languages spoken by the people in whose service he has put his pen. Such a writer will have to rediscover the real language of struggle in the actions and speeches of his people, learn from their great heritage of orature, and above all, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves. ("Writing Against Neo-colonialism" 102-3)

Ngũgĩ’s passionate support for the promotion of African languages is worthy of commendation, but he is overly rigid. Stating that the ideological commitment or the revolutionary objective of an African writer is manifest in his choice of language is probably tantamount to stating that the first name of an African leader determines how well he will govern his nation or how well his people will love him. Despite their Western first names, South Africa’s anti-apartheid hero Nelson Mandela and Tanzania’s former president Julius Nyerere are beloved leaders who are far more patriotic than the former Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Mariam whose first name is of native origin. And of course, changing from Joseph Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko did not stop the former Zairean leader from being a brutal dictator. Osofisan’s revolutionary plays do not cease to be African literature just because they are written in English, and the fact that his works have yet to lead to revolution may not be strictly blamed on his choice of language. The pro-African-language scholars and critics cannot therefore completely assume the status of a high priest who can blatantly pronounce a negative judgment on the works of fellow Africans writing in European languages and expect to go unchallenged. Ngũgĩ himself has not been exactly faithful
to his argument. His works, which were originally written in Gikuyu, including the acclaimed revolutionary play *I Will Marry When I Want*, have been translated into English. In fact, Ngũgĩ translated some of the works himself including his latest novel *Wizard of the Crow*. It may be argued that Ngũgĩ’s argument for African-language literature is not the same as opposing translation of African literature, but a situation in which a seemingly hardline advocate of African-language writing translates his works into the same European languages he seems to abhor is clearly not the best instance of leading by example. Ngũgĩ has already bade “farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings,” and also clearly stating that “[f]rom now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way” (*Decolonizing the Mind* xiv). It may be understandable when someone else translates Ngũgĩ’s African-language works but not when he continues to do so himself after making such rigid statements. His inconsistency seems strangely inexplicable. It recalls the doubtful sincerity of the Igbo proverbial old man who claims he does not eat rat meat but at the same time uses his teeth to bite off chunks of the meat for children. It appears that Ngũgĩ is privately doubtful of the wisdom of his public pronouncements on the language question. Indeed, his apparent contradictions reinforce my position that Osofisan’s revolutionary plays may have to be written both in English and Nigerian languages as well as Pidgin in a bid to mobilize everyone who is genuinely interested in the liberation of the masses.

Contrary to the pro-African language scholars like Ngũgĩ and Akorede and the pro-English scholars such as Graham-White, Roscoe and Povey, neither the English language nor African languages should be totally adopted to the exclusion of others. As far as Nigerian revolutionary drama is concerned, a cooperative linguistic experiment involving English, Nigerian languages and pidgin seems to be worthwhile. But that doesn’t mean that the problem of multilingualism can be solved when “multilingualism is itself utilized as a stage device”
Acknowledging that “in most postcolonial countries europhone syncretic theatre is situated in a bi-or multilingual context,” Christopher Balme explains that “[s]witching languages in specific contexts and from one mode of expression to another is a feature of syncretic theatre” (107). We get some sense of this “experimentation with forms of translation” (Balme 107) in Osofisan’s *The Chattering* when Ayaba sings the regal dance of continuity in Yoruba and Olori renders it in English. Contrary to Obafemi, this is not “an Osofisan innovation of getting round the problem of language in Nigerian drama” (*Contemporary Nigerian Theatre* 190). This experiment occurs only once and does not change the fact that the language of the play remains English and that the few remaining songs apart from the farmers’ anthem are in Yoruba. The non-Yoruba speaking members of the audience would still not comprehend the rest of the Yoruba songs. Moreover, using multiple languages substantially or throughout an entire play is likely to affect the smooth delivery of the message. Consider, for instance, the reaction of the London critics to Soyinka’s *The Road*, a multi-lingual play blending English, Pidgin and Yoruba and which had its premiere in London in 1965. Says Penelope Gilliat: “*The Road*, in performance is tough work for local hearing” (qtd. in Balme 111). And for *The Times Literary Supplement*: “The music of pidgin speech and Yoruba exclamation, difficult for a non-Nigerian ear to catch, must reflect both the earthiness and the transfiguration” (qtd. in Balme 111). At least two other reviewers pronounced a similar verdict. It is doubtful whether the critics would strictly maintain their position had the play used only English. Since it is important to fully comprehend the message of a non-revolutionary play, the need for such understanding becomes even more critical for a revolutionary one. For a revolutionary play in particular, it is imperative that the masses whom the play is seeking to mobilize should receive the message not in fragments but as an unbroken, organic package. Therefore to avoid unnecessary confusion arising from linguistic
experiments, a revolutionary play should endeavor to reach the people using one language at a
time. “Most of the battles fought over language in post-colonial theory,” Bill Ashcroft has
argued, “stem from a confusion between language as a communicative tool and language as a
cultural symbol” (2). This argument seems particularly compelling, but a revolutionary
playwright like Osofisan may not only emphasize language solely as a “communicative tool” or
purely as a “cultural symbol” but may always have to deploy both in raising the consciousness of
the masses toward revolutionary action. This dual function can be possibly emphasized in
whatever language his work is written or translated. The need to accomplish both functions
especially in a revolutionary play becomes particularly imperative in view of the fact that
“language has power” and “provides the terms by which reality may be constituted, it provides
the names by which the world may be known” (Ashcroft 1).

1.2 Non-Linguistic Factors

This section addresses the rest of the aforementioned factors (venue of performance,
methodology and ideology). One particular factor that has not been mentioned and with
which my analysis will commence here is the literary question—that is, the fact that a play
exists in writing and exists as literature more than as performance.

Contrary to some critics, a play is not automatically ineffective because it is written, and
playwrights do not necessarily have to de-emphasize literariness in favour of the oral
traditions. Observing that literary drama “cannot even be a rehearsal for the revolution
because it doesn’t possess such a potential,” Tunde Lakoju further argues that it is unable to
mobilize “the peasant” because “[a]s a text it would, indeed, mean nothing to him if it were
written in his own language, because he is not literate in any language” (158). Lakoju’s
argument possibly has some merit given the fact that “[p]eople in Nigeria access a play better when it is staged, for the obvious low level of literacy and the even more paranoiac emphasis on reading for immediate relevance such as examination and professional competence” (Dugga 116). Should a revolutionary playwright like Osofisan then discard writing completely? Going by Dugga’s argument, it is not that the Nigerian people are completely unable to “access” a scripted play, but that they gain a “better” understanding when the play’s presentation de-emphasizes “literacy.” It is worth noting that, by literacy, scholars like Dugga and Lakoju are referring to one’s ability to read and write, that is alphabetic literacy, which was introduced to Africa by European colonization. Therefore the non-literate Nigerians referred to by Dugga and Lakoju are illiterate in the Western sense. But such people can, nonetheless, possess some of the rhetorical skills we associate with literacy and literariness. As Osofisan has noted,

[I]t is patently fallacious to assume a priori, that a play intended for a certain audience will automatically not work with another set of spectators. A play will sometimes surprise you where you least expect it to have any impact. That has been my experience with many of my plays. Take a play like The Chattering and the Song, for instance, which I myself thought was a bit ‘academic’. But that [sic] was my surprise when I found that a state Arts Council was so moved by it that they decided to take it round the local government councils and rural areas in their state. So, what does one really know about plays, whether “revolutionary” or not? You really can’t say unless you’ve watched it; have sat down and shared the experience.23

Osofisan’s argument has been corroborated by Kerr who observes that “owing to drama’s fluid and open nature, it is still possible for even literary theatre to reach popular audiences” (105). The anti-literary drama critics may therefore want to reconsider their uncompromisingly rigid position. The fact that the majority of the people are not literate in the Western sense is no justification to completely discourage written plays. Barber argues impressively that “[m]any of the Yoruba millions are not fully literate, but the nature of the sphere of literary cultural production makes it possible for most of them to participate in an innovative, modern domain informed by written texts nonetheless” (“African Language Literature” 13). Even if Osofisan eventually decides to jettison the text and literary tradition in preference of oral dramatic techniques, it is worth publishing the play arising from such experiments. Consider the fact that Ngũgĩ’s collectively improvised revolutionary play I Will Marry When I Want exists in writing. Does this critically acclaimed play cease to be revolutionary because it has been published? Would subsequent productions of the published script be automatically invalid because they are based on written text? In seeking to pursue his revolutionary objectives, Osofisan probably has nothing to lose by embracing a culture of documentation, whatever the method he chooses in generating a play; after all, a major reason that Western scholars and critics in particular usually bypass ancient Egypt and emphasize Greece as the bona fide origin of drama is that the Egyptian theatre did not evolve into literary form (Bieber 1; Hartnoll 7). In fact, “one of the reasons used to justify the colonization of our peoples,” as Osofisan has rightly contended, “was precisely the absence of written texts among us when the Europeans arrived. Writing was the measure of ‘civilization’, and we who did not possess a library were deemed to be barbarous, deserving of all kinds of maltreatment” (“University Theatre” 71). Rather than simply discard the
written text, a revolutionary playwright should actually be cognizant of the fact that “[t]here is a basic relationship between knowledge and literacy which is superior to knowledge through orality” (Omotoso, “The Language of Our Dreams” 59). Omotoso’s argument seems persuasive since writing is better than the oral medium as a means of preserving knowledge for subsequent reference and critical analysis. Without the availability of written texts, I am not sure how feasible it would have been for my study for instance, to audit the revolutionary potential of Osofisan’s theatre. The revolutionary dramatic techniques adopted in these plays and evaluated in this dissertation are better accessed in writing than oral transmission as far as their accuracy is concerned. And whatever suggestions made by me or another scholar as to how these techniques can be improved is better appreciated when examined in juxtaposition with documented information as represented by the published plays.

In fact, rather than fulminate against written revolutionary plays a critic might better invest his/her energy in campaigning for African-language literature for it “should be the duty of all progressive citizens…that the indigenous languages of Africa should emerge and develop” (Omotoso, “The Language of Our Dreams” 59). But Osofisan may want to reach the people both through scripted and improvised plays. We cannot be too certain whether it is literary or non-literary plays that will finally raise mass consciousness if theatre is destined to precipitate a revolution in Nigeria. But whether a play was originally written or improvised the important thing is that it is performed. The whole issue of literariness versus oral technique touches on the compositional method of a play and the entire process leading to the performance; whether the play is the creative work of an individual author or the product of a collective effort involving others in various capacities. I will return to this point when I discuss the venue of performances.
Having expressed the opinion that Osofisan’s plays may possibly adopt a non-literary mode of dramatic presentation in addition to written plays, I can only agree partially that the “charge” against written plays “can be dismissed as flippant, since nowhere has the creation of literature been suspended till everybody in the nation can read and since, in fact, the provision of texts is part of the process of building that literacy” (Osofisan, “University Theatre”69-70). Still in response to the anti-literary criticism, Osofisan has pointed out its ironic twist: “It is interesting at least that all the authors who make the point, make it in print. They themselves do not rely on oral communication alone” (“University Theatre”70). Therefore the significance of writing in the preparation and production of a revolutionary play cannot be over-emphasized despite the fact that the non-literary medium may be employed side by side.

Closely related to the issue of the literary nature as well as the language of Osofisan’s plays is the venue of the performances. The concept of venue transcends the mere notion of physical location. Where precisely a play is performed actually makes a socio-political statement about the goals and aspirations of the play as well as its ideal audience. Julian Meyrick reminds us that “[t]here is no artistic choice which is not fundamentally transformed by the physical environment in which it must be realized. Venues do not house theatre productions; they create them” (169). In Places of Performance, Marvin Carlson explains what this creative function of venues is:

No longer do we necessarily approach theatre primarily as the physical enactment of a written text with our historical concern anchored in the interplay between that text and its physical realisation. We are now at least equally likely to look at the theatre experience in a more global way, as a sociocultural event whose meanings and interpretations are not to
be sought exclusively in the text being performed but in the experience of the audience assembled to share in the creation of the total event. Such a change in focus requires also a change in the way we look at the places where theatrical performance occurs, which may or may not be traditional theatre buildings (2).

Both remarks by Meyrick and Carlson further underscore the significance of a theatre venue, and their statements will be better appreciated when situated in the context of revolutionary drama. The predominant venues of Osofisan’s revolutionary plays have been Nigerian university campuses. His plays are quite popular on the campuses because the universities have “fanned the embers of socialist ideology as a definite direction in the development of Nigerian society” (Dugga 104). But the masses whose lives the plays are seeking to improve do not usually go to these venues. The masses who should be the primary consumers and beneficiaries of performances of revolutionary drama end up being excluded. So the productions are eventually watched by an audience other than the intended constituency.

Several critics have expressed reservations about the university-based radicalism of Africa’s playwrights, and it is understandable that among them are those who have criticized the European language and other literary attributes of these plays (Lakoju 158-59; Amkpa, “Hegemony” 86-88; Hunwick 64-70). While observing that “[m]odern Nigerian theatre has not…functioned directly as a state machinery,” Uwa Hunwick, for instance, concludes that such a condition is not actually “liberating” because a playwright who is based in government-sponsored, tertiary institutions can hardly be critical of the establishment (64).

For Osofisan, the staging of his plays in the universities is more of a worthwhile than a regrettable experience. As he puts it, “I can say that, far from alienating me from the reality of our environment, the university stage has in fact empowered me to respond more
adequately and more sensitively to it” (“University Theatre” 89). In further reaction to criticism of his preference for the university as the ideal venue for the production of his plays, Osofisan stated that “[t]he plays we create are in fact only developed, and given their first outdooring, on the campuses. After that, if they are successful, if they prove to be a true response to the pressures of freedom, the plays move beyond the campus, and are taken up by various theatre groups both on stage and on television” (“University Theatre” 65). It is not very clear what Osofisan considers as valid and concrete evidence of success that will warrant performing his plays in alternative venues as well. Can this success be based on gate-takings? Or audience reaction? Or the nature of events in the world of the play? It appears that what Osofisan considers an acceptable evidence of success is a play that progressively engages the concept of “pressures of freedom,” which he has explained as “the pressures which arise from ideological consciousness, a keen awareness by the dramatist of the injustices prevalent in our present socio-political arrangement, and of the necessity to combat and change these by active struggle, and ultimately install an egalitarian society” (“University Theatre” 64). Therefore so long as the play has dramatized class oppression before a university audience and portrayed the underprivileged as capable of achieving liberation from oppression, the play has succeeded and may therefore proceed to other venues.

But since the masses remain Osofisan’s target group why not reverse the order as to the choice of venue for performances? Prior to launching a show at a university, why not mount a premiere of the play at mass-oriented venues such as town or village squares, street corners, markets and community halls among others? Osofisan’s drama has only achieved campus popularity. The primary patrons are members of the ivory tower. A number of critics who
have expressed dissatisfaction with the university-based radicalism of Nigerian playwrights have recommended Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s methodology in the Kamiriithu project which resulted in the creation and production of the play *I Will Marry When I Want*. These critics argue that this is truly a revolutionary play because the transformative impact it made on the consciousness of the people in Kenya arose from the fact that the text and virtually all aspects of the play were generated by rural people. According to Yemi Ogunbiyi, “Ngũgĩ’s decision to leave the University of Nairobi theatre setting and move to Limuru and base himself concretely where the peasant group he opted to work with was situated was a courageous, conscious, ideological decision” (47). Ogunbiyi further argues that there is the need to bridge the dangerously unhealthy gap between our [Nigerian] universities and the countryside, between our intellectuals and practical labour, between rural and urban centres. The [Nigerian] universities must initiate moves towards a meaningful and conscious merging of the best traditions of Western oriented textual dramaturgy and the vibrantly contemporary indigenous theatrical techniques. Our universities *must* involve themselves more actively in the creative struggle of our peasants and farmers by physically going to the countryside (48).

Ogunbiyi’s dissatisfaction with university-based radicalism and recommendation of Ngũgĩ’s example as the ideal theatrical modus operandi for the liberation of Nigerian people is actually an argument in favour of the methodology of community theatre. His views have been echoed by other critics such as Amuta (161-62) and Gbilekaa (34-35). For these critics, therefore, what Osofisan and other like-minded Nigerian playwrights ought to pursue is a *popular* revolutionary theatre rather than *literary* revolutionary drama. While literary drama is based on a pre-existing script that is usually authored in European languages by individual dramatists who are
demonstrating their mastery of Western literary forms, popular drama de-emphasizes the textual tradition, uses the language of the people, and involves the people right from the point of conceptualization to the execution. So while critics acknowledge the revolutionary content of Osofisan’s plays, they do not approve of his methodology. It appears they want him to revolutionize his methodology as well by embracing the techniques of community theatre. But, as we saw earlier, Osofisan himself has expressed satisfaction with his university-based literary drama.

It is in connection with the issue of venue and methodology that Van Erven has drawn attention to the concept of ATOR which stands for “Artist, Teacher, Organizer, and Researcher.” Van Erven has further explained that this concept is “like a multiple identity and different professional compartments which combine to make an artist to have his or her feet firmly in the soil of the community” and “represents the four essential ingredients” needed in the making of socially transformative art. ATOR is better realized in the practice of community theatre, which usually involves collaborative playcreating rather than individual playwriting. As we can see, Osofisan’s revolutionary plays are based on playwriting rather than playcreating. Unlike playcreating, playwriting is based on an individual’s creative imagination, a solitary enterprise in which the dramatist writes about the people with practically little or no consultation with them. Playwriting emphasizes “drama” over “theatre” while playcreating stresses “theatre” over “drama” and is equally intended to be a democratic process in which everybody’s opinion is sought and heard. Gbilekaa has stated bluntly that Nigeria’s revolutionary drama “would have to adopt the methodology of community theatre for development” (34). The community theatre methodology takes the format of a workshop, and, as Balme has rightly elucidated, “[w]orkshop

---

theatre is essentially an oral form and thus opposed to the hegemony of the literary play promulgated by the white theatre” (150). Ogah Abah argues that “the scripted play mediates against conscientization!” (97), and partly refers to the English-version of Ngũgĩ’s *I Will Marry*, which he distinguishes from the Gikuyu version of the same play. He argues that Ngũgĩ’s scripted English play is a totally different experience from that of the Gikuyu play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* which “was the event itself in the process of formation” (98), further contending that *I Will Marry* is a mere translation but not a valid substitute for the Gikuyu play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* which symbolizes an “event” and “experience” that simply perished when its performances were outlawed and the theatre building destroyed. The principal driving force of Abah’s argument is that individually scripted drama, no matter how radical or revolutionary, cannot match the spirit and mood of a community theatre performance with the same objective.

To the critics who are skeptical of the university-based radicalism of African literary drama in general, whatever effort these playwrights have made must be viewed with suspicion. Lakoju minces no words: “There is a limit to which any playwright, however ‘revolutionary,’ can claim to be presenting the lives of the working class or peasants in his drama. When he does, he does so without their consent and without their input” (159). Ukala has equally argued that the foreign dramatic methods of Africa’s literary dramatists render their plays inaccessible to the people as a result of which the plays cannot claim to be popular (31). Although these arguments appear to be well articulated, it seems a bit inappropriate for anyone to encourage Osofisan to completely abandon the university-based literary drama in favour of the community theatre approach. Osofisan can possibly combine both with equal flexibility and skill in a bid to raise mass consciousness toward revolutionary change. It is important to use virtually every available venue in a bid to reach as many people as possible. Requesting, as some critics have done, that African
revolutionary playwrights like Osofisan should completely disregard the university campus is tantamount to stating that whatever process will lead to the liberation of the Nigerian people can never begin in the universities. It is instructive to note that the university community doesn’t just comprise the elites or their children alone but children of the underprivileged class as well. It seems persuasive to argue that university students “are people whose minds are still largely open and who are going to join the rank of the policy makers.” 25 Consider the fact that someone like Nelson Mandela, South African lawyer and anti-apartheid hero, comes from a humble background. It was during the initiation ceremony into manhood that Mandela and others were treated to a speech that planted in him the initial seed of revolutionary action against apartheid. The following words could have as well come from a play being performed at a university campus and with Mandela in attendance:

We have just circumcised them in a ritual that promises them manhood, but I am here to tell you that it is an empty, illusory promise, a promise that can never be fulfilled. For we…all black South Africans, are a conquered people. We are slaves in our own country. We are tenants on our own soil. We have no strength, no power, no control over our own destiny in the land of our birth. They will go to cities where they will live in shacks and drink cheap alcohol, all because we have no land to give them where they could prosper and multiply. They will cough their lungs out deep in the bowels of the white man’s mines, destroying their health, never seeing the sun, so that the white man can live a life of unequalled prosperity (qtd. in Mandela 34-35).

Could Mandela as an undergraduate watching a campus production fail to be moved by the above speech if it was delivered by a character in a play? Even if the university community were

to be comprised strictly of the elites and their scions, that doesn’t completely render it ineligible as a venue for revolutionary dramatic presentation. “[I]t is these elites…who need to be conscientized,” says Bole Butake, “[o]therwise, what explanation can one give for the large-scale prevalence of poverty and disease in most African countries while the majority of the political and bureaucratic leadership are operating fabulous bank accounts in Swiss and other European and American banks?” (102). Butake clearly holds the privileged class responsible for the sordid and regrettable state of affairs in Africa. And Chinweizu has expressed similar views. These arguments have merit. Since it is most of the elites and members of the ruling class that have been oppressing the masses, is it not proper to attempt to disturb their conscience while simultaneously mobilizing the masses for revolutionary action? In mounting revolutionary dramatic presentations, it may not be absolutely wise to completely shun the venues where the future oppressors can be found. The members of the ruling class who oppress the people are likely to have attended a higher institution of learning prior to finding themselves in privileged positions.

But neither the university venues nor the alternative mass-oriented venues of community theatre should be the only venue. If Osofisan choses to combine the literary dramas of university venues and the community theatre projects, he may be compelled to draw inspiration from the Italian Renaissance plays of the Commedia dell’arte and Commedia erudite. While the latter was based on text and literary tradition, and was patronized by the educated elite, the former was based on improvisation and was presented in a wide range of locations such as streets and town squares, hired rooms, halls, gardens and courtyards among others. Like Commedia erudite Osofisan’s literary revolutionary plays can therefore continue to cater primarily to the educated

26 Chinweizu notes that “It is...no exaggeration to maintain that Africa’s greatest problem today, the single most formidable obstacle to her final liberation, is the character of her elite.” The West and the Rest of Us. p.351
elite while his community theatre projects, like Commedia dell’arte, can cater to the masses. As we saw earlier, Osofisan has acknowledged participation in community theatre but observes that such projects “are fundamentally insufficient to provoke the desired change to the macro-society without some additional kind of intervention” (“The Revolution as Muse” 15). His dissatisfaction stems from the fact that community theatre is mostly devoid of the sharp ideological cutting edge of his literary revolutionary drama. This is what has justified Osofisan’s preference for scripted works. But while most community theatre projects lack the ideology of Osofisan’s revolutionary plays, his revolutionary drama lacks the methodology of community theatre. We are therefore faced with an intriguing situation that validates a Yoruba proverb: the man with a head has no cap and the one with a cap has no head. It therefore seems inappropriate for Osofisan to completely disregard community theatre for whatever reason. While continuing with literary drama, he may want to simultaneously participate in community theatre but always ensure that his community theatre projects are persistently driven by the ideological commitment and revolutionary message of his literary plays.

A crucial issue that also needs to be considered here is the concept of Marxism as the literary ideology of Osofisan. A progressive ideology that advocates an egalitarian socio-economic order particularly under communism, Marxism has been a crucial source of philosophical inspiration for many African revolutionary playwrights. It is quite understandable that one of the reasons for this “diffusion of Marxist ideas in African writing” is “the disenchantment of the African people with their new African leaders” (Ngara 50). While indicting Nigeria’s postcolonial leaders, Osofisan’s revolutionary works have constantly endorsed Marxist socialism as the ideal socio-political system for Nigeria. The notion of classless society which Osofisan’s revolutionary plays have repeatedly advocated is a crucial term in Marxist ideology. It refers to the ultimate ideal
blueprint of socio-political organization which would emerge upon the triumph of communism. In a socio-economic order where each worker owns the means of production, theorizes Marx, the oppression of citizens in an industrialist capitalist system will cease (The Communist Manifesto 19, 20). Some African scholars have strongly questioned or, rather, rejected Marxism as a valid ideological inspiration for radical social transformation in Africa because of its foreign origin. One such scholar is the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah. In his essay “Masks and Marx,” Armah contends that pre-colonial Africa and the rest of the non-Western world have at one time or the other, prior to the emergence of Marxist theory, experienced revolutionary social transformation and further pointed out that the revolutionary movements that spearheaded social change such as Mau Mau, Maji Maji and Hau Hau do occasionally, at least, “tend to become communistic” (497). This means that revolutionary postulations are not an exclusive preserve of Marxism and Europeans whose patronizing and imperious disposition towards Africa, in Armah’s view, invalidates Marxism as an inspirational source for genuine radical change in Africa. Ali Mazrui has expressed similar sentiments (34). Contrary to both Armah and Mazrui, Marxist theory is not automatically inappropriate for radical social transformation in Africa simply because of its foreign origin. As Amuta has persuasively argued, “Marxism, like the products of modern technology…is a universal tool which can be put to the service of freedom” (60). But should the Marxist theory of class struggle and prescription of revolution necessarily be the best or only ideal strategy for the liberation of the Nigerian people? Marx developed his theories in response to industrial capitalism in its preliminary stages. Even a genius is limited by his own time and the peculiarities of his society. Post-colonial Nigeria or the circumstances under which the country was created in the first place is not necessarily a flawless replica of nineteenth-century Europe.
But Osofisan and the rest of Nigeria’s second-generation playwrights do not believe in other alternatives to Marxist socialism. Their Marxist analysis of post-colonial Nigeria makes revolution an indispensable harbinger of the recommended socialist system. Many Nigerians will agree with this although it is doubtful whether they are in the majority. But the average Nigerian today is very likely to support a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) that will provide the Nigerian people a forum to decide the basis of association with one another. The idea of this conference has been repeatedly touted across the nation in recent times. The adjective “sovereign” means there is no limit as to what the conference can decide; it can decree that there is no more Nigeria. Could it be that Osofisan’s theatre has so far been unable to inspire a revolution because the people do not want his prescription? “A good teacher never prescribes,” says Achebe, “he draws out. Education is drawing out of what is there, leading out, helping the people to discover…to explore.”

Besides entertainment, Osofisan’s theatre performs a pedagogical function by seeking to enlighten the people on the structures of domination and the necessity of liberation, but the playwright performing this pedagogical task may do well to present his ideal solution as an option. Osofisan may want to emulate the shepherd who “stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go on ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind” (qtd. in Mandela 25-26). Asked why his works blame the socio-political and economic woes of post-independence Nigeria on bad leadership rather than possibly challenge the existence of Nigeria as a single political entity, Osofisan stated that

I don’t think we should begin to ask such questions. This question is an evasion. The thing is whether we like it or not we have been created as a country. I think the pertinent question to

ask is: what are the problems of living together, of making the country work? As far as I am concerned, there is no doubt that we will do better as a country than as separate countries. Look at the present configuration of the world. Europe is coming together despite all their wars; don’t forget that some of the terrible tribal and religious wars were fought in Europe. Look at the German states, the French. They have all come together now to form the European Union. Why? Because they have seen that that’s the future of the world. We have the American empire on one side. We have the Chinese and the Asian on another. We are moving towards a world in which the small nations may not have a chance. If we had any sense, we should be talking now of one Africa, against or at least side by side these menacing empires. Or at least, of one West Africa; of one big entity to compete with these other places. But instead, look at how weak and divided we are, and insist on continuing to be. We even want to break up the more? Let me remind you of the parable of the broom and broomstick: how easy it is to take one broomstick and break it whereas when you put many broomsticks together into a broom, it becomes almost impossible to break. It is the same with our countries. It is much…safer and more profitable for us to stick together. We are stronger that way as an entity and as a market. If you produce something in Aba today, look at the market you will sell it to within the same border of Nigeria. Look at the possibilities for travelling, tourism, education. Being one large entity has so many advantages.28

Osofisan’s explanation demonstrates a good knowledge of history and gives him the image of a progressive. But what the historically informed playwright may have failed to realize is that while the European nations and the Americans seem to have learnt something from the wars they fought, Nigeria seems to have learnt nothing. The same problems that led to the Nigerian Civil

28 Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Metaphorical Language and Revolutionary Ethos,” pp. 175-76.
War of 1967-70 are not only present in 21st-century Nigeria but have actually gotten worse. Ethnic rivalry and distrust as well as religious intolerance have risen to Olympian heights. The Islamic terrorist group, Boko Haram (Western Education is Sacrilege), has continued to slaughter innocent Nigerians and destroy property with reckless brutality, all in a bid to impose Islamic law in Northern Nigeria and possibly on the rest of the country. Other ethnic nationalist groups such as the Igbo-dominated Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Yoruba-dominated Odua People’s Congress (OPC) have embarked on irredentist activities. Besides fleeing to their respective states of origin in the wake of civil disturbances in their states of residence, Nigerian citizens have in recent times been deported by the governments of their state of residence. The country’s land mass and population are bigger than those of several European nations such as Britain, France and Germany. But while each of these European nations is among the so-called first world countries, Nigeria remains part of the so-called third world nations. Would a small but workable Oduduwa or Biafra not be preferable to a big but unworkable Nigeria? As Chinweizu has argued in a 2006 public lecture,

Nigeria is like an elephant with two heads, one in front and one behind, with each head pulling in the opposite direction from the other. Clearly, for any two-headed elephant to move properly, one of its two heads must vanish. In Nigeria's case, one head is incorrigibly nostalgic for the ways of seventh-century Arabia; the other head lusts for the conspicuous capitalist consumerism of the European world. Now, since neither of these two heads on the Nigerian elephant is appropriate for national survival, there is a need to chop off, not one, but both heads.

Chinweizu is clearly opposed to the continued existence of Nigeria as a single political entity. He argues in the same public lecture that “Nigeria is not a nation but a…society of inward
antagonism, one held together by mutual internal antagonism, one which could not carry on if its members had no fellow members to hate.” In a similar vein, Soyinka has tactfully expressed doubts about the corporate existence of Nigeria: “[i]f the nation’s will has become so tainted that it cannot be implemented, then the nation itself has become so contaminated that it cannot begin to claim the recognition of a nation” (The Open Sore of a Continent 132). Indeed, post-independence Nigeria has never made sense as a sovereign nation. The various federating units comprising the country have yet to demonstrate any convincing sign of compatibility. In view of the foregoing, it seems less convincing for Osofisan’s revolutionary drama to continue to ignore the seemingly doubtful workability of the so-called One Nigeria and insist on a revolution in the context of a single political entity. Therefore, one may be forgiven for asking yet again whether a major reason for the inability of Osofisan’s plays to precipitate a revolution is because Nigerians do not want a revolution? Could it be that they prefer another solution to their oppression? If so, would it not be more appropriate for Osofisan’s plays to present Marxist-inspired revolution as a suggestion rather than a sine qua non for the liberation of Nigerian people?

“The presence of Marxist ideology in Nigerian drama is a fact that must be acknowledged,” according to Ukpokodu, “but whether the impetus that Marxist plays gather at the moment is a mere euphoria that accompanies an intellectual fashion, and as a fashion might soon lose its fire or whether there is a deeper commitment and sincerity than is at first obvious, cannot be ascertained now: only the test of time has the answer” (184). Osofisan’s sincere and “deeper commitment” to Marxism is presently beyond doubt. However, the issue is whether such “commitment” and “sincerity” as manifested in his dramaturgy will ever result in a revolution or liberation of the people. His appropriation of Marxist theory is such that he envisages a totally egalitarian and classless society arising from revolutionary action. But how practicable is this
Marxist notion of communist state that approximates nirvana? Mindful of the fact that one of the standard criticisms of Marxist theory is that the notion of a communist paradise is an illusion, Terry Eagleton, in defence of Marx, has stated that “there is nothing in Marx’s work to suggest that we would...arrive at any sort of perfection” (*Why Marx Was Right* 101). Eagleton further points out that “[e]veryone for Marx was to have an equal right to self-realisation, and to participate actively in the shaping of social life. *Barriers of inequality would thus be broken down*” (*Why Marx Was Right* 104-5, my emphasis). Has Eagleton not shot himself in the foot? The emphasized lines do not indicate that inequality will be substantially or considerably erased. They suggest that it will be completely obliterated in the classless society that Marx envisages. But what Marx is saying is probably more important than what anyone thinks or believes that Marx is saying. Here is Marx in his own words: “Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. *They have a world to win*” (*The Communist Manifesto* 39, my emphasis). Again, the emphasized lines do not foresee the slightest impediment to the complete emancipation of the underling in a communist socio-economic order arising from revolutionary transformation of society.

Marx’s concept of the “world” is a metaphor for limitless economic prosperity and an infinitely rewarding socio-political order. And the reference to “chains” alludes to exploitation, oppression and domination. We are led to think that the oppressed will be free from their “chains” not partially or substantially but completely. It is quite possible that what Marx wanted is a society in which inequality will be significantly curtailed but documented evidence of his postulations, as demonstrated by the quoted remarks for instance, does not substantiate this notion. We get the impression that communism, for Marx, ensures an oppression-free society. It is equally possible that Osofisan wants a near-perfect rather than an absolutely perfect society,
but this is not substantiated by his works, particularly not by those that conclude with the downfall of the government such as *Aringindin*. This vision of a totally classless society in African nations is shared by Ngũgĩ:

My thesis, when we come to today’s Africa, is then very simple: a completely socialized economy, collectively owned and controlled by the people, through the elimination of all exploitative forces, is necessary for a national culture. A stratified society, even in pre-colonial Africa, produces a stratified culture or sub-cultures, sometimes to the total exclusion from the central hub of national life of the *ainois*, the *ndungatas*, the *osus*, the *mbaras*, the slaves and serfs in such pre-colonial societies, and of the peasantry and working people in modern neo-colonial states. (*Homecoming* 13)

It is not surprising that the above remarks came from Ngũgĩ, another Marxist literary artist. As evident in his words, Ngũgĩ, like Osofisan, is advocating for a completely egalitarian socio-economic order. But one strikingly notable point that emerges from Ngũgĩ’s words is the fact that even pre-colonial Africa is no stranger to the kind of social classification and hierarchical layering of citizens that inevitably resulted in the marginalization of certain members of the population. Therefore the domination by the rulers of the ruled or of the majority by the minority is not necessarily a tradition which Africa’s postcolonial leaders inherited from the European imperial overlords. The italicized words in Ngũgĩ’s remarks are of particular interest for they specifically indicate the victimized members of the society. The “*osus*” for instance, are Igbo people who are deemed social outcasts by the rest of their kinsmen and women in south-eastern Nigeria. The status of the *osus* is comparable to that of the *untouchables* in India. Not even the mass conversion of the Igbo to Christianity has completely terminated the *osu* custom. The *osus* are still being discriminated against particularly in the choice of marriage partners. Osofisan may
therefore want to be more realistic in prescribing a *totally* classless society as an alternative socio-political arrangement for Nigeria. It is doubtful whether this notion of a flawless or perfect society in which there will be no oppression, inequality and suffering is entirely realistic. Osofisan appears to have glossed over the fact that greed and selfishness are persistent attributes of ordinary mortals as a result of which oppression, domination and avariciousness cannot be completely eliminated in any society. Suggesting that each of these negative qualities be drastically curtailed or reduced to a barest minimum in the interest of the majority of citizens, it seems to me, might be more persuasive than insisting on their outright or everlasting eradication.

Osofisan and the rest of Nigeria’s Marxist-oriented dramatists may have to be flexible by equally being open to other ideas rather than completely slam the door on alternative analyses of the nation’s problems. Interestingly, the Marxist Brecht has stated that “Marxism is very naturally a most complicated matter…and what is odd is that the very ones who gulp it down like hot cakes are the ones who will not understand this fact” (*The Mother* 83).

Indeed, Osofisan’s reliance on Marxist analysis and solution to the plight of the Nigerian people appears to be overly dogmatic, either too prescriptive or unnecessarily prescriptive. But he would not entertain such an insinuation:

I’m not there to force people to take a specific point of view. My major aim in writing is to bring people to reflect, to question accepted views as they begin to think. My aim is not to present a view and say “This is what you must do!” I don’t believe you can achieve anything like that. But you can present the situation and say these are the opinions, make up your mind.29

---

Does Osofisan’s explanation not contradict his assertion that “Clearly, if we are to escape from this wasteful and tragic cycle [in post-independent Nigeria], there must be a revolution” (“The Revolution as Muse” 14)? Or are we faced with a case of unintended discrepancy between theory and practice? Even when some Osofisan titles adopt an open-ended conclusion, that doesn’t actually eliminate the author’s specifically recommended antidote of revolution to the oppression of the masses. We find this in a play like The Chattering where the stage directions state that “The play does NOT end” (56) and encourages the audience to partake in the singing of the Farmers’ Anthem. Oga Abah argues convincingly that “[o]f course the play has ended” (98). To validate his position, Abah advances compelling evidence:

Osofisan has debated the issues in the playscript. What we see played out is the playwright’s rationalization of the ordinary persons’ condition. And he is doing this from his elitist position. Leje, Funlola and Sontri, characters in the play, are his students and at the same time his compeers. All of them are discussing the problems of ordinary persons on their behalf. The farmers are absent from this discussion as the intellectuals plan to overthrow the government, an action purported to benefit the peasants. They are not present because the playwright has already written their role into the text (98).

A major point that emerges from Abah’s analysis and one which is actually substantiated by The Chattering is Osofisan’s conscious or unconscious insistence on the validity of his ideal method of achieving the revolution, which he has been preaching with unflagging vigour. It may be tempting to challenge Abah’s position. This is because Osofisan’s inconclusive stage directions can be a suggestion that the conflict dramatized on stage has not been resolved with the ending of the play in real time and space, but it is doubtful whether such a reading invalidates Abah’s argument. His quarrel is not actually whether high-profile people should discuss the problems of
“ordinary persons” but how this discussion is done. His basic argument is that such a stage direction suggesting an open-ended format is no substitute for a methodology of collaborating with the peasants in generating a play as in community theatre. This argument remains persuasive in my view because the fact that Osofisan’s stage directions possibly suggests that the conflict in the real society has not concluded with the ending of his play does not rule out his prescription of his brand of revolution for the masses who may not necessarily favour this brand. For instance, the masses may want to assign to the intellectuals a role that is different from that envisaged by Osofisan. Abah’s point on the deceptively valid stage directions and the problematic nature of Osofisan’s last scene in *The Chattering* despite the stage directions can be further appreciated, at least in part, by attending to the following assertion:

The [farmers’] anthem is also faulty if its contents are addressed to the Nigerian audience, and if that audience is expected to carry the actions into real life—as is suggested by the active participation of the audience in this “endless” play. The fault is that of the playwright’s poor perception of a contemporary society, whatever its ideology. The possibility of everyone in Nigeria or elsewhere becoming a farmer is non-existent. If everyone is a farmer, there would even be no farming since there would be no professional bodies to make the steel and shape the implements that farmers would need for farming. He sees farming as a remedy for wars, oppression and exploitation. If Osofisan’s intention is really to make everyone a farmer, he is guilty of not studying the society he is writing for seriously; if he is simply creating an illusory art work, he is guilty of infidelity to Marxist preoccupation in which art is geared towards concrete life actions. Thus the Farmers’ Anthem creates a problem for an otherwise good play (Ukpokodu 177-78).
Both Ukpokodu and Abah have highlighted a contradiction that may have arisen as a result of the playwright not thinking about things more carefully at the end of this play or not willing to budge on his vision of an ideal society and how this could be achieved through the medium of theatre. This is a kind of contradiction that we find too in most Western nations where “there is a hermetically sealed-off system in which the arts operate;” this is a system where the “mainstream” or rather “professional theatre functions in the sense that during four to five weeks, a playwright writes a play about something he intellectually thinks is important” that satisfies only the “high-educated elite” which in the Netherlands, for instance, is “largely white, middle class and above, which comprises fifteen percent of the national population.” It seems convincing that “we need to find a way…in the Netherlands to open up that system so that things can actually move up and down,” just as it equally appears persuasive that Osofisan in his plays may have to re-think some or all of his views or rather prescriptions as to the necessity of a revolution or how best it can be achieved in Nigeria. It is crucial to remember that

A social revolution cannot result simply from the desires, dreams, ideals of revolutionary-minded individuals. Its consummation requires a level of socio-economic contradiction which makes the overthrow of the ruling class objectively possible. And it needs the presence of another social class which, as a result of its place in the process of production, its weight in society, and its political potential, can successfully achieve this overthrow (Mandel 29-30).

Interestingly, Osofisan seems to concur with Mandel:

It has never been my intention that one play of mine; with just one single play, will lead people to go and get guns and start fighting and change society. No, societies change,
revolutions come when a sufficient climate of discontentment has been created, and literature is just one of those agents of change, but it is an important means. But it is not all; it is just one, and it is a very important aspect. Creating awareness, raising awareness, raising consciousness, raising satisfaction, letting the people see the falsehood of a regime and so on. The theatre can do these, but the theatre alone wouldn’t do that; it won’t lead to revolution. Priests do preach in their churches, teachers teaching in the classrooms, journalists writing, people spreading pamphlets, market women talking, leading processions. It is the accumulations of all these that can bring up any kind of meaningful change.\(^{31}\)

Osofisan has accepted that his plays may not precipitate a revolution dramatically overnight and that the task of achieving a revolution doesn’t only require the patience of a long-distance runner but will certainly be a collective enterprise involving other professionals as well. But his confession somehow contradicts what his plays themselves are actually seeking to do. His plays, as demonstrated in subsequent chapters, have repeatedly sought to galvanize audience members to carry out the revolutionary transformation of Nigerian society with *immediate* effect; the plays do not seem to support his verbal confession that revolutions normally take time to mature. Neither do they reflect his argument that theatre alone cannot lead to revolution. Osofisan, as earlier noted, has stated that the primary objective of his theatre is to “provoke” the audience “into …ultimately …realising and accepting not just the possibility of action, but also the necessity for it,” in addition to encouraging the audience to recognize that this radical transformation of Nigerian society must take place “now” and “today, and not in some imagined

future paradise.”32 These remarks come after Osofisan declared that none of his plays is intended to precipitate immediate revolution and that theatre will have to collaborate with other professions to usher in a revolution. So how do we reconcile the apparent discrepancy in these statements? It appears the earlier statement is a diplomatic response intended to satisfy those who believe that Osofisan has overestimated the ability of art to precipitate social change; those who demand to know from him “what plays of yours has helped to change what?”33

Indeed, scholars are mindful of the fact that the plays of Osofisan and the rest of Nigeria’s second-generation playwrights recommend and dramatize revolution with urgency as though theatre is the only means by which Nigerians can be mobilized for revolutionary action. As we saw earlier, Ogu Festus Idoko, who has conducted a survey of Osofisan’s popularity at two Nigerian universities, has demanded to know whether Nigerian society can “[be changed through his plays?]” (148). I believe it is not for nothing that Idoko poses this question. It is a question that stems from the pollster’s awareness of the plain, pure and undiluted socialist revolutionary ambition of Osofisan’s plays. It is instructive to note that Idoko does not ask whether Osofisan’s plays can partner with other activities to usher in a revolution but specifically asks whether the plays themselves can precipitate a revolution. Equally mindful of the fact that the university-based radicalism of Nigeria’s second-generation dramatists appears to be claiming the sole responsibility for liberating the people, Saint Gbilekaa has stated emphatically that “[t]he task of emancipating the masses cannot be accomplished by the universities nor radical theatre alone. It is more of a collective tripodal endeavor involving the universities, the peasants and the proletariat together with a few petit-bourgeois that have committed class suicide” (34). For Osofisan to claim that his plays do not seek to inspire

---

immediate revolution or that they are intended to collaborate with other professions to inspire a revolution despite the contrary evidence in his plays for each claim is tantamount to African feminist writers claiming not to be feminists.34 Osofisan’s claims, also, recall the author’s note in Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman which claims that the play is not about a clash of cultures despite the binary opposition between the British colonial administration and Yoruba traditional customs. The author’s note has not prevented some critics from disagreeing with Soyinka. In fact, Kwame Anthony Appiah considers Soyinka’s claim “disingenuous” (78), while arguing that such a clash is among the thematic pre-occupations of the play. My dissertation is more interested in what Osofisan’s plays seek to accomplish than in his opinion regarding their revolutionary potential. In fact, his submission somehow elicits the following questions: Is a playwright actually necessary in the struggle for the liberation of a people? If yes, how important is his role? Can the liberation of Nigerian people for instance be achieved only if a writer is part of the struggle? Utoh contends that the “role of the playwright as the conscience of a nation, especially a nation in crisis, has given a militant, radical and political edge to most Nigerian plays,” further pointing out that how these plays achieve their goals “depends on the commitment of the playwrights” and that “after all, drama has been known to initiate change” (274). She cites no specific example of drama’s ability to precipitate social transformation and her argument somehow makes the writer quite indispensable in the process of social transformation, at least in the context of the writer’s works. And she has no problem acknowledging that “[p]ostcolonial Nigerian society is undoubtedly ripe for social change” (274-75). If a revolution is destined to occur in Nigeria, would it be truly impossible without the playwright playing some role? According to South African playwright Lewis Nkosi,

34 Buchi Emecheta, for instance, claims to be a “feminist with a small f!” “Feminism with a Small f!,” p.175.
My own view is that a writer has a function to perform in revolutionary societies, but that function is of a limited sort. But, contrary to the romantic notion, writers simply are not unacknowledged legislators, they are not legislators—period! It would be far more prudent for us here to take a less exalted view of our function. I am not even sure, in fact, that we are absolutely necessary to society (“Individualism and Social Commitment” 46).

Nkosi’s humility or rather brutal frankness further underscores the point in Osofisan’s immediate preceding remarks. But Nkosi did not stop there:

I think that anyone who is not wearing blinkers knows where real power resides. If you want a vision of the future of Africa, you have a better chance of finding out if you buttonhole an economist, an investor, a policeman with a gun, a politician who is organizing the next coup. Perhaps the function of writers, apart from mirroring their societies, is to be bad-tempered, to grumble and to protest, but there is not very much they can do about the real direction of society (“Individualism and Social Commitment” 47)

So the fact that the writer is not indispensable is the more reason he/she may not have to be too prescriptive regarding the best strategy for the liberation of the people.

Another issue that is worthy of consideration is the contradictions in the works of Osofisan. Consider, for instance, that in plays such as No More the Wasted Breed, the gods that Osofisan seeks to demystify are still somehow made to look powerful; they decide when Saluga dies and when he lives and, in fact Saluga, the voice of reason and critical reflection, salutes Olokun, the “god of justice” (111). And the ending of Morountodun seems unnecessarily anticlimactic. Would it not have been more empowering to have the play conclude with Marshal’s
arrival at the police station to sign the truce that accedes to the farmers’ demands? Or alternatively conclude with the scene of the Titubi-Marshal wedding which takes place after the signing of the truce? That Marshal and others leave for another battle when it is clearly unnecessary and are crushed by the same oppressors that Osofisan had the peasants defeat somehow diminishes the revolutionary flame of the play. Osofisan attempts to justify such apparent contradictions:

[A]s a playwright working in a real historical situation, as distinct from a merely fictive one, the solution you sometimes think is the best, that is most desirable from a theoretical point of view, is sometimes not the true one when you come down to reality. For Morountodun, it would have been quite easy for me to do what you prescribe, with the farmers positively triumphant; but those of us who lived here where the whole thing happened and witnessed the events know that the story was not like that. In the end, the insurrection ended in what you may describe as a betrayal; a triumph for the leaders, but not for the farmers they led. This was the stark reality here; and in writing the play, I went and did some research on it, and discovered that this is invariably the pattern all over the world—that peasants’ revolts never really lead to actual revolutions. So that’s the reality, and even if from a theoretical point of view you would wish that things were otherwise, you would still have to admit, and confront this reality. Do you choose to tell lies to the audience, by romanticizing the situation, or do you just show them the reality and let the shock of it provoke debate and reflection? I chose the second option…So I am not just interested in celebrating the abstract euphoria of revolution. I want to bring all of us to reflect seriously…about what actually happened. What made courageous leaders turn around on their own people and become agents of the state? And it is the same thing
with Saluga in *No More the Wasted Breed*. Looking at it, the gods still end up as being powerful. The contradiction IS the point of the play! Precisely, because the general mentality of our people at the moment is still largely predicated on superstition and on the omnipotent presence of the gods. I may be wrong, but I think the best approach is to use this superstition in a subtle way that will subvert it, rather than go on a frontal attack. It’s what I call a surreptitious approach, one that will not provoke a spontaneous, if not even violent, rejection. So, the question becomes not really whether they believe or not, but rather, what they do with that belief.\(^\text{35}\)

Whatever anyone chooses to make out of the above explanation, a situation in which Marshal and other combatants do not finally return from battle after a scene of victorious celebration by the peasants and Saluga’s death and resurrection at the hands of the gods just prior to the triumph of his argument over the gods’ are instances that simultaneously recognize and reject, validate and void the ability of the underprivileged to overcome oppression. Are such conflicting signals quite necessary? It is not that all dramatic conflicts between the peasantry and social classes antagonistic to its interests must be resolved in favor of the peasantry. As we saw earlier, my examples of revolutionary drama include plays that do not actually conclude with victory for the oppressed such as Hussein’s *Kinjeketile* and Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*. But none of these plays, including those that concluded with victory for the oppressed, reflects the contradictions in Osofisan’s works by simultaneously dramatizing the people’s ability and inability to defeat the oppressor. Other scholars have equally picked on these apparent contradictions in Osofisan’s works. Dunton has drawn attention to other contradictions in *No More the Wasted*

Breed, pointing out that “Elusu’s role is particularly awkward, as both creator and victim of the region’s degradations” (“Political Theatre” 1123).

Osofisan, it seems to me, should have employed additional artistic license by disregarding the last scene in Morountodun and by not allowing the gods to kill Saluga in the first place in No More the Wasted Breed. Consider, for instance, that the historical Niger-Dakar railway strike on which Ousmane Sembène’s novel God’s Bits of Wood is based actually concluded in failure but the novel deviates from historical accuracy by concluding with a victorious strike for the colonized. In the same manner that Osofisan has employed artistic licence to violate historical accuracy by ensuring that the farmers won their demands in Morountodun, he could have simply ignored the last scene. If it is at all necessary to remind the oppressed of their past defeat, such a scene could better occur earlier in the play so that the final scene of victory will completely overshadow that of failure. Here is the non-combatant leader Baba’s last word, upon the exit of Marshal and others for the ill-fated mission: “They will not come back” (78). This prophecy is tinged with apocalyptic vision and the fact that it comes to pass does not call for celebration, at least for the underprivileged or their sympathizers. Should such a line be the ideal parting shot particularly for a spectator whom this play is seeking to empower? And if indeed there are no historical antecedents of peasant revolts ever leading to revolutions as Osofisan has stated, why then, one might ask, does he seek to use such incidents to galvanize the masses into revolutionary action? Or is he simply presenting a mere artistic memorial of historical and mythological incidents in the name of a revolutionary play? A play like The Chattering equally presents some kind of strange contradiction. Consider, for instance, that when Alafin instructs the guards to apprehend Latoye and execute him, Latoye uses charms and incantations to freeze the feet of the guards prior to delivering the speech resulting in the
seizure of Alafin by the guards. This reliance on charms is at odds with Osofisan’s demystification of supernatural forces in a bid to emphasize the ability of man to subdue the forces of oppression and achieve liberation; it gives the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the author’s faith in the limitless power of man is simply utopian.

Another possible contradiction in this play has been observed by Olaniyan who has pointed out certain “images” that “should be incongruous in any revolutionary play” (“Centring the Marginal” 146). He specifically draws attention to the amorous scene that opens the play and which involves some riddling games in which Sontri is portrayed as the “hawk”, “stag” and “brave hunter” while Yajin is portrayed as the “hen”, “doe”, “young leaves” and “good woman” (4). Olaniyan observes that due to this scenario which seems to encourage the subordination of women under patriarchy, “this play that is the beloved of traditional Marxist critics is at the same time really disturbing for feminists” (“Centring the Marginal” 146). He further argues that the apparently male-privileging images of the prologue “are divisive and, worse, elitist” (“Centring the Marginal” 146). Olaniyan’s observation becomes particularly intriguing when tested against the following submission from Osofisan:

I am not persuaded that the visionaries who will eventually lead us out of chaos will be discovered only among the elite, or the so called “elders”, or that they will necessarily all be male. That is why the leading figure in my play, Morountodun…is female, and young, and originally from the elite. But the decisive factors in her positive orientation come from the peasantry, from the nurturing ideals of the old women of the farms whom she encounters (“And After the Wasted Breed” 261).
So where do we go from here? Going by the central role of female characters in *Morountodun* and another revolutionary title like *Aringindin*, could it be that any situation in Osofisan’s plays in which women appear to be undervalued in accordance with patriarchal norms is probably more accidental than deliberate? Or that the wrong thing has been done for the right reasons? As we shall see later in my analysis of *No More the Wasted Breed*, Osofisan explains that the negative and uninspiring portrayal of women is not a contradiction; it’s just that there are bad women as there are good women or bad men and good men. And for a play like *The Chattering*, could it be that the “images” Olaniyan is not happy with are deliberately included so as to be condemned rather than be approved? Or that Osofisan has provided these images as part of the evidence of a society that needs to be radically transformed? Consider, for instance, that immediately after Sontri says to Yajin that “a brave hunter is the pride of the tribe,” she replies, “A good woman is the pride of the--no, no! You go too fast, hunter!” (4). It is particularly instructive to note that Yajin does not complete her lines, a failure which Olaniyan considers a product of “self-consciousness,” further arguing that “a completion” of the speech “would have made her metaphorically surrender as the pride of Sontri” (“Centring the Marginal” 146). So is Osofisan actually mindful of the patriarchal oppression of women and hence would rather have Yajin terminate her speech halfway? In fact, Olaniyan himself has acknowledged that “[t]he drama of Osofisan traverses and undermines our contemporary gendered absolutes, and by inference, reveals them as neither natural nor inevitable but as partisan, ideological constructs that can and need to be altered” (“Centring the Marginal” 144). So why then is Olaniyan complaining about Osofisan’s handling of gender politics? It appears that his apparent dissatisfaction stems from the fact that “[r]epeatedly in Osofisan’s dramatic universe, the relationship between men and women is shown only in their connection with the larger social
struggle, rarely in terms of the tension soaked issue of unequal sexual arrangement and
genderization of roles and attitudes” (“Centring the Marginal” 147). It therefore stands to reason
that, in Osofisan’s constant message of the revolutionary transformation of society, he has
knowingly or unknowingly emphasized class struggle over gender relationships. This emphasis
on socio-economic relations stems from Osofisan’s application of the Marxist yardstick in his
treatment of class struggle in Nigeria.

The Marxist analysis of social relations has come under fire from feminist critics who
consider it grossly inadequate and neglectful of the continued oppression of women (e.g.,
MacKinnon 515-44; Jaggar 215-44; Nicholson 192-200). And it is instructive to note that
Olaniyan is still critical of Osofisan’s handling of gender relationships despite acknowledging
that the “class question is extremely important, and it is doubtful if any genuine solution to
those other struggles could be found outside its context” (“Centring the Marginal” 150).
Interestingly, Osofisan himself has acknowledged his imperfect understanding of the female
condition:

I have to admit it, I am not a woman. However sympathetic or sensitive I am, I have to
recognize that I cannot reach beyond a certain depth of understanding of the female
condition. Because I am male, I partake spontaneously, and even in spite of myself, of the
benefits offered to me in a male-dominated society—a situation which cannot but corrupt
my view, however much I try to strain against it (“Literature and the Cannibal Mother” 8).

Let us hope that not being a woman will not necessarily discourage Osofisan from being more
prudent in the manipulation of gender politics in order to ensure that everyone is included and
celebrated in the mobilization for revolutionary action. It is interesting that these gender-inspired criticisms are still leveled despite the fact that female characters are generally believed to enjoy a much better representation in the works of Osofisan than in those of his first-generation compatriots such as Achebe and Soyinka. Osofisan, according to Ngozi Udengwu, “is one of the very few Nigerian male writers that escaped feminist indictment for negative portrayals of female characters” (199). Mindful of the fact that some critics consider Osofisan an advocate of social justice and that others regard him as a feminist writer, Udenwgu concedes that Osofisan is a “gender-sensitive writer” as well as a “humanist writer” but “cannot be said to be a feminist writer” (213). Her conclusion stems from the fact that Osofisan’s works are not driven by a feminist aesthetic which espouses “the ideals and visions of feminism” (207) and projects the notion that women possess a distinct culture that shapes their writing in a way that is missing in the works of men. However, it is instructive to note that Osofisan’s compatriot, the feminist playwright Tess Onwueme, concedes that the emphasis and prominence given to women in Osofisan’s plays as “guardian angels” and harbingers of social change rather than as “temptress” 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 (“Daughters of Eve” 229).

When critics like Olaniyan, Udengwu and others of similar persuasion express reservations about Osofisan’s handling of gender politics, it is not that his plays are no longer revolutionary; the criticisms, it seems to me, are intended at least in part to clarify what may have eluded his attention in order for him to strengthen his revolutionary message. The relatively inspiring portrayal of women in Morountodun and Aringindin should be encouraged and maintained if not improved on. However, going by Udengwu’s analysis, it appears that a man can never write
a truly feminist play. This notion seems inaccurate. Such argument is tantamount to stating that it is unethical for rich people to discuss the problems of poor people. But quite why this should be so is not clear. If we accept the logic of Udengwu’s tacit argument, then we would have to say that it is unethical for Catholic priests who, by vocation, are celibate and childless, to discuss the affairs of married couples and families, or for women to ever discuss the problems of men, and so on and so forth.

But since Osofisan himself, as we saw earlier, has acknowledged his imperfect knowledge of the female condition, the best he could do is to ensure that female characters are constantly featured in visibly prominent roles in revolutionary plays. Such representations of female characters as found in *Morountodun* and *Aringindin* will probably help minimize if not eliminate the dissatisfaction with Osofisan’s works “from the point of view of African feminism” which considers as a “limitation” his “emphasis solely on a class-based approach to history and analysis of oppression” (Olaniyan, “Centring the Marginal” 150). Osofisan may also probably have to consider Olaniyan’s advice that both class and gender struggles “ought to be fought side by side” (“Centring the Marginal” 150).

Another issue worthy of consideration is Osofisan’s medium of dramatic presentation. As we saw earlier on, Osofisan has attempted to justify his preference for live theatre performance, citing immediacy in reaching the audience as well as the ability to communicate in a language other than words. This argument appears well-articulated but it is doubtful whether the continued use of live theatre alone is enough to mobilize a given population for revolutionary action. Live theatrical performances in Nigeria have been virtually non-existent since the era of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre groups of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Moses Olayiwa (a.k.a Baba Sala) among others. Live dramatic presentations in present-day Nigeria are done
mostly in the theatre departments of various institutions of higher learning. These productions are usually staged by students whose main motive is to satisfy the particular requirements of given academic modules. Film appears to be the dominant medium of dramatic presentation in Nigeria today. This is the era of *Nollywood*, as Nigeria’s film industry is fondly called. But *Nollywood* movies seem bereft of the ideological commitment and the revolutionary objectives that Osofisan’s theatre espouses. On whether he has thought of pursuing his revolutionary goals via the medium of film, Osofisan stated,

Well, of course, I’m always open to any media that is accessible to the people. Nollywood has proved to be a successful industry. But Nollywood is controlled by certain people who are only interested in making profits; and because right now they make their profits easily, they are not willing to listen to any criticism, to make changes. The people financing it are motor spare parts dealers. They don’t think of complex plot lines, or of the profound issues of life. It’s like fast food; what do the producers care about delicacies? They want to make money overnight, and they are making it, period. Those of us who want a richer ware [sic] must come out and provide alternatives. But unfortunately, here’s where the matter of funding comes in: where do you get the money if you want to make an alternative film—a more serious one? Banks will only support you on their own terms, with these impossible interest rates. So, where do you go? This is where we have suggested some kind of government intervention. In the meantime, however, I have agreed for some of my works to be made into films, the most recent
being *Maa’mi*, which Tunde Kelani has just produced. [Y]es, film is a medium I will be exploring more in the future.\(^{36}\)

It is good to see that Osofisan recognizes the importance of film. And the fact that he is not satisfied with the artistic quality of *Nollywood* films could be an additional reason for utilizing the cinema to propagate his revolutionary message. His recognition of the importance of this medium is probably more important than the source of funding. If he is determined to use any vital medium of dramatic presentation to articulate his revolutionary message, then he must find a way of doing so without necessarily depending on the government. Should he decide to apply for any government funding that may be available in the future, chances of securing a grant cannot be guaranteed since he is likely to be competing with many other applicants, and moreover, the government may not be too eager to fund an artistic work that is overtly critical of the political authorities and encourages their overthrow. It may make little or no sense in the first place for a revolutionary artist to seek financial support from the same authorities he criticizes. You cannot despise a leper and still desire his gift. To ensure that any prospective film of his will not be hampered by financial constraints, Osofisan may have to come up with some entrepreneurial skills without seriously expecting assistance from the government. Meanwhile the mere suggesting of the dramatic medium of film does not mean that Osofisan should abandon live theatre completely. He could possibly employ both media with equal dedication. And the mere suggestion of entrepreneurship as well may not necessarily be applicable to the medium of film alone but live theatre as well to help prevent or minimize the chances of the government or other donors frustrating his projects. The following testimony is not exactly inspiring:

We have tried here to run a programme on theatre for development and in the end we found certain inadequacies, or should I say anomalies, which we couldn’t cope with, one of these being the fact that most of these projects are funded by the United Nations organizations. Try as much as we could, we just couldn’t get local sponsorship in spite of, or perhaps because of, our successes. Yet the sponsoring UN bodies always have their own agenda, which may be different from ours or what we perceive to be that of the target community.  

That sounds like a pitiable lament but rather than make the United Nations or any funding agency the whipping boy, Osofisan may have to devise a means of achieving financial independence. One possible way of doing this might be to emulate his contemporary and fellow revolutionary writer Bode Sowande who left the university to start his own theatre company. As Sowande explains,

The playwrights of my generation, Osofisan’s generation, have been constructed by academia. And some of the works are saying the same thing over and over. It is only the language that is fashioned differently. Even the departments—Institute of African Studies Ibadan, Department of Theatre Arts Ibadan, Department of Dramatic Arts Ife and all these places—have become over the years very confident and comfortable. The structures have not made it possible for new visions and new directions to emerge. And this has affected the students. They have got certificates and degrees and have gone into the open society only to be shocked. This is the complaint that the environment has not made it possible for innovation. Some of the writers of our generation have restricted themselves to leftist ideology that it [sic] has become the same song, the same chorus. Yet, in my opinion, the

---

society in which we live is a society that calls for a radical vision and a radical use of
dramatic arts. Because it is a society that actually responds very warmly to performing arts.
Those young people that are now struggling in Lagos and Ibadan, they are saying that the
universities from which they have come have been badly structured. Because we have
trained them, they have got the certificates, they come out and say: ‘My God! It is not like
that. You people have kept us talking about this and that playwright. When we come out it is
a completely different world.’ And so they are looking for new aesthetics, new styles, new
methods of production that will attract people, that will make people come and see how they
live. I also left the university some years ago (qtd. in Ulrich 118-19)

Sowande’s explanation touches on some restrictive conditions that a university environment may
impose on creativity, and such conditions clearly may not guarantee maximum promotion for the
works of a revolutionary playwright. Therefore, in addition to the opportunity of achieving
financial independence, abandoning the academia, as hinted by Sowande, may allow Osofisan
the opportunity to experiment with innovations that may not be possible in the university
environment. Leaving the university does not mean that Osofisan cannot mount his works in a
university campus. As earlier noted, his plays can be performed in virtually every available
location including the universities. Alternatively, Osofisan may retain his university job in
addition to establishing a private outfit, to possibly maximize the chances of securing any
available funding in pursuing his message of radical social transformation. In his analysis of
several Theatre for Development projects in Nigeria, Ogunbiyi notes that a major shortcoming of
these projects is that they are sponsored by the universities and governmental agencies. As a
result of these sources of funding, Ogunbiyi argues that these projects cannot be genuinely
committed to bona fide change in society (46-47). His argument becomes persuasive if we accept
that he who pays the piper dictates the tune as a result of which the sponsoring agencies cannot fund a project that is critical of the sponsor. It may be therefore worthwhile for Osofisan to explore alternative sources of funding as suggested, in whatever dramatic medium he employs.

Assume Osofisan were to implement my suggestions or recommendations by other critics. Would his theatre finally inspire a revolution in Nigeria? Several scholars have expressed the view that no theatre no matter how skillfully executed will ever lead to revolution. According to Sudhanva Deshpande,

revolutionary theatre is something that has to be understood in the context of the revolution; in other words, you must have some revolutionary movement taking place in the society for there to be revolutionary theatre. I don’t believe that you will have revolutionary theatre unless there is actual revolutionary movement on the ground. I think it is important for a theatre of this kind to be connected to, to become an ally of, and become support for a large number of grassroots organizations that may or may not see themselves as revolutionary in the strict sense of it [sic] but certainly organizations that are working towards change at the grassroots. Unless theatre is connected to organizations, unless it is connected to people who want change in the society, theatre by itself is not going to bring any revolution.\(^3\)

Deshpande’s conclusion is unmistakably negative. His pessimism is shared by several others such as Mark Fortier (164), Diana Taylor\(^3\) and Michael Etherton (320-21). Etherton, it was, who, as former head of the English department at Nigeria’s Ahmadu Bello University, led the

\(^3\) Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Revolutionary Theatre in Postcolonial Asia and Africa,” p.107.

\(^3\) Taylor was speaking at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama (now the graduate division of Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies) University of Toronto on October 15, 2009. According to her, we can talk about “resistance” and putting a “cog” in the wheel of social injustice but not “revolution” as far as theatre’s capabilities for social change is concerned.
nation’s first experiment in Theatre for Development. He was speaking of Nigeria’s revolutionary drama when he noted that

It may be appropriate to set the term ‘revolutionary’ aside when talking about theatre for and by the people. In one sense the word is used in a very general way to cover anything which argues for rapid social change, and it often simply becomes a catch-phrase. In another sense—and especially when ‘revolutionary’ is used in connection with theatre, or culture generally— it can mean the transformation of art without actually accomplishing any corresponding social transformation. In fact, no theatre can actually make the revolution. It is even doubtful if ‘revolutionary theatre’ can be construed as the ‘rehearsal’ for the revolution. A revolutionary theatre may in fact never mean anything more than a theatre of the rhetoric of revolution (320-21).

Clearly, Etherton is quite unsparing. These scholars certainly make some sense since the plays of Osofisan and the rest of Nigeria’s second-generation playwrights have not inspired a revolution to date. The substantive point in their argument is that used adjectivally, to designate a specific theatrical practice, “revolution” is an omnibus concept that subsumes anything that calls for radical social transformation. Therefore if Osofisan’s theatre is actually revolutionary, going by the argument of the scholars, it can be so only in the sense that it advocates social transformation on the seismic scale implied in the term, revolution, rather than in the sense that it is itself (or could itself be) the primary agent of the revolution. These perspectives seem quite difficult to resist. It sounds like a well-argued position. But it is worth noting that the argument of these scholars is not the only opinion that exists on the issue. Consider, for instance, that when Diana Taylor, a New York University professor, told her students that theatre is incapable of leading to
revolution, virtually every one of them dropped the class.\textsuperscript{40} Were these students guilty of over-reaction? Or were they quite justified in the face of unwarranted pessimism? Is it right or wrong to compare the views of Etherton and like-minded scholars to the view prior to the emergence of Barack Obama that a black man could never be the president of the United States? For now, it appears that Etherton and other like-minded scholars are right. Osofisan and other like-minded Nigerian dramatists may want to proceed with revolutionary theatre if they still have the desire for such works. And should Osofisan choose to implement my suggestions or recommendations of other critics the chances of Osofisan’s theatre leading to a revolution cannot be totally ruled out or totally ruled in. My suggestions in particular are intended to ensure the best possible manipulation of all the key factors that have been analyzed and let time and providence be the final judge as to whether or not Osofisan’s brand of theatre will singlehandedly precipitate a revolution in Nigeria or combine with other professions to do so. To sum up, let’s take a moment and reflect on the following observation from Dan Izevbaye:

After nearly a quarter of a century of radical writing in Nigeria, the radical agenda of a short term social reform with writing as a transforming agent has not yet materialized. But by the disappointment of these hopes, writers are learning to accept the slow revolution of the radical wheel. For if an artist would work with the god of social justice, his muse must be patient (10).

While the artists are still waiting for “the god of social justice,” let me commence in the next chapter a critical analysis of Osofisan’s selected titles to further audit his revolutionary politics.

\textsuperscript{40} Taylor speaking in the same occasion as stated in the preceding footnote.
Chapter Two

Class Struggle, Ideology, Politics and Violent Revolution in *Morountodun* and *The Chattering and the Song*
The two plays examined in this chapter are linked by their use of historical events and violent revolutionary technique. The oppressed in both plays are the impoverished Nigerian masses who take to arms in order to wrest their freedom from the oppressors. And the oppressor is the indigenous ruling class in post-colonial Nigeria. Embarking on violent confrontation appears to be an inevitable option for the underprivileged in dealing with a ruling class that has become increasingly deaf and insensitive to the plight of the robbed and marginalized. Resorting to violence by the oppressed in order to assert their humanity validates Frantz Fanon’s observation that

The existence of an armed struggle shows that the people are [sic] decided to trust to violent methods only. He of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free (66).

Although Fanon is talking about the settler colony in the context of the European colonization of Africa and other parts of the world, the “settler” is arguably representative of the oppressor in any given situation of unequal power relations. And Fanon’s postulations clearly suggest that it is the violence of the oppressor that triggers violence by the oppressed. He further argues that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” and that

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies. In
decolonization, there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation (27-28).

Again, Fanon’s observations are about decolonization in Africa and other parts of the world, but they are relevant to postcolonial Nigeria. What makes them relevant is the fact that the postcolony came into being by the retention rather than the dissolution of the political, juridical, and ideological apparatuses of the colonial state. In other words, far from calling “the colonial situation” in Nigeria into question, the anti-colonial forces adopted that situation as the cornerstone of its architectural blueprint for a postcolonial Nigeria. This is not to suggest that the anti-colonial forces in Nigeria were unified in their opposition to colonial rule, or that they had a unanimously accepted blueprint for a postcolonial state. Rather, it is to say that in Nigeria as in other colonial states in Africa, the confrontation between anticolonial nationalists who desired “nationhood” and their “nationalitarian” adversaries who sought social “reconstruction” eventually resolved itself in favour of the former whose “vision” of the postcolony was, in its essence, colonialist: “the nationalists’ vision was framed not only by the felt necessity of operating within the territorial boundaries constructed by colonialism, but also by their desire to retain and, as it were, ‘inherit’ the colonial state apparatus” (Lazarus 8). As Dale Byam rightly contends, “[t]he legacy in many [African] countries of [the] post-colonial period, under the leadership of various petty bourgeois leaders, has been to revert to the very oppressive techniques that fostered colonialism” (6). In a similar vein, Daniel Gover, John Conteh-Morgan and Jane Bryce have rightly noted that “the hopes and expectations born in the 1960s with political independence have developed into bitter fruit. African writers have often served as the leading social critics of their own societies” (2). By appropriating the oppressive system of the colonial state and installing themselves as the rightful heirs of the retreating colonists, the
nationalists successfully reconstituted Nigeria as a postcolony, and thus has emerged a system of political governance and authority that is tantamount to internal colonialism.

Thus, too, the political disillusionment of many writers in postcolonial Africa. Osofisan is among the African writers who have subjected their society to vitriolic attack as an expression of the disillusionment accompanying independence from colonial rule. He is mindful of the fact that what Nigeria obtained from Britain in 1960 is “no more than a flag independence” and that “the local leaders left behind were stooges carefully selected from among the members of the elite sympathetic to British interests” (“The Revolution as Muse” 12). It is the blatant dehumanization of the masses, and the corruption, wanton cruelty and callous mismanagement of the economy by this postcolonial elite that have precipitated Osofisan’s revolutionary theatre. In Morountodun and The Chattering and the Song this revolutionary practice takes the form of a dramatic re-enactment of historical materials and a renegotiation of character and situation that advance the cause of the oppressed. Thus, Osofisan’s approach to the sources of both plays amounts to writing or rather re-writing history from below.

2.1 Morountodun

The play had its premiere performance at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 1979. The plot runs together the Agbekoya farmers’ uprising of 1969 in Yoruba-dominated Western Nigeria and the mythological character of Queen Moremi of Ife. In 1969, the illiterate farmers staged an unsuccessful rebellion against the government of the then-Western region for the heavy taxation, oppression and other kinds of injustice that threatened their survival. Regarding the mythological Moremi, we are told that she forsook royal glamour to infiltrate the camp of the neighbouring Igbo warriors whose invasion was threatening the peace and security of her ancient Ife people.
She obtained the secret of the enemy as a result of which her people finally defeated them. This historical background enables us to better assess the extent of Osofisan’s faithfulness to his historical and mythological sources.

Osofisan’s play begins with the actors preparing for their roles. While they are getting ready, the Director addresses the audience members seated in the auditorium. He provides the historical background of the play but hardly has he finished before he is interrupted and ultimately seized and beaten by a richly-dressed, placard-carrying mob of young ladies who invade the auditorium to disrupt the play. The young women are led by the “pretty, sensual, and obviously self-conscious” (7) Titubi, the spoilt daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, and it is obvious from the inscriptions on the various placards that they are strongly opposed to the farmers’ revolt, totally antagonistic to the well-being of the underprivileged, and overly proud of the riches of the ruling class. The arrogance of the disruptive ruling class, particularly as represented by Titubi, is captured in her speech to the audience:

Look at me. Go on, feast your eyes. Am I not good to look at? Ehn? So what is wrong with being rich? So there is a peasant rebellion. And then? What have we got to do with it? Is it a sin to be rich? Night after night! Day after day! Lies! Insults! In the newspapers! On the radio. On the television…And then here they come with a play. But it’s got to stop! This is our country too, and we shall not run away! I, Titubi, daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, I am stopping this play tonight! And if you’re wise, you will go and return your tickets now and collect your money back (7-8).

Not even the threat of the imminent arrival of law enforcement officers can rein in Titubi’s supercilious disposition. The police eventually arrive but rather than apprehend Titubi and her
band of troublemakers they instead arrest the director of the play, apologizing to Titubi for the supposed misbehaviour of the director whom they dismiss as a goon. But after repeated explanations by the director, the police are convinced that Titubi is the real trouble-maker and the director the offended party. After being treated to some rude remarks from Titubi for daring to arrest her, the police chastise Titubi for disrupting the play rather than assisting the law to quell the farmers’ revolt which is threatening the privileges of her powerful class. Ashamed and wounded by the verbal castigations, Titubi volunteers to assist the state in crushing the peasant rebellion. Inspired by the mythological Moremi, she is determined to infiltrate the camp of the farmers, obtain intelligence, capture their leader Marshal, bring him to the police and, thereby, quell the peasants’ revolt. Convinced of the genuineness of Titubi’s determination and her willingness to assist the state, the police work out the following strategy with her: she will be detained in a prison supposedly as a genuine inmate so that when the peasants storm the prison to release their captured comrades the police will let them in to enable them to release all detainees including Titubi. She will then follow the farmers to their camp on the grounds that she has nowhere else to go. And upon arrival at the farmers’ camp, she will have to convince them of the need to live with them because she has been renounced by her people for supposedly killing her children. Things work as planned and Titubi is allowed to live among the farmers and quickly wins their trust. But finally, unlike Moremi, Titubi actually switches her allegiance to the oppressed. She refuses to serve the interest of the state anymore. She simply commits class suicide and her volte-face is occasioned by her first-hand experience of the cruel, squalid and subhuman conditions under which the peasants live despite their hard work. Titubi is disturbed by the fact that it is the members of her own privileged class who appropriate the crops of the farmers. Rejecting the excesses of the ruling class, she is now determined to ensure that the
peasants win their demands from the government. When she finally brings the elusive Marshal to
the police station, it is not for him to surrender to the state but to sign a truce that accedes to the
demands of the farmers. In an atmosphere of celebration in a subsequent scene, Titubi marries
Marshal who names her “Morountodun” (“I Have Found a Sweet Thing”) for nursing the farmers
injured in battle and in recognition of her role in brokering the truce. The wedding party is hardly
over before Marshal, in an obviously misguided, anti-climactic and inexplicable fashion, decides
to break the truce by resuming the battle. He does not return from this battle and his decision to
proceed when it is totally unnecessary is an attempt by Osofisan to draw attention to the other
side of the historical coin: that the Agbekoya farmers’ uprising concluded with the capitulation
of the farmers. His decision to include this last scene is informed by his desire to “provoke
debate and reflection” and “to present the truth and disturb the actors and the audience.”

In Morountodun, as in the rest of the plays to be subsequently analyzed, the ideology
dramatized is Marxism. The conflict is couched in class terms and the play is driven by some
fundamental tenets of Marxist theory: the history of any society at whatever period is the history
of class struggle; the consciousness of men does not determine their being, rather their being
determines their consciousness; revolution is necessary for the termination of class society and
that human condition is changeable rather than unchangeable (Marx and Engels, Communist
Manifesto 3-39). For Marx, the two main polarized classes are the bourgeoisie and proletariat.
The bourgeoisie are the capitalist owners of the means of production and the employers of wage-
labour; they are the primary controllers and beneficiaries of the economic system of production
and the distribution of wealth. The proletariat, on the other hand, does not possess the means of
production and has been reduced to the status of wage-labourers in order to eke a living. Both

---

major classes are diametrically opposed in an industrialist capitalist system. It is instructive to note that the class war in *Morontoudun* and virtually the rest of the titles to be subsequently analyzed is not between the industrialist capitalist employers of labour and their employees but between a corrupt and violent political class and underprivileged citizens. Neither *Morontoudun* nor the rest of the plays engages the issue of capital, economics and means of production in the context of the exploiting bourgeois employers of labour versus the exploited wage-earning workers. Therefore the nature of oppression we find in these plays is not industrialist capitalist. Osofisan himself acknowledges that postcolonial Nigeria which generated the plays is not industrialist capitalist:

"It is true that capitalism promotes development in the sense that it encourages manufacturing, discovering and inventing new things and ideas and so on. But that is not the kind of society we have now, we don’t even have a glimmer of that. People are not interested in manufacturing; they just want want to be middlemen; ripping off to make profits which those who are manufacturers are not making. Can we survive on that?"\(^{42}\)

Since Nigeria is not an industrialized nation, as evident in the above remarks, the question arises as to what kind of economy it is? And who precisely are those seeking to reap the kind of benefits that manufacturers do not enjoy? Nigeria is a mono-product economy that depends solely on oil resource. And since oil has become the main source of foreign exchange, neither agriculture nor industrialization has received adequate attention. Hear Claude Ake:

"The structure of industrialisation in Nigeria shows that the type of industrialisation occurring is not very conducive to the diversification of the resource base of the

\(^{42}\) Interview by Edde Iji. *Backgrounds*, p37.
economy, or even to the reduction of its disarticulation. In the first place, the bulk of the value added comes from light industries with a very low-level technology (102).

This clear absence of meaningful achievement particularly in technologically-driven, industrialized economy continues to ensure an increasing dependence on the oil resources. The oil industry is being managed by successive military and civilian governments that are so corrupt and self-centred that they are unable to create a meaningful employment for the masses or provide basic social amenities like health and quality education among others. Consequently, the ruling class swims in affluence while the masses wallow in abject poverty. So this scenario appears more like a state capitalism than industrial capitalism. It is a scenario that illustrates Ake’s argument about post-independence Africa’s indigenous ruling class:

[They] also understood that political power offered opportunities for economic power, and that the opportunities inherent in their political power were the best and perhaps only way they had of creating an economic base for their political power. And they did not hesitate to use these opportunities. Essentially what they did was to extend the economic role of the state as widely and rapidly as possible (96).

In Nigeria the ruling elite has appropriated the state for its own economic prosperity. Both Morountodun and virtually the rest of the selected titles authenticate Ake’s argument. But Morountodun, as we shall soon see, particularly validates Henry Bienen’s postulation that “the direction” of Nigeria’s “economy, even without the oil impact, has accentuated rural-urban differences in per capita income as a result of the…policies of the Nigerian government. Government would have to revise fundamentally its policies to alter the trend of increasing rural-urban inequality”(90).
And it is instructive to note that we cannot consider post-independence Nigeria neo-colonial going by the nature of the oppression in *Morountodun* and the rest of the selected titles. These plays do not dramatize the influence of foreign powers or their instruments of indirect control such as multinational corporations or international monetary bodies and portray the post-colonial indigenous leaders as agents of these powers in the oppression of African people as we find in Ngũgĩ’s novel *Petals of Blood* or his play *I Will Marry When I Want* for instance. Osofisan’s selected titles hold the indigenous Nigerian leaders *solely* responsible for the oppression of the people and believe that the subjugation of tyranny or elimination of despots will surely lead to the socio-political emancipation of the people. However, much as the oppression in *Morountodun* and other selected Osofisan titles is neither neo-colonial nor industrialist capitalist, the Marxist bourgeois-proletariat dichotomy is representative of other instances of unequal power relations that we find in these plays. As Marx has stated, the bourgeois-proletariat dichotomy represents “in a word, oppressor and oppressed” (*Communist Manifesto*). And for Marx, “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (*The German Ideology* 59). Therefore intellectual works including literary and artistic works for instance, in Marxist view, are mere ideological intruments of the ruling class. This argument becomes particularly persuasive when we recall, for instance, some literary or dramatic works like Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* which portrays man as incapable of influencing his destiny. This play projects a hierarchical social order in which the gods come first, followed by the members of the ruling class and then the masses. The play illustrates the essence of ancient Greek theatre which served the ruling class; it was a theatre that validated the existing power structures and brooked no alternative social vision in a society that practise slavery and treated women as second-class citizens. But the same Marxist theory can equally be adapted for subversive
purposes. A literary work could therefore appropriate the Marxist theory in order to challenge the
degeminy of the same ruling class which it might as well have chosen to uphold. As Osofisan
explains, “I am interested in my society, how to change it, by using certain modules that are…Marxist-Leninist.” Like the rest of the selected titles, a play like *Morountodun* is a
Marxist-inspired play arising from the writer’s opposition to an oppressive socio-political
structure which has made the ideology of the ruling class the dominant ideology. Eagleton has
noted that

> Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming
> them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative
> Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain
> forms of exploitation and oppression (Marxism and Literary Criticism vii, my emphasis).

We get some sense of the emphasized lines in Eagleton’s argument in view of the polarized
confrontation in *Morountodun* between the farmers and the state. The characters we meet in
*Morountodun* are of two social classes: the rich/privileged who are represented by the likes of
the police Superintendent, Alhaja Kabirat, lawyer Isaac and Alhaji Buraimoh, and the
poor/underprivileged represented by the exploited farmers such as Baba, Marshal, Bogunde,
Wura, Mosun and Kokondi. A mere look at the members of both classes can detect their specific
socio-economic standing. As we saw earlier, Titubi’s speech makes it clear that she is opulently
garbed and must be a luscious sight to behold; we are left with no doubt that she belongs to the
rich and powerful ruling class. In *Class Struggle in Africa*, Kwame Nkrumah observes that
“[c]ertain social habits, dress, institutions and organizations are associated with different classes.
It is possible to place a person in a particular class simply by observing his general appearance,

---

41 Interview by Edde Iji. Backgrounds, p.36.
his dress and the way he behaves” (23). Besides the example of Titubi we further get some sense of Nkrumah’s argument from the manner in which the police treated or rather mistreated the director of the aborted play in Morountodun. Although the stage directions give no clue as to his appearance, it is highly likely that he is humbly dressed, a bit shabby and malnourished as a result of which the police mistook him rather than Titubi for the thug who came to disrupt the play. The police roughen him up more as a result of his looks than any concrete evidence of wrongdoing. Thus right from the beginning of the play, we are treated to an atmosphere of unequal power relations between the rich and the poor.

The two classes in the play are at loggerheads, the atmosphere is redolent of tension and the society threatens to fall apart. Here is Titubi’s initial reaction to the crisis: “The peasant revolt, mama! You talk about it every day with your friends. I see all of you tremble. The peasants are upon us. They will eat everything up, all your wealth, the entire meaning of your life, unless someone acts” (20). Her grave concern for and determination to ensure the continued supremacy of her class, is probably better appreciated in view of Max and Engels’ argument that the battle between the oppressors and the oppressed is “a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Communist Manifesto 3). Indeed, Marx considers revolution a necessary antidote to the problems of class society; only the victory of the proletariat in a decisive and epic clash with the bourgeoisie will permanently eliminate class society. Drawing inspiration from Marx, Osofisan believes that, in the battle between the classes, the awakened consciousness of the marginalized can vanquish oppression and achieve a better quality of life for the oppressed. As Titubi says, “there’s no way you can win a war against a people whose cause is just” (70). And earlier on, Moremi had declared that “[f]ace to face we stand together, in the onrushing waters of danger. In
my own hands I hold the paddle of my destiny” (38). Any attempt to rely on magical or supernatural powers is strongly discouraged. Moremi again: “That is the life our gods have provided for us after all our rituals and sacrifices. No, no!...it is time for us to rise, to stand and square up our shoulders by our own courage, and stop leaning on the gods” (33). Therefore Osofisan posits unlimited human potential for those who are courageous and adventurous enough to question the circumstances of their existence. The peasants in Morountodun “disrupt the oppressor/victim dichotomy to demonstrate that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, [and] to show that victims are also agents who can change their lives…in radical ways,” to borrow the words of Obioma Nnaemeka from a different context (3).

The violent clash between the farmers and the state in Osofisan’s play is somehow reminiscent of that between the Brazilian government and the underlings inhabiting the nation’s backlands of Canudos in Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel The War of the End of the World. The iron determination with which the peasants in Morountodun win their demands from the state mirrors that of the inhabitants of Canudos, a religiously driven communist society that has defeated successive military expeditions by a seemingly irresponsible government accused of being the anti-Christ by demanding income taxes, promoting civil marriage over church marriage, perpetrating unjust social inequality and re-introducing slavery among others. Osofisan’s Titubi in her role as a nurse, attending to the peasants wounded in battle, recalls Vargas Llosa’s female characters such as Maria Quadrado, Alexandrinha Correa and Gertrudes all of whom are “healers, the herb doctors, the midwives, the bonesetters” (Vargas Llosa 71) and provide the much needed care to the wounded combatants from Canudos during their battle with the government soldiers. And Titubi’s central role in the liberation of the farmers is also reminiscent of that of the white British female character Elizabeth (Rachel Shelley) in the movie Lagaan,
directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. Elizabeth opposes the unjust taxation which the British colonial officers (including her own brother) have imposed on Indian villagers, and teaches the villagers the rules of the cricket game in which they must defeat the British in order to secure the cancellation of taxes. And during the all-decisive game she protests on behalf of the villagers when the British appeared to be cheating. The villagers benefit from her efforts by eventually defeating the British in a cricket match as a result of which taxation is not only cancelled for three years but the British cantonment in the Indian village is equally disbanded. Just as Titubi falls in love with the farmers’ combatant leader Marshal, Elizabeth equally falls in love with Bhuvan (Aamin Khan)—the young Indian villager leading his people against British exploitation. But unlike Titubi and Marshal, Elizabeth and Bhuvan do not marry. Bhuvan instead marries an Indian woman and the disappointed Elizabeth returns to England. When Elizabeth is described as “an English rose who came to India and lost her heart,” one cannot help but think of Titubi as the aristocratic queen who came to the peasants’ camp “and lost her heart.”

In a bid to win the revolutionary war, the male and female subaltern characters in Osofisan’s play demonstrate the kind of solidarity that also recalls those of their counterparts in Ousmane Sembene’s God’s Bits of Wood, a historical novel based on the Niger-Dakar railway strike of 1947 and 1948 in the area currently comprising Senegal and Mali. The black female characters in Sembene’s novel generally exhibit a sophisticated degree of support that enables the African male workers to win their industrial action against the French colonialists. Just as Sembene’s black African women are behind their men and assist in domestic responsibilities, attending high-level meetings, clashing with security forces in addition to partaking in marches during the strike, Osofisan’s women are equally very useful in domestic chores such as cooking,

---

44 This information is found at the back of the DVD case.
nurturing and doing laundry, partaking in the highest decision-making body among the farmers, fighting alongside their men in battlefronts, suffering detention in state prison together with their male counterpart in addition to being exposed to all sorts of dangers during invasion by government forces. As Omofolabo Ajayi has noted, “the peasant women…are not less effective in furthering the cause of the revolution” (97). These women, as in Sembene’s novel, do regard their men’s war against the oppressors as equally theirs. In view of this atmosphere of camaraderie, we can apply the phrase, “populist and collective” (2), which Fredric Jameson uses to describe historical novels, to Osofisan’s play. While the oppressors in Sembene’s story are white colonialists from distant foreign lands, those in Osofisan’s play are home-grown indigenous hawks. As in Sembene’s novel, the characters in Osofisan’s play live in the same community but inhabit separate worlds just as in Vargas Llosa’s The War of the End of the World where Canudos and the Republic constitute two separate entities within the Brazilian border or even in Western nations like England and the United States with certain neighborhoods reserved for only the rich or the poor. This separation, which further substantiates the class division in the society, equally validates the view that the social order in Morountodun approximates internal colonialism for it recalls Fanon’s description of “[t]he colonial world” as “a world divided into compartments” (29). Just as there were native quarters and European quarters or separate schools for natives and Europeans during Western colonization, so the peasants and the privileged characters in Morountodun live in different locations. The peasants dwell in rural areas while members of the ruling class live in the cities. Unlike in the cities, the social infrastructures in the rural areas are extremely dilapidated and inadequate in comparison with those of the townships. For example, rural roads are so bad that members of the ruling class dare not use them. Let Mama Kayode finish the story:
And then Baba stepped forward. He bowed like this, very low. He said: ‘Your Excellency, my son, we have listened carefully to your fatherly appeal. Our roads have been so bad for years now that we can no longer reach the markets to sell our crops. Even your Excellency had to make your trip here by helicopter. Now that we have listened to your kind and fatherly appeal, we shall forget all our sufferings and pay our taxes. I promise we shall now send in the money promptly, through the same route your appeal has come to us—by helicopter! [General laughter] (65).

Clearly, we are faced with a ruthlessly oppressive society where only the rich can enjoy the good things of life. The rich can afford to fly to the rural areas to make irresponsible demands from the poor, but the poor cannot afford the same means of transportation to the urban centres to confront the authors of their misery. “Africa has...in its midst a hardcore of bourgeoisie,” says Nkrumah, “who are analogous to colonists and settlers in that they live in positions of privilege—a small, selfish, money-minded, reactionary minority among vast masses of exploited and oppressed people” (12). The state governor whose visit is the subject of the immediate preceding re-enactment enables us to better appreciate Nkrumah’s point. The off-stage governor and the rest of the members of the ruling class whom we meet in the play are callous drones; they appropriate the farm produce of the peasants without caring about the welfare of the underprivileged. Thus we are faced with a situation that is consistent with the attributes of a hierarchical system whereby the relationship between the haves and have-nots and the rulers and the ruled are characterized by an uncompromising sense of socio-political clout.

Although the nature of oppression here, as earlier noted, is not industrialist capitalist, it somehow recalls the relationship of unequal bargaining power between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in an industrialist capitalist system. The ruling class in Osofisan’s play do enjoy the
farm produce from the peasants and definitely want the money accruing from the sale of the farmers’ crops by insisting on payment of tax by the farmers whose welfare is a non-issue to the ruling class. The members of the ruling class are therefore simulating the attitude of the industrialist capitalist bourgeoisie. The Marxist ideology that drives this play is opposed to the “Fetishism of commodities” (Marx, *Capital* 1: 83), a concept that explains the tendency in capitalism to attach more premium to both commodities and the wealth accruing from them than to the proletariat whose labour has been used to generate the wealth. Again, as we can see, the attitude of the non-industrialist capitalist ruling class in *Morountodun* somehow recalls this concept. The crops may be viewed differently from commodities but like the latter they are products of labour; the farmers just like the workers in an industrialist capitalist system have invested their labour in making the products that will benefit those who debase their humanity. Marx condemns the “alienation of the worker in his product” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 108), a situation whereby the bourgeois reaps the fruits of the workers’ labour at the expense of the latter. “It is true,” writes Marx, that “labour produces for the rich wonderful things—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 110). Marx’s argument is amply demonstrated in *Morountodun*. I submit for your inspection the following observation by Titubi:

I saw myself growing up, knowing no such sufferings as these. With always so much to eat…Yet here, farmers cannot eat their own products, for they need the money from the market. They tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise chickens, but must be content with wind in their stomach. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill…It could not be just (66).
The society we are faced with in Osofisan’s play is obviously the type where the ruling class and their agents prey on the weak, commandeer what little they have and persecute them for daring to resist. The peasant women illustrate this point through role-playing, with Mama Kayode as the Sanitary Inspector and Molade as the underprivileged Titus:

MAMA KAYODE: Where are you going?

MOLADE: To Mama Laide, Sah.

MAMA KAYODE: In this rain?

MOLADE: It’s my wife. She’s in labour. She needs help.

MAMA KAYODE: What’s that in your hand self?

MOLADE: You mean this umbrella, sah?

MAMA KAYODE: Hen-hen that’s what you call it, this dirty, smoky, cob-infested jagbajantis! I bet it’s got lice in it too.

MOLADE: But it’s brand new!

MAMA KAYODE: Well, it’s under arrest. I will certainly not allow this umbrella to go on soiling the rain, which is a public property under the bylaw (62-63).

An errand boy of the ruling class, the Sanitary Inspector is clearly overstepping the boundaries of his minimal power. His attitude recalls those of black African paramount chiefs, clerks and court messengers of the colonial era all of who “manage to turn themselves into little tyrants over their
own people,” as Captain Winterbottom has rightly noted in Achebe’s novel *Arrow of God* (108).

Such an attitude recalls the slave era, for instance in the United States where

> A few slaves were made into a slave elite. They were given a few privileges and, in return, they controlled for their masters the rest of the slaves. Even though an elite slave is still a slave, his economic mini-privilege and his carefully fostered sense of social superiority firmly tied his interests to those of his masters and made him loyal to the slaving system (Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us* 440)

The cruel and brainwashed errand boys of both the slavery and colonial era are re-incarnated in the likes of the Sanitary Inspector. Titubi, who witnessed the above re-enactment between the Sanitary Inspector and Titus, cannot believe that Titus was jailed for two weeks for refusing to surrender his umbrella. Like the title character in Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, Titus suffers unmerited humiliation and punishment for daring to protect what belongs to him. Woyzeck is beaten up by the Drum Major when the former confronts the latter over an affair with the former’s mistress. It is the exploitation and humiliation that the more powerful inflict on him that finally drives Woyzeck to suicide after murdering his mistress. But unlike Woyzeck, Osofisan’s peasant characters refuse to turn against each other or be cowed into submission. The unflinching determination of the peasants imbues them with the confidence to change their world by fighting and defeating their wicked oppressors. That is why Osofisan’s Molade can afford to say with perfect aplomb that life is “unkind only till you begin to fight back” (65).

The oppressed in this play simply reject the status of second-class citizens; they can no longer accept the class-divided society that has placed them at the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. “[T]he genuinely revolutionary drama,” opines Udenta, “becomes a…hater of
compartmentalization” (30). Osofisan’s play condemns the oppressor-initiated status quo of one world divided in two. It is because of the knowledge she obtained from the re-enactment of the confrontation between Titus and the Sanitary Inspector and her direct observation of quotidian events while she was living among the farmers, that Titubi, upon her return from the espionage mission, tells the police Superintendent and her own mother that she is “not Moremi! Moremi served the State, was the State, was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not true that the State is always right” (70). The point in this assertion is not actually the state itself but how the state is administered. A situation in which the leaders or rather rulers are considered demi-gods and perpetuate a univocal and monolithic authority in the affairs of a nation is what we are being encouraged to reconsider. It is a situation that recalls Achille Mbembe’s argument about the “colonial sovereignty” where “right was on one side” (26) and “the colonized had no rights against the state. He or she was bound to the power structure like a slave to a master” (31). Mbembe further argues impressively that

the colonized could only be envisaged as the property and thing of power. He/she was a tool subordinated to the one who fashioned, and could now use and alter, him/her at will. As such, he/she belonged to the sphere of objects. They could be destroyed, as one may kill an animal, cut it up, cook it, and, if need be, eat it (26-27).

Clearly, the peasants in Morountodun illustrate the unenviable status of the “colonized” as captured by Mbembe. They are deemed inconsequential and have no human rights unless the ruling class says so. Simply put, they have been re-colonized in post-independence Nigeria. The play is against those who have hijacked the state and have used their privileged position to mistreat the majority of the citizens. Osofisan therefore wants an egalitarian socio-political system that will replace the repressive machinery of the state that we find in this play.
“Morountodun,” writes Chris Dunton, “is Osofisan’s most ambitious attempt to stimulate radicalization of the sense of history” (Make Man Talk True 79). In a similar vein, Sola Adeyemi is of the view that “Osofisan subjects tradition to scrutiny and re-interpretation, using the embedded modes of thought and structure to proffer a counter-official version of myths and history” (128). Osofisan is mindful of the fact that a playwright is no journalist who is expected to be faithful to the source of a news story. In his words:

whereas the journalist is supposed to be merely a mirror or megaphone, an objective and transparent medium who does no more than transmit the message as he receives it, the artist is always an active mediator, whose vision interferes with, and imposes an interpretation on the message. (“The Writer, The Artist and The Journalist” 32)

This remark confirms the absence of faithfulness in his treatment of history and myth; it clearly demonstrates that his tampering with historical and mythological characters and situations is more deliberate than accidental. So Osofisan is not willing to be a literary journalist who must ensure that in his reports he remains totally faithful to his sources. And when he further declares that “[a]rt does not exist beyond politics, or beyond economics; it is determined by them; but …art also determines them in turn” (“The Writer, The Artist and The Journalist” 29-30), we get the impression that his dramaturgy politicizes art and aestheticizes politics. His handling of historical and mythological characters and incidents in Morountodun is a clear indication that the play is not a straightforward dramatization of history or a mere artistic re-incarnation of mythological characters. Making the farmers win their demands and making Moremi’s alter ego, Titubi, commit class suicide amounts to a radical revision, re-shaping and reconstruction of historical accounts and mythological narratives. As Chidi Amuta has rightly contended, Morountodun is a play in which “everything and everybody changes into their opposites and
back again” so as to pursue a “redefinition of social reality” (173). Osofisan has used artistic license to alter historical facts in order to pursue his social vision. According to him,

Myth is only history which has been distilled by time, which has crystallised. So that when we use it, we are not supposed to have a subservient attitude to myth. Myth is just a peculiar interpretation of issues. And when you think of it, most of these interpretations, in fact, have been decided by the ruling class, which means that they are also subject to re-interpretations. In most of my own work, I take the myth as the version of history that has passed and then rewrite the version the way I see it, asking myself that if somebody who was not in the ruling class was telling this story, how would he tell it? What would be his own attitude?45

Osofisan’s approach to myth and history validates Mao Tse Tung’s observation that “all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics” (Mao 25). Osofisan’s identification with the cause of the underprivileged attests to the fact that “every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics?” (Ngūgĩ, Writers in Politics, preface). Because of this obvious challenge and interrogation of received readings of history and myth, demystification of supernatural powers, sympathetic portrayal of oppressed characters, constant expression of desire for social change and the ability of the underprivileged to wrest their freedom from their oppressors, scholars (e.g., Ajayi 89; Obafemi, “Revolutionary Aesthetics” 118,126; Awodiya, “Oral Literature” 105-6; Adeyemi 127; Amuta 173; Onwueme, “Visions” 60, 64) have often deemed Osofisan’s works revolutionary. In his review of Morountodun, Niyi Osundare writes

that Osofisan’s works “are about the first body of plays in Nigeria with a clear ideological perspective. He is already on the way to doing for us what Bertolt Brecht did for Europe” (“Social Message of a Nigerian Dramatist” 150).

Osofisan considers the peasants’ revolt in *Morountodun* as paradigmatic of the mass resistance necessary to dislodge oppression in potcolonial Nigeria. As Sandra Richards has noted, Osofisan, together with other Nigerian second-generation playwrights such as Bode Sowande, “seemingly viewed the Agbekoya Farmers’ Revolt as a prime example of the national liberation struggle yet to be waged in Nigeria” (94). By the same token, Yvette Hutchinson has noted that “[o]ne of the ways Osofisan engages with recognizable socio-political realities of contemporary Africa is by situating his plays clearly in the context of the post/neo-colonial. The plays are framed by events in history that Osofisan sees as profoundly influential on Nigeria’s current situation” (“Riding” 208). *Morountodun* holds up to the oppressed majority of Nigerian population a vision of the kind of unity, solidarity and collective heroism exhibited by the revolting farmers. Osofisan’s emphasis on *collective* rather than *individual* heroism is informed by his ideological position. “Being greatly influenced by Marxist thinking and in particular by Marxist materialist dialectics,” Osofisan, contends Hutchinson, “has challenged Soyinka’s use of myth and focus on individual heroes as being static and reactionarily backward” (“Riding” 207). Hutchinson further argues convincingly that “Osofisan is closer to Ngugi wa Thiong’o than Soyinka on the uses of myth and history” (“Riding” 207). Osofisan has explained that his notion of people-oriented revolutionary leadership is different from Soyinka’s:

We also differed on his image of the romantic hero, the *Ogunnian persona*. We feel strongly that what our society needs badly is somebody who is far less of a loner, an organizer who can bring men together into a team. Of course the inspired, courageous
individual has his role, to act as the catalyst, the vanguard and so on; to rouse awareness and provoke insurrection, but the real work is in planning and organization.\(^\text{46}\)

In *Morountodun*, nearly all the time, decision-making is democratic.\(^\text{47}\) As Osofisan explains, “[t]he revolution itself is a mass of people always doing things together” (qtd. in Obafemi, “Revolutionary Aesthetics” 119). This position is echoed by Sowande:

Revolution has to be collective. If any man believes he can go it alone, he is fooling himself. The forces that he is fighting are enormous…Let us start from history, none of the revolutionaries worked alone. The kind of characters you have in Soyinka’s plays who are individualists are so perhaps because of Soyinka’s ideals. But I don’t think it is realistic. You cannot make it as an individual (qtd. in Obafemi, “Revolutionary Aesthetics” 119).

Soyinka has equally expressed dissatisfaction with the second-generation playwrights. He has accused them of “ideological confusion” and has gone further to express his reservation about the place of Marxism in Nigerian literature.\(^\text{48}\) Osofisan makes no effort to conceal his adherence to Marxist ideology. In his words: “[I]f you are interpreting us only in terms of Marxism, then you say…this is a foreign idea. But you know I don’t hear the same criticism against people who say they are Christians or Muslims. Why are they not asked why they are bringing foreign ideas here”\(^\text{49}\).


\(^\text{47}\) Such as during the trial of Lawyer Isaac and Alhaji Buraimoh, two previously underprivileged characters who have just risen to prominence and have now collaborated with the state to mistreat the peasants.


\(^\text{49}\) Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Metaphorical Language and Revolutionary Ethos,” p.171.
As a Marxist writer seeking to improve the condition of the less privileged, Osofisan’s play also accords female characters a relatively prominent role. Although female emancipation is not the primary concern of Morountodun, the play attempts to give women a respectable voice in the class struggle between the oppressed masses and the tyrannical ruling class. Aside from the visible role of the peasant women already noted above, it is noteworthy that Morountodun features a heroine. Titubi plays a central role in arranging the truce between the government and the farmers. She also plays a major role in the well-being of the peasants as she nurses those wounded in battle. Her personality becomes particularly warm and likable after she commits class suicide. As Marshal says of her during the wedding ceremony: “We have seen you in our midst, different from how you came. And we have grown to cherish you, and that is enough. I give her, not a gun, nor a matchet…For her war is not to kill, but to heal. I name her—MOROUNTODUN!” (74-75).

Titubi is so precious and particularly sweet that she is given a new name that befits her human qualities. For the playwright, her central role in the play is more deliberate than accidental. “[I]n a patriarchal society,” says Osofisan, “the suppressed women are my heroes” (“Literature and the Cannibal Mother” 7). Moremi’s call to arms—“Face to face we stand together in the onrushing waters of danger. In my own hands I hold the paddle of my destiny” (Morountodun 38)—is, for Osofisan, “a new image of womanhood…an image different from the ones we are used to in any of our previous literature” (“Literature and the Cannibal Mother”7). That women are accorded a relatively significant status in this play is substantiated by Omofolabo Ajayi. “[T]he choice of a woman as the lead character in a play about men who take up arms to defend a cause and ensure the survival of a people,” writes Ajayi, “is a definite ideological choice” (97). She adds: “Osofisan pays tribute to, and gives recognition to the…roles
that women have always played in national, social, political, or economic struggles but which
have remained unsung and are routinely ignored in historical accounts and other documents”
(97). Both Victor Ukaegbu\textsuperscript{50} and Tejumola Olaniyan\textsuperscript{51} have expressed similar views.
Morountodun “in its barest outline,” writes Osundare, “is about Titubi…who aspires to be
Moremi” (“Social Message of a Nigerian Dramatist” 149). The relatively empowering portrayal
of women is such that some have begun to compare the play with Ibsen’s \textit{A Doll’s House}, a
prominent text on the issue of female liberation. Robertson Grant\textsuperscript{52} has expressed the view that
Titubi’s imagined past experiences, prior to our meeting her in the play, are comparable to
Nora’s storming out of her matrimonial home in Ibsen’s play. Grant draws attention to the
following passage in order to shore up his argument:

I wasn't myself. I swear I didn't know what I was doing. Suddenly I wanted to end it all,
but in such a way that no part of me would be left in his hands. I mean, my husband. How
I hated him! How I hated myself! I hated the fact that he'd ever touched me and loved me.
I wanted to scrape all my skin off, cut my tongue, my lips, all the parts of me that had
ever come into contact with him. I swear I wasn't myself! At last I said I'd kill myself and
the children I had for him (\textit{Morountodun} 28).

The above passage is not only comparable to Nora’s rebellion against patriarchy in \textit{A Doll’s
House} but also recalls Euripides’ eponymous heroine in \textit{Medea} killing her children in order to
spite a wayward husband whom she eventually leaves. Whether the earlier comparison reflects

\textsuperscript{50} Ukaegbu has noted that Ososfan’s play is “revolutionary for eulogizing women’s contribution to society” and further states that “Osofisan conceives Titubi, Mama Kayode, Wura, Mosun and Molade as no ordinary women in peripheral, decorative roles but as part of the inner circle of revolutionary ideologues.” “Mythological and Patriarchal Constraints.” p.180.

\textsuperscript{51} Olaniyan observes that “Osofisan is...uniquely significant for...non-condescending representational emphasis on women” and has “charted an alternative course for the portrayal of women in Nigerian, indeed, African drama.” “Centring the Marginal.” p.143.

\textsuperscript{52} An undergraduate at the University of Toronto, Grant was responding to an assignment on the students’ reading of \textit{Morountodun} which was among the texts studied for the course: Theatre and the World: Innovation and Experimentation. I was the Teaching Assistant for this course under Professor Antje Budde (September-December 2012)
well but the other badly or whether one or both of them is/are unacceptable to critics and proponents of female emancipation, they both demonstrate a limitless desire to overthrow patriarchy. Like Grant, Madeleine Swinkin\textsuperscript{53} has established links between Morountodun and A Doll’s House. Indeed, the visible role of female characters in Morountodun is equally acknowledged by audience members who saw the 2010 production of the play which was directed by Andrew Buckland for Rhodes University.\textsuperscript{54} According to Louella, “[t]he kids were blown away by the show! They…loved how it dealt with the empowerment of women.”\textsuperscript{55} This verdict is authenticated by Solomon Odame.\textsuperscript{56} These testimonies clearly demonstrate the recognition of women’s important contribution in this production that “captures in a moving manner, the intrigues and betrayal of people’s expectation by the government and its functionaries like the police, tax collectors and sanitary inspectors who hold the people down in a terroristic grip” and equally “depicts the determination and the struggles of the peasants to combat the tyranny of the military government and the economic hardship being faced.”\textsuperscript{57}

2.2 Dramatic Techniques

Morountodun blends a wide range of theatrical style and conventions. The techniques are partly Brechtian and non-Brechtian but they combine to reveal the ideological and political intention of the playwright. The Brechtian influence is evident right from the opening stage directions: “A flurry of activity: actors making up, trying costumes, reading script, rehearsing gestures, miming some of the later actions in the play” (5). The actors are preparing for their roles right in the presence of the audience and the preceding stage directions destroys the Aristotelian illusion of

\textsuperscript{53} Swinkin was equally a member of the above-mentioned class and was responding to the same assignment. For her, “the female protagonist” in Morountodun, “reaches a state of awakening and opens her eyes to the injustices around her, which is quite like Nora.”

\textsuperscript{54} See production photo on page x of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{55} See Rhodes University Drama Department website (www.ru.ac.za/drama)

\textsuperscript{56} Solomon Odame notes that the play “tells the triumphant tale of a female leader named Morountodun”. See Odame’s 2010 Travel Blog (www.prezodame.wordpress.com)

\textsuperscript{57} Odame, www.prezodame.wordpress.com
reality, making it clear that the spectators are about to watch a rehearsed event. As Brecht explains:

The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them. He reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a complete transformation ("Short Description of a New Technique of Acting" 137).

The Brechtian acting system eliminates the notion of the fourth wall which separates the stage from the spectators and conveys the impression that the dramatic action is taking place in the absence of the spectators. Brecht again:

In order to produce A-effects the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays. Aiming not to put his audience into a trance, he must not go into a trance himself. His muscles must remain loose, for a turn of the head, e.g. with tautened neck muscles, will ‘magically’ lead the spectators’ eyes and even their heads to turn with it, and this can only detract from any speculation or reaction which the gesture may bring about. His way of speaking has to be free from parsonical sing-song and from all those cadences which lull the spectator so that the sense gets lost ("A Short Organum for the Theatre" 193).

This anti-illusionistic technique is further conveyed in Morountodun through dialogue:

DIRECTOR: Hurry up. Hurry up. Play opens in five minutes
AN ACTOR: Fair house today?

DIRECTOR: Fair. Better than in the last town we stopped (5).

The director equally serves as the narrator, providing some insight into the historical background of the play (5), and furnishing the audience with some answers to unanswered questions at the end of the play while reminding them that they are in the theatre (79). Such a mixture of narrative and dramatic technique mirrors Brecht’s concept of *epic* theatre. The deliberate attempt to emphasize the make-believe nature of the play is in accordance with Brecht’s concept of *alienation* which seeks to ensure active participation of the audience and productive interaction between the stage and spectator. And by making the farmers win their demands, contrary to historical fact, *Morountodun* evokes the Brechtian concept of *historicization* which views social conditions as changeable and encourages us to imagine the past as different from what it was. The anti-illusionistic technique in *Morountodun* makes the play meta-theatrical; such a technique is not only avant-gardist but also revolutionary since it amounts to the overturning of conventional expectations. “Iconoclasm in form,” says Osofisan, “has…been more vital as an organ of revolt than even the verbal content” (“Radical Playwright” 214). He has further argued that “[y]ou can’t talk of revolutionary theatre in terms of its subject matter and theme alone. You have to include its techniques and structural strategies”.

Role-playing is one technique repeatedly employed by Osofisan as a means of stirring consciousness and further strengthening the ideological direction of his works. Some instances of role-playing in *Morountodun* such as the episode between Titus and the Sanitary Inspector or the governor’s visit to the rural area have already been noted above. There are other examples such

---

as that between the police Superintendent and Titubi mirroring a hypothetical interrogation session that explains why Titubi has come to live with the peasants. Role-playing further projects the meta-theatrical nature of the play. Further evidence of Brechtian influence is the episodic nature of the plot. The scenes are chronologically scrambled, and several of them look more like stand-alone plays than components of a unified whole. Consider, for instance, that the Moremi story which historically antedates the farmers’ uprising, is presented in the fifth and sixth scenes by way of flashbacks long after the farmers’ uprising has begun. Again, consider the several flashbacks which narrate the circumstances leading to Titubi’s ideological volte-face. Although we see Titubi when she is living with the farmers, we are not shown these particularly important experiences, which are subsequently introduced when we did not exactly anticipate them. In all these instances the audience, in accordance with Brechtian tradition, is expected to link up the fragments and arrive at its own understanding of the scenic relationships. Clearly, therefore, Osofisan’s Brecht-inspired techniques seek to reconfigure the interface between the actor and the spectator. “Spectator and actor,” theorizes Brecht, “ought not to approach one another but to move apart. Each ought to move away from himself” (“A Dialogue about Acting” 26).

Like Brecht, Osofisan’s ideological vision has influenced his stylistic devices. As Udenta has noted, “style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content” (ix). Udenta is aware that an author’s intention or worldview can determine the form of his art. The Brechtian-inspired portion of the structural technique in Morountodun is intentionally designed to appeal to the spectator’s sense of reason and intellect rather than emotion. The playwright’s re-shaping of the psyche of some members of the ruling class in pursuit of his revolutionary objectives might as well be analogized to a trend in Brechtian theatre which Brecht explains as follows: “Even when a character behaves by
contradictions that’s only because nobody can be identically the same at two nonidentical moments. Changes in his exterior continually lead to an inner reshuffling. The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew” (“Conversation with Bert. Brecht” 15). In response to Brecht’s position, Joachim Fiebach observes that “the individual’s character” is being “an elusively fluid phenomenon realized by adopting endlessly changing Haltung(en) (attitude-cum-stance)” (31). As evident in Morountodun, the heroine Titubi’s transition from being a hater of the oppressed to a passionate advocate of their cause validates both Brecht and Fiebach. Her class suicide seems to suggest that the revolution in this play may be equally adjudged in terms of cognitive transformation that facilitates the liberation of the oppressed and not just people launching a violent uprising in order to secure liberation.

Indeed, Osofisan seems to have a knack for plotting his plays in a way that their political implications are created in the structure of the plays. A regular feature of his revolutionary drama is that someone who appears to be one thing turns out to be another. Conversion seems to be important to him. Moreover, there is the issue of children, particularly, young ladies abandoning their parents. In Morountodun for instance, these points are illustrated with the character of Titubi who abandons her wealthy mother and eventually commits class suicide and thereby becoming a champion of the underprivileged. This idea of privileged children abandoning their parents in order to work for the oppressed appears to suggest that Osofisan’s vision of a revolutionary transformation of society has a generational component. Consider his earlier quoted remark: “I am not persuaded that the visionaries who will eventually lead us out of chaos will be discovered only among the…so called ‘elders’” (“And After the Wasted Breed” 261). Could it be that, contrary to conventional wisdom particularly in Africa, there is something which the youth are seeing and which the elders are not? Going by the quoted remarks, it is not
that the elderly have no role to play whatsoever in the revolution; at least Baba the farmers’ non-combatant leader is an elder. But Osofisan appears mindful of the fact that the African culture is so gerontocratic that it suppresses the voice and individual freedom of its younger generation. Could it actually be that Osofisan believes that the socio-political mess he wants remedied in Nigeria has been created by the older generation and it will therefore take the younger to clear it? One may be forgiven to believe so going by his earlier cited argument on the need to influence the minds of tertiary education students towards a more progressive social vision. When the youth are pictured as probably more visionary than the elders vis-à-vis the liberation of the society as illustrated with Titubi in *Morountodun*, it tends to have an interesting ironic twist that raises the whole question of the relation of inside to outside or appearance to reality and physical sight versus spiritual blindness as in Sophocles *King Oedipus*. In Sophocles’ play, Tiresias is physically blind but spiritually insightful but the reverse is the case with the monarch Oedipus. Just as the people of Thebes depend on the blind seer Tiresias rather than Oedipus to reveal the information that is necessary for the healing of an ailing people, Osofisan’s youthful characters, rather than their parents, have been particularly instrumental in the process leading to the liberation of society. Indeed, this whole issue of people appearing to be one thing and turning out to be another seems to suggest that the revolution takes place the very moment when a sufficient degree of awareness and mental liberation has occurred in the minds of certain characters, both oppressed and oppressor, and that the revolution may be lead or substantially aided by some unlikely people. Titubi’s ideological volte-face upon having a first-hand experience of the living conditions of the peasants illustrates this point. Her ignorance-induced aggressive disposition at the beginning of the play eventually gives way to a humane face of compassion, thereby precipitating the liberation of the downtrodden.
Interestingly, as we shall also see in the subsequent analysis of some of his other plays, Osofisan’s revolutionary technique has always involved a potentially transgressive relationship or association between some members of the opposing groups. It is particularly worth noting that Osofisan who relies on binaries and prefers that evil stands forth as evil and the oppressed as good, should adopt the deconstructive technique of dismantling the binaries by not only ensuring that some members of the ruling class commit class suicide but also making couples out of some members of diametrically opposed groups in the larger society. Besides assisting the farmers in winning their demands upon committing class suicide, Titubi also marries Marshal, the farmers’ combatant leader. As earlier noted such a union particularly recalls that of the white British woman Elizabeth (Rachel Shelley) and Bhuvan (Aamin Khan), the young Indian villager leading his people against British exploitation in the Gowariker-directed movie *Lagaan*. This particular technique of making some members of the ruling class collaborate with the oppressed is persuasive in my view. If some members of the ruling class are genuinely willing to work with the oppressed to ensure a more progressive society, why should the oppressed refuse to cooperate? Osofisan appears to be suggesting that the liberation may not occur after all with blind and indiscriminate hatred by the oppressed of all the members of the ruling class. The playwright seems to be suggesting that the progressive members of the ruling class do equally have a role to play in the revolutionary transformation of society. His seemingly persuasive argument is tantamount to the wisdom of using a vaccine prepared with the strain of a given disease to prevent that disease! It may well be that Osofisan doesn’t hate the rich after all but is only against the oppression by the rich of the poor.

Language is equally a major technique that Osofisan has employed to pursue his revolutionary politics. Proverbs, idioms and riddles have been strategically deployed to pursue
the author’s message of radical social transformation. Osofisan’s use of language is politically effective in the sense that it has been able to capture the callousness of the ruling class and the determination of the oppressed to resist oppression. Consider, for instance, Marshal’s proverb: “The well-fed dog has no thought for those who are hungry” (45). The proverb vividly portrays the selfishness and cold-hearted attitude of the oppressive elite. As we can see, several of the earlier quoted speeches by Titubi, Molade and Moremi smack of rebellion and advance the revolutionary theme of the play. Moremi’s earlier cited remark, “[f]ace to face we stand together, in the onrushing waters of danger. In my own hands I hold the paddle of my destiny” (38), for instance, helps to illustrate this argument. The circumstances under which the statement is made are quite instructive. The statement comes just before the arrival of the Igbo warriors who will capture Moremi as she desires so that she can infiltrate the camp of the warriors and obtain the intelligence with which her people will conquer them. The remarks in question demonstrate toughness, courage and iron will. And because it is made under the circumstances already noted, we get the impression that nothing can afford to stop the oppressed if he/she is truly determined to achieve liberation. The scene in which the speech is made is re-enacted shortly before the farmers’ invasion of the prison to release their colleagues and Titubi who eventually goes to live with the farmers. The speech substantiates the notion that words stir emotions and emotions stir actions. Moremi’s tough, well-orchestrated speech in a dangerous atmosphere and her matching actions energized Titubi’s dwindling morale at a crucial moment, enabling her to undertake a risky mission that eventually resulted in her class suicide and subsequent liberation of the oppressed. Osofisan’s language clearly articulates the unjust society slated for revolutionary transformation. His linguistic technique is both politically relevant and artistically entertaining.
Osofisan’s manipulation of language sufficiently meets Aristotle’s theory of dramatic diction. According to Aristotle, “a current or proper word” is that “which is in general use among a people” and a “strange word” is that “which is in use in another country” (98). Aristotle concludes that “the same word may be at once strange and current, but not in relation to the same people” (98). This distinction seems persuasive because its basic argument is that the effectiveness of language should be determined by how well it is understood by the targeted audience. The average African or rather Nigerian audience member is likely to identify with rather than be alienated by the linguistic style of Morountodun. Osofisan cannot be accused of “old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction” divorced “from African oral poetic traditions” (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike 165). He has tampered with a Western language without defiling it. And his use of songs, dance and music further advances the theme of the play. The scene where the armed peasants invade the prison to release their colleagues is brilliantly aided by a war song that “fills the air in a sudden violent upwelling” (39). The song clearly indicates that the farmers have not come to negotiate for peace and further underscores the implication of this invasion which somehow amounts to treading on a prohibited territory. The militant song which supports the volatile atmosphere of the play is further evidence of the audible rumblings of a society destabilized by class divisions.

Morountodun is indeed a media-blending drama. As Osofisan has explained, “[t]he drama which our people savour is still one in the mould of ‘total theatre,’ that is, a multi-media production, in which dialogue is no more important than other paralinguistic signs. There must be music and song, dance, colour and spectacle” (“The Revolution as Muse” 20). Osofisan has also used certain character names to make important political statements. “Titubi,” for instance, means instability and/or naivety. As earlier noted, her new name “Morountodun” means “I have
found a sweet thing.” Both names reflect her position and level of understanding of the plight of the oppressed, particularly as she grows from ignorance-induced hatred of the oppressed to being a champion of their cause. The latter name is particularly appropriate for a character who has made a significant contribution toward the successful liberation of the masses. It signifies the author’s sympathy for her humanitarian role. Such symbolic naming of characters stems from the author’s deliberate attempt to make crucial political statements.

However, much as this play generally succeeds, it could still be better. The play’s disconnected scenes and fragmented episodes affect the smoothness of the story. The flashbacks which occur here and there as a way of linking the past and the present affect the flow of dramatic action and weaken characterization. Olaogun contends that Titubi’s “growth (if any) is reported not shown; she experiences no real conflict, no struggle. In the final analysis her transformation is unconvincing” (51). Contrary to Olaogun, Titubi does actually encounter some experiences leading to inner “conflict” and “struggle.” We are treated to a scene where she is “groaning in evident pain” (Morountodun 41) as the farmers are performing a surgery-like treatment on the bullet wound she sustained during the peasants clash with government forces. Partaking in other experiences of the peasants, such as washing clothes at the stream with the women, nursing the wounded in battle and relocating with the peasants from one residential location to the other to avoid being detected by government forces, are all dangerous experiences that stimulate inner “growth,” especially as they finally contribute to her committing class suicide. But the issue here is that the overall structural technique employed to explain Titubi’s ideological volte-face is such that we do not anticipate that her experiences with the peasants will eventually result in her class suicide. If her class suicide comes as a shock to the agents of the state, the reader or audience shouldn’t be that shocked. Rather than having Titubi narrate
through flashbacks to the police Superintendent and her mother the circumstances leading to her class suicide, one or several scenes involving the Superintendent, Titubi’s mother and other members of the ruling class going to the rural areas to make a direct observation of the peasants’ lives would have been more effective in letting us know the reasons for Titubi’s ideological conversion, whether or not they agree with her. The play’s blending of history, myth and contemporary reality could be better. It is hardly surprising that some spectators may not easily follow this mixture of different elements: “some of the flashbacks are obtrusive, especially to those of the audience not familiar with the violated linearity of artistic time” (Osundare, “Social Message of a Nigerian Dramatist”150). The film technique of fade and dissolve using a physical symbol to make a transition from Titubi to Moremi is not too smooth. Let Dunton finish the story:

It isn’t that the play lacks dramatic technique: it is full of strategies, but these remain oddly mechanical, never quite meshing with the ideas that are voiced around them, so that in parts of the play Osofisan appears to be demonstrating the techniques at his disposal, rather than creating a fully-functioning piece of political theatre (“Political Theatre” 1124).

Dunton pronounces the above verdict despite conceding that “all the evidence is here in Morountodun of an attempt to create an extremely sophisticated piece of political theatre” (“Political Theatre” 1123). Several if not most of the “oddly mechanical” techniques he is questioning, and quite justifiably in my view, stems from Osofisan’s application of the Brechtian acting style. I am not sure that it is necessary to emulate this style. Since the audience goes to the theatre knowing full well they will watch a rehearsed performance despite the acting style employed, I am hardly convinced that it is appropriate for the actors in particular to remind them
of the make-believe nature of the play. In a revolutionary drama, the actors should be emotionally identified with their characters since the play is seeking to expose the concrete realities of oppression and injustice and the need to overthrow the status quo. This is particularly so for the actors representing the oppressed. If they are discouraged from creating emotional attachments to their role how will the spectator be moved? Or could the spectator be sincerely expected to be moved by the ideas of the play rather than the emotions of the actors? If yes, the spectator might as well read a revolutionary novel or poem rather than go to the theatre to see a play!

Could Brecht himself claim success with this alternative acting system? Morris Fishman explains:

I saw Brecht’s production of his own play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*…The estrangement was evoked by the setting and scenery rather than by acting, and the only time that the actors seemed to be reporters or commentators was when they sang a type of choral interlude akin to that of the chorus in a Shakespearean History, commenting on the progress of the story. In the main body of the play the actors appeared to be completely identified with their roles. Here theory and practice seemed to differ (25-26).

Fishman further expresses concern as to “whether it is the audience rather than the actor that requires training for this type of theatre” (25). In a similar vein, Oscar Brockett has expressed doubts on the possibility of realizing the Brechtian acting system (371). Going by all this, one may be probably forgiven for answering in the affirmative the following question: If Brecht was not Brechtian and Brechtian techniques do not work, was Brecht successful because his audience identified with the actors? Fishman’s and Brockett’s reservations about Brecht are applicable to
Osofisan’s productions. If the actors in Morountodun were not emotionally identified with their roles, the audience members of the Rhodes University production wouldn’t have been impressed. And for the Ibadan production of Morountodun and Once Upon Four Robbers, Osundare acknowledges that “[t]he cast…which produced both plays did a fine job” (“Social Message of a Nigerian Dramatist” 150). Osundare’s verdict is a confirmation of the actors’ emotional involvement in their roles. In fact, his only disappointment with the cast members of Morountodun pertains to the actress who played Moremi, whose “rather foreign accent jars the harmony of the serene Yoruba character she represents” (150). If the Brechtian acting system is the ideal technique for Osofisan’s revolutionary theatre, then Lola Fani-Kayode should have been commended for her mechanical acting. Her unconvincing representation of Moremi will be probably convincing only outside of Nigeria. But since Nigeria remains the primary reference point for this dissertation, the success or otherwise of her performance had better be judged from the point of view of Nigerian spectators.

It is instructive to note that Osundare is critical of Fani-Kayode despite the fact that Moremi is a cameo part in only two scenes out of the sixteen that make up the play. That such a short role should draw attention because the acting was not convincing enough should raise some questions about the appropriateness of Brecht’s alienation acting system for Osofisan’s theatre. Requesting an actor to distance himself from his character is like Aristotle trying to detach plot from spectacle. Is this not tantamount to attempting a biological separation of the chicken from the egg or a man trying to leave his buttocks behind while on the run? There seems to be no justification for Osofisan to experiment with any acting system when it is of doubtful relevance to his plays. Interestingly, he has conceded that “Brecht is a playwright I really love because of the tussle between his theoretical writings and…the plays themselves; things come out almost
always against the theories.” 59 Since Osofisan has acknowledged the apparent inconsistency between Brecht’s theories and praxis, why then one might ask, has he adapted Brechtian theories? Could this be the case of the mad man in an Igbo proverb who claims to know what he is doing but not what is happening to him?

2.3 *The Chattering and the Song*

This play was first performed at the University of Ibadan in 1976 under the artistic direction of Femi Osofisan. The story centres mainly on the trio of Mokan, Sontri and Yajin, former school colleagues now pursuing different vocations in accordance with their social vision. Mokan works for the state secret service while Sontri is an activist with the Farmers’ Movement, a revolutionary organization seeking to establish a classless socio-political order. Prior to their graduation from the university, Mokan’s fiancée, Yajin, jilts him for Sontri. This intrigue in their shared past is represented in the Prologue, a sequence of riddling games which takes us back to their university days. Then follows the actual play, which begins on the eve of the Yajin-Sontri wedding. Mokan, who is believed to have accepted the betrayal with phlegmatic resignation, arrives in the company of his friend Leje to celebrate with the bride and groom.

As the preparation progresses, Yajin requests as a wedding gift the re-enactment of a Sontri-crafted play about a historical rebellion that occurred in the nineteenth-century Oyo empire during the reign of Alafin (King) Abiodun. The guests are happy to comply with her request and she does the casting of the various roles. Sontri plays the tyrannical Alafin. And by virtue of dramatic irony, both Leje and Mokan are assigned parts that parallel their actual roles in the main play. Leje plays the young rebel standing trial before the Alafin while Mokan plays the

---

chief palace guard. The characters pick up their costumes and props and assume their new roles in full view of the audience. This play-within-a-play is the pivotal scene that poignantly captures the oppressive socio-political order that precipitates a violent revolution. Hear Latoye: “But in your reign Abiodun, the elephant eats, and nothing remains for the antelope! The buffalo drinks, and there is drought in the land! Soldiers, seize him! He is ripe for eating!” (45). Having been galvanized by Latoye, the palace guards, now representing the masses, pounce on the Alafin and begin to rough him up. Shortly afterward, the stage directions indicate that “Aresa brings down his sword on the head of the Alafin” (46). Mokan, driven by vindictive impulse, steps out of character and arrests Sontri and Yajin for subversive activities. At this moment, the bride and groom finally realize that Mokan works for the state secret service and has avenged their betrayal. With the arrest of the duo, Mokan is convinced that he has dealt a crushing blow to the Farmers’ Movement. But this is an erroneous assumption because the real leader of the Farmers’ Movement is Leje who will continue working undiscovered. Leje is convinced that Yajin’s father, a judge, will use his position to secure the release of the arrested couple and that the arrest has actually advanced the cause of the revolution: “We need anger to start a revolution, even a great anger, but once it has started, it will get rid of us, unless we meet it with cunning and compassion. That’s why Sontri needed the arrest. Mokan was helping us without knowing it” (51). At the end of the play the stage directions insist that “The play does NOT end” (56), thus suggesting that, in Osofisan’s theatre, as in Boal’s, drama is a “rehearsal for the revolution” (Boal 122).

As in Morountodun, Osofisan in the The Chattering is unfaithful to his historical sources. As a historical figure, Abiodun was considered a generous king who re-established peace and stability after eliminating Gaha, a despotic Basorun or prime minister. Gaha himself had
dethroned an incumbent Alafin and killed all the princes of Oyo except Abiodun who was partially disabled (Johnson 178-87). But Osofisan’s deep-seated penchant for and commitment to collective effort prompts him to jettison any kind of individual heroism no matter how well-intentioned, as we see in the following dialogue between Abiodun and Latoye:

ABIODUN: Your father was a pestilence on this land. He was a rebel and a usurper. I Abiodun, I was the one who changed all that. I put my foot down firmly on disorder, and established order in its place. I, Abiodun, I braved your father’s magic lantern and put my blade in his ribs. I killed him, and I killed Chaos (38).

LATOYE: My father was a plague, and you killed him. But you, Abiodun, you are the new plague! The new spot to be scraped out! (39).

Historically, Abiodun was able to rein in the young rebel through the use of supernatural powers. But Osofisan has little faith in magical solutions to current problems. Thus, he does not cite this historical event in order to suggest that solutions to the tensions in The Chattering are to be found in magic. Rather, he cites it in order “to unmask” it, “to use theatrical magic to undermine the magic of superstition. All these gods and their pretended inviolability…one is tired of them”60. Thus, in The Chattering he recasts this event by ensuring a successful overthrow of tyranny.

Latoye is the ideological mouthpiece through whom Osofisan articulates his vision of an egalitarian socio-political order. The Alafin together with his wives represents the oppressive ruling class in postcolonial Nigeria, while Latoye and the guards represent the oppressed masses. Clearly, the class conflict in contemporary Nigeria as captured in The Chattering is particularly

disturbing. The relationship between the rulers and the ruled is far from stable. This is further illustrated in the following exchange:

ABIODUN: Latoye, you bush rat, you have challenged the king of the forests to combat, now watch the lion gobble his prey!

LATOYE: Alafin, you brought out a cudgel, I laughed at it. How can you then threaten me with a whip! Soldiers, listen to me! I am going to release you, but only after you release your minds. No one can do that for you but yourselves. Think! Think! With Me! For it is that alone that will free you of your shackles...Look around you. Look into your past, look into your future. What do you see? Always the same unending tale of oppression. Of poverty, hunger, squalor and disease! You and your people...are the soil on which the Alafin’s tree is nourished, tended until it is overladen with fruit! And yet, when you stretch out your hands, there are no fruits for you! I am begging you, please, fly out of your narrow nests. Come follow me, raise a song to [sic] freedom! NOW! (41-42).

The above passage represents, Ukpokodu has rightly noted, an instance of the education of the masses which Marxist ideology considers very crucial for the liberation of the underprivileged (175). Like the social worker and agitator Iqbal in Khushwant Singh’s novel *Train to Pakistan*, Latoye is the herald of a new revolutionary order. According to Iqbal, “the Englishmen have gone but the rich Indians have taken their place. What have you or your fellow villagers got out of independence? More bread or more clothes? You are in the same handcuffs and fetters which the English put on you. We have to get together and rise. We have nothing to lose but these chains” (60). Iqbal is speaking in reference to India from which Pakistan has just been carved out upon the departure of the British colonial masters. And upon being told that “[w]e were slaves of
the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians—or the Pakistanis,” Iqbal replies that “If you want freedom to mean something for you—the peasants and workers—you have to get together and fight” (48). Like the masses of post-colonial India and Pakistan, those of Nigeria have been held hostage by the native ruling class, and Latoye, just like Iqbal, assumes the responsibility of making the masses realize that their liberation, which is of vital significance, is achievable through determination backed by action. The masses are made to understand that they have what it takes to secure freedom from the indigenous tyrants.

_The Chattering_ was written when Nigeria was under military rule. In an interview with Chris Dunton, Osofisan explains that

I was writing about Gowon. He was in the same situation [as Abiodun], he’d fought a war, he’d established peace, but the regime had become very corrupt. Also I wrote this play because people seemed to have come to the point of view you could do nothing to displace such a regime (qtd. in Dunton, _Make Man Talk True_ 73).

General Yakubu Gowon was Nigeria’s military head of state between 1966 and 1975. Gowon and the rest of the military leaders before and after him, all of whom seemed to believe that the presidency was their private estate, dehumanized the masses with impunity. Much as I agree that “[b]y the time the play was produced first in early 1976…public opposition to the Gowon military regime had significantly increased,” I am not sure it was this opposition that provoked the “bloodless counter coup headed by the more progressive Murtala Mohammed” (Richards 95-96). The well-being of the masses is usually a pretext used by the soldiers to overthrow a government in order to advance their selfish interests. Mohammed’s administration was not the people-oriented revolution Osofisan advocates. Since all military governments are instances of
impositional rule, Osofisan’s dissatisfaction with Gowon is, by extension, applicable to Mohammed’s regime. As Osofisan puts it:

[As] General Gowon grew monumentally corrupt, the need to confront it [Gowon’s regime] publicly prompted me to [write] The Chattering and the Song, in which I found metaphors to explain why the regime had to go and in what way social justice could be established in its aftermath. Corruption among local government officials during the Obasanjo-Murtala military regime inspired the fierce satirical portraits of Whose Afraid of Solarin? (“The Revolution as Muse” 18).

And successive civilian administrations have not liberated the people. Under them, a ruling class that expropriates the wealth of the nation has gained greater prominence than it enjoyed under the generals. Olori, the wife of the Alafin, can afford to say with cool detachment that “[t]his world is not of our making. We inherited it. The world is as it has always been. Will you turn it upside down?” (The Chattering 43). Olori is reminiscent of the so-called “first ladies” in contemporary Nigeria who use their husbands’ privileged positions as president or state governor to squander national resources and display an inflated sense of self-importance. Her remarks recall those of the black African colonial apologist, Mabigué, in Sembène’s novel God’s Bits of Wood: “I know that life is often hard, but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He has assigned a rank, a place, and a certain role to every man, and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design. The toubabs [whites] are here because that is the will of God. Strength is a gift of God, and Allah has given it to them. We cannot fight against it” (89-90). This notion of a divinely ordained world order that pictures the status quo as fixed and unchangeable is contrary to Osofisan’s social vision. Osofisan’s Latoye belongs to a people-oriented revolutionary vanguard who demonstrate how society can be changed by the unflinching determination of the
less privileged. His personality and leadership attributes possibly answer the following questions which Biodun Jeyifo believes the play seeks to address: “how are revolutionaries made; of what stuff are they made; in what consists the rightness and authority of their cause?” (52).

Latoye, like the leaders of the peasants in Morountodun, epitomizes Osofisan’s notion of the revolutionary hero as one who works with the people rather than remain aloof. Rather than assume the status of a solitary messiah who fights alone against the despotic Alafin, Latoye recognizes the necessity of empowering the masses to liberate themselves, with him serving merely as a catalyst. His verbal rhetoric is so strong that the guards withdraw all further loyalty to the ruling class. But despite his important role, Latoye himself recognizes that the people are more important than him. When Abiodun says to him, “Tomorrow you will be dead,” Latoye replies, “Yes, you will kill me. But your hands cannot reach the seeds I have already sown, and they are on fertile soil. Sooner, sooner than you think, they will burst into flower and their scent alone will choke you” (37). Latoye recognizes that the struggle for the liberation of the masses should not fizzle out with the elimination of a single individual. He does not try to tower above his people. Never once do we hear him say “I Latoye.” His unwillingness to use such language despite his crucial role contrasts sharply with the ego-driven language of the despotic monarch. “I Abiodun” reminds us of “I, Oedipus” (Sophocles 25) in Sophocles’ King Oedipus. The monarch Oedipus sees himself as a man “whose name is known afar” (Sophocles 25). Out of arrogance and an inability to pause for self-reflection and examination, Oedipus, in an engaging dramatic irony, pursues with dogged stubbornness his search for the perpetrator of a land-defiling crime that he himself actually committed. Oedipus, unlike Nigerian leaders, is fated by the gods to harm his people unintentionally and does care about what has gone wrong with the land unlike Nigeria’s ruling class, but the arrogance with which Oedipus seeks to uncover the
murderer is not divinely ordained and diminishes his patriotic motives. Such myopic arrogance is akin to that of Nigeria’s myopic and overweening ruling class—as exemplified by Abiodun—who believes it is infallible and worthy of celebration by the people whose humanity it has grossly debased. Indeed, the arrogance of the ruling class in *The Chattering* equally mirrors that of its counterpart in Vargas Llosa’s novel *War of the End of the World* where Baron de Canabrava has the temerity to announce: “Nobody’s going to take what’s ours away from us. Haven’t we present, right here in this room, the political power of Bahia, the municipal government of Bahia, the judiciary of Bahia, the journalism of Bahia? Aren’t the majority of the landed property, the possessions, the herds of Bahia right here? Finishing us off would be to finish off Bahia” (166-67). The class structure that precipitates this comment is what Osofisan is opposing in *The Chattering*; he strongly condemns the socio-political conditions that empower Abiodun to tell Latoye: “You talk in the future tense. But your future is in my hands” (37). The freedom of the oppressed, as the Nigerian playwright sees it, is an inalienable right that should not be dictated by the rich and powerful. And hence the justification for Latoye’s intrepid demand from Abiodun: “When you put a man in chains…you free his tongue!” (36-37). Osofisan is therefore calling for a society that operates on the foundation of justice and equality but not domination, a place where *everyone* truly counts. “The characters of his plays,” writes Awam Amkpa about Osofisan, “as symbolic representatives of Nigeria’s social reality, aim to transform” the country “into a participatory democracy founded upon equity and justice” (*Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* 56). This vision of an equitable and classless social order is better appreciated in the following remarks by Latoye:

For centuries you have shielded yourselves with the gods. Slowly, you painted them in your colour, dressed them in your own cloak of terror, injustice and bloodlust. But Olori,
we know how Edumare himself arranged his heaven, on which model he moulded the earth. To each of the gods, Edumare gave power, and fragility, so that none of them shall ever be a tyrant over the others, and none a slave. Ogun of the forge, king of Ire and outcast; Sango of the flaming eyes, king and captive; Oya, beautiful, unfaithful like women; the great mother Yemoja, whose weakness is vanity…that power shall not be corrupted by abundant privilege, that neither good nor evil shall be the monopoly of a few (45).

Clearly, “[t]he social milieu of The Chattering is an alienating class society marked by the material corruption and the spiritual and moral barrenness of the ruling élite” (Jeyifo 52). That the people are finally able to overthrow Abiodun and reclaim their freedom rather than wait for divine intervention is in accordance with Osofisan’s conviction that man can alter his destiny. He has remained critical of unwarranted dependence on spiritual solutions to the plight of the robbed and the cheated:

[I]f God exists, He must be wondering why some of us choose not to use the talents He has given us. He gave us hands, feet and a brain, which other animals don’t have. But we don’t want to use them. We allow some people to persuade us that instead of helping ourselves, prayers alone will do everything, especially if we pay them enough to intercede for us.61

Osofisan’s remarks recalls Marx’s assertion that “[t]he more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts 108). For the Marx-inspired Osofisan, therefore, it is not God who made man but man who has constructed God in his own

---

image. Still on the issue of reliance on supernatural powers as opposed to man’s ability to influence his future, Osofisan is at pains to emphasize that

It is one of the ways in fact that I have tried to disagree with Soyinka: to counter the ideology or that philosophy of subservience, inertia, surrender; to let people struggle, to give them hope. Things may be bad, yes; but they are not ordained to be bad. They can be changed. I am trying to say that there is value in struggle; even if the gain is not immediate. That we are not doomed as black people. We are going through difficult times…yes, but these difficult times are not eternal.62

*The Chattering*, like several Osofisan titles, uses the empowering pedagogy articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As Freire sees it, illiteracy is not the inability to read and write but a state of subservience arising from socio-economic structures of exploitation and domination. Osofisan believes that the masses remain subservient and largely supine in the face of oppression because they think that a few people have been destined to occupy high position and enjoy the good things of life. This notion is challenged in the play under review. As Leje tells Funlola,

Listen, we always say the world is as we met it. But it isn’t true! While we sleep, while we fold our arms, there are always a few greedy men who remould the world in their own particular image. And when we wake, the world is already different: there are new fences around us, new chains on our wrists (52).

Osofisan’s play therefore does not encourage the masses to behave like robots who accept punishments and ask for more. He believes that with unity and collective rather than individual

---

effort, the people will attain emancipation. Says Leje to Funlola, “[t]he police are ignorant. What is a single man in revolution? Once a movement begins, in the search for justice, it will run its course, with or without those who serve to spark it off. History will not remember us” (53). Thus the significance of collective action as the only means of liberation from oppression is further underscored.

2.4 Dramatic Techniques

Again, as in *Morountodun*, there is a hybrid of theatrical elements. These elements, as in the earlier play and the rest of the analyzed titles, are politically relevant and advance the playwright’s revolutionary objectives. The Brechtian influence is apparent in some aspects of the technique. This is evident in the play-within-a-play. The stage directions are eager to emphasize the make-believe nature of this re-enactment:

*During this ‘play’ we must feel the characters—especially Sontri— at first searching for words and attitudes, until they gradually, if unconsciously, merge with the figures they are trying to impersonate. One possible way of showing this would be in the change of verbal rhythms and tonation* (34).

The meta-theatrical technique evident in the above direction is best explained by Brecht’s concept of alienation, which has been explored earlier in my discussion of *Morountodun*. Here, as in *Morountodun*, Osofisan employs the device in order to elicit a critical response from spectators, as the actors’ assumption of their roles in the play-within-a-play and their donning of
their costumes in full view of the audience suggests. But the dramatic value of alienation is rendered even more forcefully in speech, as the following dialogue demonstrates:

YAJIN: Latoye! Where’s my Latoye disappeared to?

LEJE: Here, here, Mrs. Producer! (32).

Like Brecht’s *The Measures Taken*, in which as earlier noted, some communist agitators from Moscow re-enact the story of why they murdered their Chinese guide, the play-within-a-play in *The Chattering* tries to involve the spectators in the process of its production. In accordance with the Brechtian tradition, the spectator is invited to witness how the theatre creates its fictions instead of being encouraged to accept the illusion of reality. When *The Chattering* premiered at the University of Ibadan, the “actors were made to come on stage with boards announcing the scene and its setting in space and time before the action began” (Garuba 227). Garuba argues convincingly that this narrative technique is akin to the role of the director in *Morountodun*. Such a narrative device equally recalls Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, where placards are used to summarize the events of each scene. And the use of music in *The Chattering* is partly modeled after Brecht; the music functions as an independent component of the drama. The orchestra that sings the bride’s praises and supplies the music for the wedding ceremony of Yajin and Sontri is located on stage. That the musicians are placed in full view of the audience is in accordance with Brecht’s alienation technique of epic theatre which insists that the technical equipment for stage lighting be exposed so that the spectators are demystified of the sources of stage illumination.

I have expressed some reservations about Osofisan’s adaptation of the Brechtian style. The same reservations are equally applicable to *The Chattering* and need not be repeated. Given Osofisan’s level of intellectual training, it might be tempting to justify his experiments with
foreign theatrical techniques. Having noted that Osofisan grew up “in a deep Yoruba community,” Sola Adeyemi maintains that “he is a product of Western education, where he imbibed the cultural influence which later manifested in his writing” (129). Granted that a writer’s level of education and intellectual exposure are likely to influence his craft, it can still be argued that a writer needs to be more circumspect, discriminatory and selective as to what he/she can borrow from foreign traditions. Hear Gao Xingjian: “Western literature, particularly the ideas and methods of modern Western literature, has given me great inspiration, but I do not think that borrowing them indiscriminately will lead to any great work. I therefore attach more importance to the work itself” (qtd. in Kwok-Kan 9). Thus, borrowing from a foreign tradition is a legitimate practice in literary compositions but one must at the same time be consciously discriminatory. To borrow is not the issue. The issue is whether the borrowed technique is actually necessary. As my analysis demonstrates, the Brechtian acting system does not seem to make Osofisan’s plays more effective in delivering their message. Both reviewers and audience members who saw the production of Morountodun were impressed by convincing rather than mechanical acting. Let me draw attention to the following advice:

I am an English man…You are African…Very soon you will run your independence. We cannot teach you how to manage your affairs. We are not experts in African religion or anything. We may not be able to teach you what you want or even what you need. We can only teach you what we know. After that you can do what you like with it (qtd. in Ohaeto 45).

That was Professor Welch counseling the undergraduate student Chinua Achebe at the University of Ibadan. Osofisan may do well to consider such advice in order to determine whether his acceptance of the Brechtian dramatic theory is actually appropriate for his theatre. It
is a matter of serious interest that some European scholars themselves do acknowledge that Africans reserve the right to reject what they have learnt from Europeans just as they can afford to accept it.

Again, as in *Morountodun*, the whole technique of people appearing to be what they are not has been employed to advance a message of radical social transformation. Consider, for instance, that Leje who is the real leader of the revolutionary movement is not arrested at the end of the play. Mokan, the law enforcement officer, mistakenly thinks that Sontri and Yajin are the most important leaders of the Farmers’ Movement. In fact, it is particularly ironic that, despite their being close friends who arrive together for the Sontri-Yajin wedding ceremony, Mokan remains ignorant of the fact that the seemingly drunk Leje is the main leader of the Farmers’ movement! This issue of appearance versus reality once again seems to suggest that Osofisan may be stressing the fact that the revolution may be led or brilliantly aided by unlikely people. This fact may be particularly lost to the members of the ruling class and their agents who seem to think that someone’s social standing is always determined by physical appearance as demonstrated by Mokan’s failure to arrest Leje. Osofisan’s approach to the issue of inside versus outside in the portrayal of certain revolutionary figures validates the notion that “‘acting’—the power to be unknowingly protean in appearance, to use the expressive qualities associated with theatrical performance—can and should be a weapon of struggle” (Crow and Banfield 107). The oppressed may therefore want to take advantage of the short-sighted vision of the ruling class—as exemplified by Leje’s successful evasion of arrest—while designating responsibilities to various individuals in their struggle for social emancipation. Again, the apparent notion that the youth has a leadership role in the revolution is emphasized by the fact that the key activists in the Farmers’ Movement are Sontri and Leje; the former in particular is a fresh school leaver.
And the playwright once more employs the technique of a potentially transgressive association between some members of the opposing groups to advance his message of social transformation. This is particularly illustrated with the character of Sontri, a prominent activist in the Farmers’ Movement. By virtue of his educational accomplishment, Sontri is not underprivileged but he chooses to work for the oppressed. His choice to serve the underprivileged mirrors Titubi’s class suicide in *Morountodun*. And it is worth noting that when he is arrested together with his fiancée Yajin, the latter’s father and off-stage prominent lawyer who is expected to secure their release belongs to the privileged class. The expected assistance from Yajin’s father somehow recalls the lawyer who is murdered for voluntarily assisting the underprivileged in Ngũgĩ’s novel *Petals of Blood*. The lawyer in Ngũgĩ’s story shelters a group of villagers in his house when they have nowhere to sleep, feeds them and represents them when they are facing unfair prosecution at the courts of the oppressive elite. As Ngũgĩ does with the lawyer, Osofisan appears to use Yajin’s lawyer father besides Sontri to deliberately prick the conscience of the ruling class as to what they actually ought to be doing with their privileged position. Through the characters of Sontri and Yajin’s father who are directly or indirectly advancing the cause of the oppressed, Osofisan has once again hinted the need for a kind of transgressive relationship or handshake between the oppressed and some members of the privileged class as a workable strategy in the liberation of the oppressed. Although we do not see Yajin’s father in the story and we are not told that he is directly working with the underprivileged, but going by Sontri’s commitment to the liberation of the oppressed, whatever assistance Yajin’s father renders in connection with the release of Sontri in particular is actually a favour to the underprivileged class. Therefore the underprivileged ought to be aware that any
The process of meaningful social transformation will possibly include some members of the elite class. This socially transformative strategy in my view, as earlier stated, is persuasive.

The language of *The Chattering* advances the revolutionary theme of the play. Proverbs, riddles, songs, dance, music, symbols and metaphors are harmoniously blended to convey political objectives. In the central dramatic scene of the play, Latoye tells the guards who have been ordered to kill him that

The sapling which tries to halt the passage of the elephant will be plucked from its roots!
Whenever the storm starts on a journey, not all the branches in the forest can bar its way!
If the hill will not yield to the flow of the river, it will have its bosom furrowed! And now I say wind! And I am wind! I say river! I say elephant! Let all forces melt before me!
Freeze! (*The guards freeze.*) (41).

It is interesting to see that the guards actually obey the instruction at the end of the speech. That Abiodun’s dictatorship, no matter how deeply-entrenched, cannot withstand the rolling tide of the revolution is a message that has been strongly emphasized in the beauty, power and energy of the language. The guards and even the monarch are comparable to the mere “branches” and “hill” that cannot prevent the “storm” and “river” of change. And still in a bid to encourage the guards to cease all further allegiance to a brutal dictatorship, Latoye, as we saw earlier, directs the guards to “fly out of your narrow nests. Come follow me, raise a song to [sic] freedom! NOW!” (42). Latoye’s powerful verbal delivery is well supported by a magical incantation with the body movements and choreographed freezing of the addressees. The political effectiveness and miraculous powers of his proverbial and figurative language are attested to by the successful

---

63 As earlier observed in Chapter 1, Latoye’s reliance on magic at this moment appears to contradict Osofisan’s demystification of supernatural powers. Could it be that the playwright does approve of these powers occasionally if they are used to advance the interests of the oppressed? Whatever the answer, we are faced with an apparent contradiction that a revolutionary play may want to avoid.
ideological conversion of the guards that leads to the overthrow of Abiodun’s tyranny. Proverbs further provide some insight into the cruel and merciless nature of the ruling class that the playwright wants overthrown. For instance, in order to justify his position that Latoye’s young age should not be a reason to condone his subversive activities, the Alafin wonders: “Shall the scorpion sting, and claim youth as an excuse”? (39). Abiodun’s language is paradigmatic of the vile autocrats who criminalize criticism of their regimes in order to crush political opponents, not only in Nigeria but in the rest of postcolonial Africa.

The prologue features some metaphoric images that demonstrate how the rulers oppress the ruled or how the rich intimidate the poor. The hen succumbs to the hawk, the fish to the frog and the doe to the stag. With Sontri as the hawk and Yajin as the hen, the former says to the latter “I’m swooping down, with my beak of steel” (2, my emphasis). These predator-prey animal images provide an initial glimpse into the oppressive and morally bankrupt society that threatens the survival of common men and women. Such images portray the cruel nature of the status quo that has aroused Osofisan’s disenchantment. The title of the play is metaphorical. “Chattering” indicates the unity and combined effort of the masses while “song” indicates a chorus of freedom. Awodiya has argued persuasively that the metaphorical title prefigures the upheaval in the play. For him, that the “chattering” comes before the “song” is analogous to the violent overthrow of the Alafin which precedes and ushers in the revolution (The Drama of Femi Osofisan 231). We get a hint of the message implied by the metaphorical title early in the play during the charged confrontation between Sontri and Funlola over the former’s weaverbirds caused to fly away by the latter. Funlola believes the birds are “causing too much commotion” (17). This draws the ire of Sontri who compels her to admit under duress that a commotion is “[a] violent disturbance like a riot or … bad government” and that the collective “chattering” of
the weaverbirds is “song” (17-18). It is a tense moment listening to the seized Funlola repeat the exact promptings from Sontri.

The weaverbirds are representative of the masses and when Sontri says they “have flown across the border to become political refugees!” (16), it simply refers to the citizens leaving in large droves in recent times to seek better life elsewhere. Songs have been used also to advance the revolutionary theme of the play. Consider, for instance, the following excerpts from the farmers’ anthem:

When everyone’s a farmer

We’ll wipe out the pests

In the land

No more injustice

Labour’s for all

No more oppression (56).

And the refrain for the anthem states inter alia:

Bring in the seeds

Plant them in earth

Tend them with care

Watch them grow with time
Harvest is coming

In the land (56).

The anthem is featured in the epilogue and the spectators are encouraged to partake. That the audience is invited to participate arises from the fact that “the play does NOT end” as earlier stated. This inconclusive conclusion is aimed at provoking an insightful discussion and critical analyses of the socio-political issues that generated the play. The attempt to bring the audience into the action is further intended to stir them towards changing the world outside the theatre. The farm is a metaphoric reference to the nation and the seeds to be sown are the masses to be mobilized for emancipation. The lyrics of one of Sontri’s revolutionary songs partly says:

One haughty thing, he walks the street

He walks the street on myriad feet

And struts as if he owns the sun.

He has no bite, he has no fist

He has no tongue to voice protest

This haughty thing is a millipede.

This millipede, a curious thing

A curious thing of middling mien

It signifies our nation now:
On shaky feet we stumble on (15).

Thus the hopelessness and the instability of the nation is symbolized by the millipede. Music also plays a crucial role in facilitating the play-within-a-play. Songs are used to complement the ritual dance and mime in the play-within-a-play. The royal dance of solidarity for the unjust status quo sung by the Olori and the rest of the wives is worth noting. The rest of the wives sing in Yoruba, and Olori translates in English as follows:

The seasons pass:

We do not hear the groan of the world

It shall not be in our life time! (43).

Again, role-playing which is presented via flashback in the play-within-a-play has been employed as a technique for raising consciousness and further strengthening the ideological direction of the play. I am not sure I could convey this point better than Awodiya:

the playwright, through the flashback, suggests that if an ordinary man like Latoye in the past could revolt against a dictatorial ruler like the Alafin, the contemporary man should emulate such a precedent by questioning and challenging their leaders, urging them to improve the people’s social, economic and political conditions. *(Drama of Femi Osofisan)* 39

The play also employs humorous elements in tackling its political theme. In particular, Leje and Mokan tease each other and we get the impression that many a truth is spoken in jest. For instance, Mokan accuses Leje of being drunk but the accused wants to prove his sanity by
swearing “[i]n the name of the father and the Holy Booze!” (29, 32). Leje’s response is probably a tacit criticism and mockery of religion exemplified here by Christianity. Obafemi has stated that “Osofisan draws from the great sense of humour of the Yoruba to build his play” (184). This “sense of humour,” as demonstrated by the cited remarks, appears to be intentionally wry because of the author’s ideological intention. Osofisan’s ridiculing of religious institutions through jest is understandable given his lack of faith in supernatural powers in the liberation of the people.

We have seen how Osofisan has manipulated content and technique in both plays to pursue his revolutionary message. Since the truth of history does not necessarily have to tally with the truth of art, Osofisan’s revision of historical and mythological materials is understandable. By re-shaping historical and mythological characters and situations in the interest of the underprivileged, the dramatist has embraced a progressive ideological stance. Going by the nature of revolutionary change in both plays, it might be tempting to view the writer as a proponent of violence. But let him speak for himself:

I don’t see how you can avoid violence in the kind of country we live in. I can’t imagine any situation where there would be a complete absence of violence. So what I mean to say, really, is that I don’t believe in violence as an end in itself. But violence is inevitable in certain situations, to displace oppression, and assert one’s freedom. Because oppressors and rulers never just surrender their hegemony without a fight.64

What follows from Osofisan’s explanation is that the violent nature of revolutionary transformation evinced in both plays is not necessarily an expression of the author’s desire but a

portrait of Nigerian society. Such an explanation touches on the inseparable relationship between literature and society and the fact that literature has always been a product of the society that generates it. Osofisan’s position on revolutionary violence as the last means of overcoming an oppressor who is not willing to relinquish power without putting up a fight has been supported by Nkrumah\textsuperscript{65} and Eagleton\textsuperscript{66} among others. It appears that the oppressive nature of the ruling class at any given time determines the kind of strategy to be employed by the oppressed in order to secure liberation, just as Fanon too has argued earlier on. But Osofisan’s dramaturgy does not strictly prescribe physical violence or armed struggle as a sine qua non for revolutionary action. This is amply demonstrated in the two plays on which I will now focus attention in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{65} Nkrumah argues in \textit{Class Struggle in Africa} that “Revolutionary violence is a fundamental law in revolutionary struggles. The privileged will not, unless compelled, surrender power. They may grant reforms, but will not yield an inch when basic pillars of their entrenched positions are threatened. They can only be overthrown by violent revolutionary action.” p.80

\textsuperscript{66} Eagleton observes in \textit{Why Marx Was Right} that “If socialist revolutions have generally involved violence, it is largely because propertied classes will rarely surrender their privileges without a struggle.” p.187
Chapter Three

Class Oppression and Revolution in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* and *No More the Wasted Breed*
The two plays under examination here do not make use of historical and mythological sources and there is no armed struggle prior to revolutionary transformation of society. However, the absence of armed struggle does not mean a complete absence of violence. Both plays rely on some level of violence either through a subtle elimination of the symbol of oppression (*Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*) or verbal argumentative confrontation (*No More the Wasted Breed*) in order to win liberation for the oppressed. But in comparison to *Morountodun* and *The Chattering*, the revolution in *Aringindin* and *No More the Wasted Breed* unfolds in a relatively peaceful atmosphere. Despite the presence of some violence, the revolution in the latter two titles is such that the oppressed fight with their brains rather than muscles and we get the impression that freedom is achievable not only by working hard but also by working smart.

3.1 *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen.*

The play had its premiere performance at the University of Ibadan in 1989. Set in an unnamed Yoruba town, the play dramatizes the triumph of the people over military dictatorship. It opens with shop owners discovering that their shops have once again been broken into and their wares looted by armed robbers. It is a moment of grief because the night guard was also murdered by the robbers. A retired soldier and citizen, Aringindin, arrives at the scene but rather than join others in mourning, he steps aside and begins to play his mouth organ with Olympian detachment. Shortly thereafter, Baale—the traditional ruler—arrives together with his prominent chiefs. Having ensured that Baale has been made aware of the murdered watchman’s corpse, Aringindin departs after spitting at Baale’s feet. More citizens arrive on the stage. As the scene progresses, Baale recommends that the police be sent for. This is greeted with derisive laughter from several citizens who proceed to re-enact the police responses to similar events. Indeed the reenactments show that the police responses have been marred by corruption, inefficiency, and
ineffectiveness. A heated discussion of banditry and insecurity ensues. Aringindin had suggested that a band of night-watchmen under his leadership be constituted as the only solution to the continued atrocity by the robbers. The councilor or, rather, Kansilor, a man who is the elected representative of the town at the local government council and who is a keen supporter of Aringindin’s suggestion, now berates Baale for rejecting it. Baale once more refuses to accept the suggestion on the grounds that rather than improve security such a plan will further lead to the breakdown of law and order. He is strengthened in his position by the Oracle who foresees disastrous consequences in Aringindin’s suggestion. Baale is finally compelled to accept Aringindin’s plan when the townspeople almost kill a teacher and his girlfriend over the former’s lack of sympathy for the robbed traders whom he accuses of being exploitative. Baale is terror-stricken in the face of the dangerously deteriorating security compounded by the inefficient police force and the inability of the oracle to prescribe an alternative remedy. Aringindin then finally assembles a band of arm-bearing night-watchmen under his command. No sooner is the body launched than Aringindin bares his fangs; shops are commandeered, an autocratic regime is imposed, and expression is repressed. Ayinde, the school teacher, puts it succinctly:

Aringindin is our hero: he has made our nights safe, chased away the robbers who would steal even our dreams! But, let me ask you, what is the price we pay for this safety?

Answer me! We sleep safely, but everywhere Aringindin’s decrees surround us like iron fences! (159).

Ayinde’s remarks come during a ceremony to honour Aringindin who has just received one of the country’s highest awards from the nation’s military government. This award, which was engineered by the Kansilor, is in recognition of Aringindin’s role in ensuring that their town is secure. Ayinde is not opposed to the award but insists that the night-watchmen be immediately
disbanded and that Aringindin should play no further role in the security of the town. He goes further to disclose a plot by Aringindin to overthrow Baale the following day, set up roadblocks on the major roads and around the market, and establish detention centres. The gathering is disturbed by these revelations and Aringindin walks out, leaving Kansilor, who is privy to the evil plot, to debunk the allegation. While Kansilor is still trying to assure the people, the robbers attack again, this time in broad daylight. They rob the traders of their money and personal belongings, kill Ayinde and abduct Yobi. Baale, who is equally humiliated by the robbers, relinquishes his throne, thereby completely paving the way for Aringindin’s rise to power. It turns out that the robbers are the same night-watchmen under Aringindin’s leadership. The abducted Yobi confronts Aringindin for orchestrating the insecurity in order to justify his rise to power. Aringindin tells her she is right and tries to coerce her into marrying him with the approval of her father who is eager to profit from Aringindin’s autocratic regime. Disappointed in her father, Yobi refuses to marry Aringindin and is clamped in detention after making an unsuccessful attempt to murder Aringindin. In the final scene, which features Aringindin’s coronation, the peasant women tactfully disarm and divert the attention of the bodyguards, and Aringindin, who is so bogged down by his paraphernalia of office that he cannot assist himself when the music is amplified, screams and jerks rapidly. The music eventually pierces his ears and cracks his brain. When he drops dead, the people break into freedom song and the play concludes with the people in the process of setting up an egalitarian political system, “[a] government in which every voice is represented, whether old or young, male or female, worshipper or non-believer” (189).

Osofisan’s play is a critique of military dictatorships that have plundered national wealth and subjected citizens to reigns of terror. Aringindin’s dictatorship recalls that of the military
tyrant who believes that he is not born “to take orders but to give them” and proudly announces that “I am the government after all” in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (200 and 201). And his “decrees” that “surround us like iron fences,” to quote Ayinde again, is equally reminiscent of the repression and draconian legislations of successive dictators in Sony Labou Tansi’s novel *Life and a Half* where citizens are compelled to pay all sorts of ridiculous taxes, including a tax for being loyal to a reigning dictator, and are imprisoned for defaulting. Like the tyrants in Tansi’s and Garcia Marquez’s novels, Aringindin’s imperious disposition substantiates Achille Mbembe’s argument about the typical *autocrat* as seen in post-colonial Cameroon: “Since there is no subject apart from him, he is incapable of seeing himself as mortal, as subject to death despite the fact that death has not spared those around him” (163). Prior to his murder, Aringindin’s words and actions did not sound or appear like those of an ordinary mortal; he believes he is more important than his people who should be grateful for having him.

As the circumstances surrounding Aringindin’s rise to power demonstrate, the soldiers usually cite the well-being of the masses as justification for seizing power. But on assuming office, they turn out to be as corrupt and incompetent as the civilian politicians. Osofisan has explained that “*Aringindin*...was a response to the Buhari/Idiagbon regime. I was trying to study how dictatorship comes about.” He has also stated that “worried about the gradual collapse of all traditional and modern civil institutions in a gleeful collusion with General Babangida’s military regime, I wrote *Aringindin and the Night watchmen*” (“The Revolution as Muse” 18). In the play, Aringindin represents all the military despots that have ruled Nigeria in the post-

---

colonial era, while Kansilor represents the discredited civilian politicians who collaborate with
the soldiers to oppress the masses represented by the town’s people. Rather than being drawn
from myth and historical incidents, the characters and situation stem from the contemporary
situation. This is what has prompted Victor Dugga to observe that “[f]or the first time in his
career, Osofisan was not re-interpreting the history of the people but writing the living history of
the people” (103). Aringindin is, therefore, deeply rooted in a contemporary reality. It represents
the status quo, which the playwright finds disgusting as evident in a previously quoted remark:

Clearly, if we are to escape from this wasteful and tragic cycle, there must be a
revolution: the soldiers must be made to climb down from the saddle of power; the lower
classes empowered; and an enlightened leadership, composed from all sectors of the
population, must be created to replace the present usurpers (“The Revolution as
Muse”14)

The evil power of the military despots is so vicious that even traditional institutions are
denigrated with wanton impunity. The very moment in which Baale abdicates the throne for
Aringindin is particularly tear-inducing and its effect outstanding:

BAALE: (In great humiliation) Aringindin…Kansilor…(He takes off his cap. Immediate
consternation at the symbolic gesture, some screaming, some sobbing). My people… no
need to cry… (He totters, there are tears in his eyes)

Aided by a heart-softening dirge, Baale continues:

When the lion at the head of the pack can no longer read the wind right, and mistakes the
scent of the hunter for that of the prey…When the great araba, under whom we shelter,
loses its leaves, and begins to wilt...My people...we have seen such moments indeed when elephants invade a homestead, and the head hunter finds his arms paralysed...then it is time my friends to go, to stop and join the ancestors...(167-68).

Baale’s final submission and unceremonious exit parallels a moment in Ola Rotimi’s *Ovonramwen Nogbai* when the monarch and title character is compelled to take off his cap and surrender to British authorities, a moment so disturbing that even a British officer was “*himself emotionally perturbed, but ...her Imperial Majesty’s task must be done*” (Rotimi 54). Indeed, as Tejumola Olaniyan has rightly noted, “[t]he true referent for Baale’s concession scene is the historical divestment of Africa’s indigenous political order that happened...with formal colonialism” (“Femi Osofisan” 116). Olaniyan further argues that “Baale, representing the indigenous leadership order, is no more than a piece of antique furniture in the present time of the play: he commands reserves of affect from the people but is fundamentally vulnerable; he does not have the power to make and effect policies that can make a difference in the life of the community” (“Femi Osofisan” 115). Baale is indeed a sorry figure. And what the dramatist seeks to demonstrate with his downfall is that Baale is no longer relevant in the scheme of things, and that traditional rulers, as evident in postcolonial Nigeria, are mere pawns manipulated at will by successive military or civilian administrations. The office has therefore lost its aura and prestige and should be quietly laid to rest. But if the indigenous system symbolized by Baale can no longer guarantee the people’s well-being, neither the Western-style democracy symbolized by Kansilor nor the military dictatorship epitomized by Aringindin offers a better option. The play is therefore clearly dissatisfied with these three systems of government none of which exemplifies the model about to be instituted at the end of the play. The ideal model is the “socialist regime,” which Frantz Fanon defines as

171
a regime which is completely orientated towards the people as a whole and based on the principle that man is the most precious of all possessions, will allow us to go forward more quickly and more harmoniously, and thus make impossible that caricature of society where all economic and political power is held in the hands of a few who regard the nation as a whole with scorn and contempt. (78)

Fanon’s observations corroborate the “essentially socialist leanings and convictions”68 of Osofisan’s second generation of Nigerian playwrights.

The women-inspired revolutionary action in Aringindin is particularly reminiscent of Lope de Vega’s Fuente Ovejuna where a group of women-led villagers slay a tyrannical overlord. But contrary to what obtains in Lope de Vega’s play, where the peasants, despite assuming power for themselves, eventually relinquish it to the monarchy, the oppressed characters in Osofisan’s play do not re-establish the monarchy or seek any other system of government where a few individuals will lord it over others. The people in Aringindin have used their newfound power to better their lot. And whereas the peasants in Lope de Vega’s play employ a violent revolutionary technique that results in the dismembering of the body of the cruel overlord, Osofisan’s oppressed characters employ a clever trick that is tantamount to stabbing without drawing blood. The revolution succeeds in Aringindin despite the absence of massive or intensively violent bloodshed. It is a brand of revolution that recalls Isaac Deutscher’s words that the government “was elbowed out of existence by a slight push,” in reference to Russia’s Bolshevik revolution of 1917 (qtd.in Eagleton, Why Marx Was Right 180). Deutscher’s remarks stem from the fact that relatively few lives were lost in the course of the revolution just as in the Easter Rebellion of 1916 that compelled British imperial authorities to grant partial independence to Ireland. The

---

process of radical change in Osofisan’s play mirrors these European uprisings. The play is
devoid of the militant Marxism and the extremely gory revolution in *Morountodun* and *The Chattering*. Dugga observes that “Osofisan’s major shift away from the core of Marxism to a
toned down search for popular leadership through democracy engrosses this play” (99). Edde Iji
validates Dugga by listing *Aringindin* among the Osofisan titles stemming from a “[s]ober-
socialist temper” (*Backgrounds* 38). Iji’s distinction is in sharp contrast to the titles arising from
an “angry Marxist-socialist temper” (38), which include but are not limited to *Morountodun* and
*The Chattering*. The subtle liberation technique employed in *Aringindin* recalls the clever tactics
adopted by Ethiopia to suppress the irredentism of Eritrea in Alemseged Tesfai’s *The Other War*
In Tesfai’s play, we see how Ethiopian men, in accordance with a state-engineered scheme,
deliberately procreate with Eritrean women so as to dilute the dissident race and frustrate their
secessionist bid. This strategy of cross-ethnic sexual reproduction is the “other war” which is
different from the military warfare between both countries. However, this cunning tactic, unlike
the clever strategy of the oppressed in *Aringindin*, did not finally succeed since Eritrea
historically seceded from Ethiopia and appears unstoppable at the conclusion of Tesfai’s play.
The subtle technique that resulted in the elimination of Aringindin is the brainchild of the market
women. Once more, as in *Morountodun*, we are made to appreciate the female characters as
revolutionaries. This fact is well appreciated by the male characters in *Aringindin*, as Fatosin
admits, “Women! You have taught us a lot today” (190).

Again, there is emphasis on collective rather than individual effort as an important
strategy of liberation. The significance of collective action is deliberately or inadvertently
underscored when Yobi’s bullet fails to assassinate Aringindin near the end of the play. This
line of reasoning is further strengthened by the earlier version of the play where Yobin actually
kills Aringindin before turning the gun on herself. In the play’s updated version, it appears that the playwright wants the people of this town, rather than a specific son or daughter of the community, to take the credit for terminating tyranny and ushering in a new era of freedom. “The thematic focus of *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen,*” says Muyiwa Awodiya, “is that everyone ought to participate in the work of community development, and not abdicate this collective responsibility to a few messianic figures in order to avoid social disorder and authoritarian methods of government” (*The Drama of Femi Osofisan* 85). *Aringindin* therefore favours a political brand of theatre by using a small town to tell about an entire nation, and does not emphasize individual stories except as they connect with experiences in the broader socio-historical landscape.

Yobi and Ayinde are the playwright’s ideological mouthpieces. Driven by genuine compassion for their people, they try to alert others to the dangerous disposition of the few, evil-minded miscreants and the need to nip tyranny in the bud. The duo are Osofisan’s vocal medium for articulating his alternative social vision. They both epitomize moral courage and speak the truth without minding whose ox is gored. Ayinde pays with his life, and Yobi fearlessly engages Aringindin one to one:

YOBI: You won. For now the laughter is [sic] your lips. But one day, our people will be awake and they will stop calling so helplessly for messiahs. They will be ready, everyone, to assume responsibility for their own lives. And the laughter will no longer be in the palace or on your frightening lips. The laughter will be in the streets!
ARINGINDIN: You talk nonsense! You are a dreamer, I see. But you forget, it is not dreams that our country lacks, but the men to give dreams a concrete shape! Yes, men of action, like me!

YOBI: You don’t believe in dreams, Aringindin, only in nightmares! All your talk is of power, of conquest, greed, your selfish ambitions! Not of the needs of our people! And to get what you want, you’ll use every means, including the means of callousness! You are just a monster! (172).

Though the daughter of a high-profile politician, Yobi refuses to side with her father in the oppression of the people. She is not swayed by the benefits of good living from ill-gotten wealth. In fact, she promptly disowns her father: “Quiet, you’re no longer my father!” (172). She further upbraids him: “The people voted you into office, made you their leader and guide but see where you’ve led them!” (172-73). Her siding with the masses despite her privileged status is analogous to Titubi’s class suicide in Morountodun or that of Sontri in The Chattering. Indeed Yobi and Ayinde’s roles in raising the consciousness of the people are similar to that of Latoye in The Chattering and Saluga in No More the Wasted Breed. Ironically, however, Osofisan in Aringindin occasionally uses some philosophical statements from the loathsome characters to prick the conscience of the masses who seem to think that their salvation lies in the hands of a divinely appointed coterie. Consider, for instance, the following remarks from Kansilor: “All our people wish to do is go to sleep, while some watchmen take control. They talk, they talk, but they do not wish themselves to be in charge” (173). Kansilor’s remarks clearly betray the confidence reposed in him. He has simply denied his ability or willingness to use his position to improve the lives of the people. The needlessness or rather uselessness of people like him is even acknowledged by the robbers who accost him during the daylight operation: “Dem pay you well-
well, still you dey chop council money! Bad of all, no security! See how robber dey come harass innocent people like dis for afternoon! Na so you dey do your work? Boys, gifam some lashes”!!

(166). The robbers ironically berate Kansilor for his corruption and inability to provide security for citizens as a result of which the robbers wreak havoc on the lives of the people. Therefore the masses should know better when characters like Kansilor and the armed robbers who publicly flog Kansilor pass a vote of no confidence on the government. Having observed the maverick nature of Osofisan’s demand that the audience view the esteemed traditional rulers critically, Olaniyan has further argued that “[t]he ambition of the aesthetics of uncommon sense is to subvert the normalization of this condition of adversity in the consciousness of those who are its victims and provoke in them the hope and self-criticism they need to demand more from themselves and from those who manage their affairs; to change themselves and their condition” (“Femi Osofisan”121). As Osofisan himself explains,

Aringindin….is a different kind of play…because…I’m trying to give a picture that is a warning. I am giving a picture of what history would be if certain things happen. And one of the ifs in this play is, if people are dormant, if people keep calling on messiahs, in the Third World, then our plight will continue.69

Aringindin is therefore designed to compel the underprivileged to confront their psyche, re-condition their mind and reject their victim status. This is arguably so particularly for the latest version of the play which deviates from the earlier version that features a peasantry that “are not dormant” but “do not take a politically progressive action.”70 The subtle technique used to eliminate the symbol of tyranny in the play is somehow reminiscent of the death in 1998 of

Nigeria’s former military ruler General Sani Abacha. He is believed to have died as a result of eating a poisoned apple given him by Indian prostitutes flown in from the Seychelles. But his death—as equally evident in Soyinka’s King Baabu which satirizes the dictator— did not lead to revolution, because it was orchestrated by members of the ruling class who replaced him with one of their own. That such a strategy could eliminate him could serve as a concrete affirmation of the appropriateness of the clever strategy employed in Osofisan’s play which, unlike Soyinka’s, was actually written before Abacha’s death. Like several Osofisan titles, Aringindin is bold in its vision and is an instance of “more recent writing” from Africa that “has turned to requiring ordinary people to play their part in forging the future, and to resist the urge to look for and follow apparently heroic leaders who time and again fall victim to the lure of power” (Banham and Plastow xii).

3.2 Dramatic Techniques

The play is richly embellished with a wide range of devices such as songs, dancing, drumming, role-playing, symbols, metaphors and proverbs among others. Again, we get a sense of total theatre or a “feast for all the senses and for the mind” to borrow the words of Leonard Pronko from a different context (1). Each of the aforementioned devices plays a crucial role in making a political statement and advancing the revolutionary theme at various moments. I am in a better position to appreciate this fact having watched a production of the play at the University of Jos in 1994. Directed by Victor Dugga, it was a robust theatrical spectacle. I can particularly recall the scene of Aringindin’s (Charles Nwadigwe) award ceremony. It was an electrifying moment to see the market men and women trying to outdo each other in songs and dances. The singing, dancing and drumming created a deeply compelling atmosphere of celebration. But the scene equally calls for sober reflection in order to appreciate its implication for the existing social
relations and class power structures. In stating this view, I recall Mbembe’s argument on how the underprivileged contribute equally in promoting unpopular leaders in post-independent Africa. “In the postcolony,” writes Mbembe, “bodies have been used to entertain the powerful in ceremonies and official parades” (122). He further stated that “on such occasions some of the bodies have borne the marks of famine: flaky scalps, scabies, skin sores. Others have attracted small crowds of flies. But none of this has stopped them from breaking into laughter or peals of joy when the presidential limousines approached” (122-23). The less privileged constitute “the troupes summoned to dance” in order to “bear witness” to the “self-adoration” of the tin-pot despots (122). The atmosphere of celebration with which the oppressed townspeople receive Aringindin’s award illustrates Mbembe’s argument. It appears that the people have quickly forgotten the pain and anguish arising from the robbery in the preceding Act and are yet to fully appreciate the demonic disposition of the man who is actually behind their calamities. Osofisan would definitely not want the people to sing and dance in order to forget their sorrow. Hence, he uses the more critically-minded characters to arouse the consciousness of the people for the eventual liberation in the end.

The market is a symbol for the state of the nation and contributes to our understanding of the author’s brand of political theatre. The broken shops symbolize the equally broken, tattered and disorganized nation that offers no protection to her citizens. And since the play tells the story of a people rather than of one or two individuals, the market serves as an appropriate venue for communal gathering. All the scenes in Aringindin take place in the market square. As in Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman, the market in Aringindin facilitates the concept of participatory African theatre. It is particularly instructive to note that even the scene of Baale’s disgraceful and untidy exit in Aringindin does not take place in private but in the market. “It is
only proper,” says Gbemisola Adeoti about the monarchical institution, “that it surrenders its authority in the marketplace, a public assembly where its final humiliation is witnessed by all to deepen the effect of its collapse” (400). It is in the same market where the people collectively witness the humiliation of Baale that they also eliminate Aringindin and usher in an all-inclusive government. Adeoti has further argued that the market “is a veritable site for interrogating the myriad of socio-political forces that account for Africa’s unending crises of development in post-independence years” (388). Aringindin substantiates Adeoti’s argument with an all-market scene that emphasizes the collective and features a cast that is representative of the class society that the playwright seeks to transform.

The generational component of Osofisan’s revolutionary politics is yet again manifested in this play. Despite her privileged family background, Yobi, the young daughter of the corrupt counsellor, denounces her father’s corruption and association with Aringindin. The young woman aligns herself with the cause of the oppressed and assists in the elimination of tyranny. In her role as the Iyakeere or regent who will have to place the crown on the king’s head at a coronation ceremony, Yobi effectively plays her part as instructed by the market women who employ the strategy of massaging Aringindin’s ego at his hour of elimination. Yobi equally agrees as instructed by the market women, to become Aringindin’s bride at his coronation, all in a bid to flatter the unsuspecting monster prior to his elimination. Again, this young woman’s choice to disown her father and work with the underprivileged appears to substantiate the notion that the playwright advocates a leadership role for the youth in the socio-political emancipation of a nation that has been recklessly mismanaged by their parents’ generation. Yobi’s sympathy for the oppressed and her important role in the elimination of Aringindin mirrors Titubi’s class suicide and prominent role in the liberation of the oppressed in Morountodun. Both young ladies
abandon their parents and align themselves with the cause of the robbed and cheated. Therefore the impression is given once again that some members of the ruling class do equally have a positive contribution to make in the process of radical social transformation. This notion of a boundary-bursting camaraderie between the oppressed and some members of the ruling class as a necessary ingredient for the liberation of the oppressed is evident once more. Therefore, the impression is given once again that the playwright may not be actually resentful of the ruling class because of their privileged position but the fact that this class has used their position to oppress the people rather than establish a society based on justice and equality of citizens.

Again, the issue of appearance versus reality or inside versus outside and the possible notion that the revolution commences the very moment that masks come off and everything stands forth in its true colours is a structural technique that the dramatist has employed in rousing the consciousness of the oppressed. This he does through the character of Aringindin in particular. Aringindin gives the impression initially that he is genuinely concerned with the well-being of the people. Virtually everyone trusts him, thinking that the band of night watchmen under his leadership is actually protecting the town. But the playwright, through some intriguing dramatic situations, eventually leads the people to discover that the Aringindin-led watchmen are the same as the armed robbers who have been preying on the lives and property of innocent citizens. It is when Aringindin’s mask of compassion and patriotism gives way to his monstrous face that the people decide to eliminate him. Osofisan’s round-about approach in exposing what Aringindin truly stands for, the playwright’s technique of patiently leading the people step by step in the process of unmasking the monster may be understood as an attempt to ask the Nigerian people to pause and think long and hard about the calibre of people they entrust with leadership positions and whether the socio-political system that precipitates the rise to power of
such autocrats is truly the best for the people. The revolution in the play first occurs by way of
cognitive transformation in the minds of the people before the dismantling of the oppressive
socio-political system as represented by the elimination of Aringindin.

The symbolic use of names is equally worth noting. Aringindin’s legal name
“Gbegunde,” for instance, means bringer of something frightful. As we can see, Aringindin is a
monster and an oppressor of the people, someone the dramatist strongly condemns. The names in
question are informed by political considerations. Also, Yobi, for instance, is an abbreviation of
“Yobioyin,” which means “honey.” The meaning of her name indicates the sweetness of her
personality; it is in accordance with someone who is a positive inspiration to her people. She
plays a crucial role in the elimination of Aringindin and her name signals the playwright’s
identification with what this young woman stands for.

The language of the play is full of metaphors, aphorisms, idioms and gnomic expressions
that advance the playwright’s political message. In trying to justify his treacherous and unreliable
disposition, for instance, Kansilor evokes an animal metaphor to explain his position: “The law is
a chameleon: It adjusts its coat always to the colour of strength! (some citizens cheer)” (136).
Kansilor’s remarks further help us to comprehend the fact that he is no longer willing to serve
the people as expected because he finds Aringindin too powerful to resist, and so chooses to
work with him. And in the speech quoted earlier Baale employs animal, human and tree
metaphors to announce his abdication from the throne: “the lion at the head of the pack,” “head
hunter” and “great araba.” Such metaphors enable us to better appreciate the prestige previously
associated with his position and the full import of his downfall. The animal appellation of “lion”
is of particular interest to me. The lion is usually believed to command a royal presence and
attitude; it is traditionally considered the “King of the Forest,” “King of the Jungle” or “King of
the beasts.” The lion is courageous and considered to be so proud and powerful that it does not cower before other animals including human beings. It rules its territory with mesmerizing power and when it roars other creatures panic. Baale’s evocation of “the lion” metaphor in particular to explain what he represents vividly illustrates the fact that his downfall is not same as that of an ordinary citizen; it is incredibly humiliating and absolutely appalling. It is really worth emphasizing that the man whose dictatorship has toppled the people-endorsed prestigious office captured particularly in the animal metaphor of “the lion” is too dangerous for the people. The playwright carefully manipulates language on several occasions to emphasize the need to prevent dictatorship. Consider the following exchange:

BAALE: Let me ask you: the storm which tears a whole building down how does it start?

OLUODE: Softly. It starts softly, as a breeze!

BAALE: Thank you: it is no different with tyranny (138).

The above passage reveals Baale’s suspicion of a hidden agenda in Aringindin’s suggestion that a band of night-watchmen be constituted under his command. When Aringindin eventually bares his fangs upon constituting the night-watchmen, we cannot help but conclude that the softening “breeze” is actually a deadly “storm.” The playwright has indeed employed appropriate and effective diction in exposing the hypocrisy of political tyranny, critiquing dictatorship and emphasizing the need for its overthrow.

Role-playing is skillfully manipulated as well to reject the status quo and stress the need for an alternative socio-economic order. It is through role-playing, for instance, that we get a
sense of how corrupt and unfair the police are. What follows is a re-enactment of what took place when the people dragged a robber to the police station:

GBADA: The sergeant finally said--- “Wetin! Na this man you come bring here? You no know am”?

DOKI: Know him? We said no, of course we didn’t know him.

GBADA: “No wonder!” he laughed again! “So tell me, what did he do?”

DOKI: “We caught him breaking into a house, trying to steal”

GBADA: “Steal! Ha ha ha! Na him work be dat! So una no know de man Na so so t’ief-man! He don tey since he dey do robber! Even se’f, na jus’ las mont’ we release am commot from here! Abi robber? No be your former room dey dere? Sorry, gentlemen, to waste your time like dis! Na because you no know am! Na proper robber him be, and not’ing go fit change am again at all at all! De t’ing don enter him blood finish! So lef am make he dey go!...” (162-63).

With Gbada in the role of the police sergeant in this re-enactment, we see how the police approve of crime by refusing to investigate the robbery. That the robber has been previously detained sounds more like an excuse than a reason for letting him go. The police simply persuade the citizens to get used to the fact that the man is a robber and that nothing can be done about it. It is not clear why the police have refused to punish the robber. But whatever the reason, the attitude of the police is simply unprofessional. Not only are the police unwilling to interrogate criminals but they also mistreat innocent citizens. Shortly after this re-enactment, Doki remarks that “[w]e
ourselves nearly ended up in jail!” (163). In an earlier re-enactment, the citizens demonstrate how the police arrived at the market square two days after a crime was reported and seized a victim of the crime who had to bribe them to regain his freedom. However, much as the role-playing is a relevant technique, I am not sure it is quite necessary to use it repeatedly as Osofisan does in this play to emphasize the same point. Granted that the moments that precipitate the role-playing occur at different locations, the several play-acting scenes emphasize the same point: police corruption and inefficiency. A single re-enactment seems enough to address this point. Too much re-enactment intended to repeat the same message unnecessarily dulls the pace of the play. But this real or imagined shortcoming does not, however, seriously impair the artistic quality or the political message of the play. The play has sufficient dramatic power and is quite entertaining despite the seriousness of the subject matter.

3.3 No More the Wasted Breed

The play is based on the carrier ritual and is a response to Wole Soyinka’s The Strong Breed, which deals with the same subject. The carrier ritual is a practice in which the traditional Yoruba community would sacrifice one of their own at the end of the year. The sacrifice is done for the sake of communal purgation and regeneration. During this cleansing rite, the sins and guilt of the members of the community are heaped on the ‘carrier’ or scapegoat who, then, is expelled to enable the society to experience spiritual rebirth in the subsequent year. The individual in the role of the carrier is believed to be chosen by destiny since he must have inherited the role from previous members of his family. Since one is born rather than elected a carrier, one cannot evade this responsibility. This is the point stressed in Soyinka’s The Strong Breed when the carrier Eman is told that: “Your own blood will betray you…because you cannot hold it back. If you make it do less than this, it will rush to your head and burst it open” (134). This perceived
inability of man to change his destiny is clearly out of step with Osofisan whose *No More the Wasted Breed* overturns Soyinka’s ritual worldview. In the words of Osofisan:

[I]t is not right to use for your communal rites of cleansing, people who have not contributed in polluting the society. If you want to sacrifice anybody at all, you sacrifice only those who are responsible for destroying the society, not the innocent people you call the strong breed. I know I will continue to sin if I know that someone else or another family will be used for atonement. In contrast, if I realise that it is the person who has been found guilty or some member of his or her family that will be used for this ritual cleansing, then I would be more careful with my public conduct. That way malefactors would be apprehended, and the ritual would not become just a colourful ceremony. You can see, therefore, why I say that Soyinka’s “strong breed” are in the end just a “wasted breed”, that their heroism is just a concocted lie to induce compliance.\(^{71}\)

Osofisan is therefore arguing for individual responsibility. It is not a question of the community seeking to heal itself by expelling carriers, but of the guilty paying for their transgressions.

In *No More the Wasted Breed*, the story centres on a disagreement between the supernatural powers and underprivileged mortals. Elusu, the goddess of the inland waters, has caused a flood for the residents of a riverine community; households are waterlogged, farms are ruined, plants have decayed and fish have disappeared. The seriousness of the devastation occasioned by the flood is best appreciated in the following exchange between the goddess and her husband Olokun, the god of the ocean:

\(^{71}\) Femi Osofisan. Interview by Chima Osakwe. “Metaphorical Language and Revolutionary Ethos,” p.171.
OLOKUN: Beautiful! Look at the wreckage you’ve made of the town. For how many months now you’ve surrounded them, suffocated them, till their land has ceased to breathe. You’ve spread your water everywhere, like a terrible carpet, so that wherever they put their feet, even within their doors, they swim in you.

ELUSU: And more! You should see their farmlands which I have turned swamp. Roots of their precious crops, I held so tight in my embrace, till they rotted away. I am a terrible goddess of vengeance! (88).

The goddess cites the prolonged neglect of her cult as justification for punishing the community. And shortly after the prologue involving the two above-mentioned deities, a fisherman, Biokun, is introduced as he is preparing a sacrifice to Olokun on behalf of his gravely ill son. Other characters subsequently introduced are Saluga, Biokun’s bosom friend and co-fisherman, Togun, the Priest of Olokun, and the Acolyte of the Olokun shrine. These characters, together with both aforementioned gods who reenter in the guise of mortals, argue over the hopeless state of affairs in the area and Elusu’s moribund cult. Through Elusu our attention is drawn to the little black mole on Biokun’s chest, a sign associated with someone chosen to be a carrier. We are treated to a flashback or rather a quick transfiguration that features Biokun in his father’s role and confirms the fisherman’s inherited status as a carrier. After this, the gods cast off their disguise and the argument becomes increasingly heated with Elusu insisting that the residents make a huge sacrifice so as to placate her. She specifically insists that Biokun must proceed with his role as a carrier, which demands that he carry away the ills of the community in a boat set adrift. Believing in the efficacy of the gods, Biokun is willing to proceed with the risky task not only to ensure the restoration of normalcy to the community but also to see that his son is cured. However, Saluga is disgusted by the supernatural powers, stating that previous sacrifices to the
gods have been in vain. He therefore urges Biokun to disregard the gods, pointing out that human beings should take their destiny into their own hands. Stung by Saluga’s audacity, Elusu strikes him dead and urges Biokun to proceed with his duties. But Biokun is now convinced by his late friend’s voice of reason and bluntly refuses to comply with the directive. He accuses the gods of riding roughshod over the poor while the oppressive elite together with their foreign masters are left unpunished. His volte-face and reasoning are so strong that he causes a rift among the gods, with Olokun taking sides with him. Olokun is compelled to resurrect Saluga after ensuring Elusu’s death by ridding her of worshippers. Olokun has no problem acknowledging, prior to his final exit, that “tides change for gods as they do for men,” further admitting to the oppressed that “[y]ou have become the masters of your own fate” (110). The play ends with victory for the oppressed as the flood recedes, the sun shines again, leaves come back to life and Biokun’s child is healed!

In comparison to the other selected titles, No More the Wasted Breed suggests that Osofisan’s plays are not uniform. One might wonder what drove a revolutionary playwright to turn to mythic theatre. As I explained in the Introduction, my notion of revolutionary drama is not limited solely to formal political topics but includes drama that strongly encourages liberation from situations in which the freedom of men and women are stifled, as we see in the “exploitative” ritual of scapegoating. Osofisan’s play interrogates the carrier ritual so as to redeem the humanity of the oppressed. “The play,” writes Chinyere Okafor, “shows that the writer is committed to the breakdown of the social system that oppresses and alienates the under-privileged” (127). The oppressed class is obviously represented by the likes of Biokun and Saluga while the oppressors are represented by the supernatural powers and their human agents such as the Priest and the Acolyte. The oppressed bear the burden of the oppressor and the latter
thrive at the expense of the former. Thus we get the picture of a cruel and exploitative socio-political system that evokes the postcolonial Kenyan society where “[a] fool’s walking stick supports the clever,” as Ngũgĩ’s Wangeci observes in *I Will Marry When I Want* (15). As Saluga demands from Togun, the priest of Olokun: “Why is it always the poor who are called to sacrifice? Why is it always the wretched, never a wealthy man, never the son of a king, who is suddenly discovered to bear the mark of destiny at difficult moments, and pushed on to fulfill himself in suicidal tasks? Why?” (105)

Saluga’s role, as I hinted in my analysis of *Aringindin*, is akin to that of Latoye in *The Chattering* or Ayinde and Yobi in *Aringindin* because it entails the raising of the consciousness of the less privileged to the point of precipitating liberation from injustice and oppression. The carrier Biokun advances from ignorance to enlightenment courtesy of Saluga’s awakened consciousness. Biokun’s previously uncritical acceptance of his role as a carrier demonstrates the people’s deep-seated faith in the efficacy of supernatural powers. Rather than seek pragmatic solutions to their numerous predicaments, the less privileged instead seek the assistance of those who are responsible for their oppression. Saluga’s death at the hands of Elusu is the climax of Biokun’s journey to self-discovery and awareness of the need for emancipation. He now has a different impression of the supernatural powers and adopts Saluga’s critical attitude that finally leads to liberation. The mentally liberated Biokun is imbued with so much confidence that he now begins to ask some important questions that are likely to sway the minds of those with a sense of social justice. Not even the gods can escape his critical examination:

You complain of pollution, but who brought the ships of merchandise from across the ocean to our shore? You complain of being abandoned, but who brought the predators
who impoverished our people and turned them into groveling slaves? Did our conquerors not come across your seas, Olokun? Did they not berth in your waters, goddess? (108).

The logic of Biokun’s argument is that the gods facilitated the arrival of the European slave ships in Africa by refusing to stop them or not being able to do so. Some critics would agree: “Olokun sided with the powerful neo-colonial agents by ensuring their safety through his watery domain” (Okafor 121). Whether or not the gods collaborated with the alien invaders, it becomes a matter of grave concern that equally smacks of bitter irony when African gods who dwell in the ocean and manipulate the waters to the disadvantage of the people cannot prevent European slave ships from arriving in Africa. The gods are therefore simply being suicidal or counterproductive; they have not justified the confidence which the devotees place in them.

In her essay “How Man Makes God in West Africa,” Karin Barber explains the symbiotic relationship between humans and the gods in Yoruba traditional epistemology. “[M]en make their gods by being their supporters,” writes Barber, and a god “falls into oblivion” the very moment it is abandoned by the adherents. She further explains that “[t]he fundamental devotional impulse is to glorify” a god “and strengthen its reputation so that it in turn will bless the devotee” (740). Not only could adherents jettison their “allegiance” to one god and transfer it to another, but we are given to understand that they may also “strip a troublesome spirit of the powers they have given it” (741). Osofisan’s treatment of the human relationship with the gods illustrates Barber’s argument and pushes the boundaries of its context. The play demonstrates how the members of this community have been making sacrifices to the gods in the belief that they will receive private and communal blessing as a quid pro quo. The playwright’s handling of the interaction between the gods and humans is such that we get the impression that the gods cannot exercise any power over the lives of mortals which the mortals themselves have not approved.
The human characters in Osofisan’s play have engaged the gods in a confrontational manner, making it clear they will no longer pay homage to them. The gods are finally dethroned because the mortals make good their threat despite some resistance by the supernatural powers. Though *No More the Wasted Breed* offers a fictional corroboration of Barber’s argument, it does not depict the humans switching their “allegiance to another” god. Rather, they decide to paddle their own course henceforth.

Osofisan’s commitment to disabusing the minds of human worshippers on the necessity of the carrier ritual has been arguably influenced by Marxist analytical thinking. In the *German Ideology* for instance, Marx and Engels posit that ideology is a misleading consciousness of the world which distorts man’s relationship to the society. In order to illustrate their argument, Marx and Engels evoke the metaphor of the camera obscura. “If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process” (*The German Ideology* 36). This analogy clearly suggests that the human mind re-shapes reality. “It is not consciousness that determines life,” continued Marx and Engels, “but life that determines consciousness” (*The German Ideology* 37). Therefore our views, opinions, beliefs and ideas are shaped by the society. As earlier noted, Marx has observed that “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (*The German Ideology* 59). Marx is mindful of the fact that the “ruling class” usually controls the economic power:

the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who
lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it (*The German Ideology* 59).

Therefore ordinary people are persuaded to view socio-political and economic aspects of life from the perspective of the hegemonic class. In view of this scenario, a hired labourer whose sweat produces enormous wealth for his boss, still accepts the virtue of hard work or the Biblical injunction that slaves should be obedient to their masters to possibly benefit from heavenly reward. Such a manipulation of the worker’s psyche encourages him to keep working and be insensitive to his exploitation, and thereby advances the interest of his industrialist capitalist employer. As earlier noted, the nature of oppression in the selected works of Osofisan is not industrialist capitalist, but the Marxist bourgeois-proletariat dichotomy in an industrialist capitalist system is representative of other instances of unequal power relations we find in these plays. Therefore, just like the oppressed worker in an industrialist capitalist economy, a carrier like Biokun in *No More the Wasted Breed* prior to his mental liberation, believes that performing the ritual is a worthwhile adventure because his private and communal problems will be aggravated by not proceeding with the religious custom. His uncritical acceptance of the ritual simply profits both the human and supernatural agents of oppression. Osofisan’s manipulation of the subject of the play in order to subvert the ideology of the oppressor equally recalls Antonio Gramsci’s argument in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci argues that the underprivileged possess a binary consciousness that serves the interest of his master but yet has the potential of rebelling against oppression (333). Biokun’s ideological volte-face that enables him to cast aside the reactionary and retrogressive religious ritual substantiates Gramsci’s argument. Clearly, Osofisan’s argument is that the gods do not merit further accolades since they cannot truly guarantee the well-being of human worshippers.
Osofisan’s play is relevant to contemporary Nigeria which is so crisis-ridden that churches are springing up at an alarming rate to provide miraculous solutions and supernatural remedies for man-made problems. Osofisan deplores this trend: “Look at the number of prayers that are offered every day in this country. Every hour, prayer upon prayer! Under the guise of religion the number of criminal activities that are going on is too much.” Osofisan would definitely want the masses to emulate Biokun by re-thinking traditional customs in the interest of their liberation. For the dramatist, sacrificing the underprivileged for the well-being of a traditional community mirrors the broader Nigerian socio-economic system, given that

When the rulers deplete the treasury through naked looting and reckless consumption, it is the common citizens we hear being called upon to pay increased levies and tighten their belts. When the nation goes a-borrowing, it is the ruling class and their cronies who spend the money, while the ordinary citizens have to pay back, through inflation, a ruined market, the devaluation of the currency, the shortage of essential commodities, and all such penalties imposed by the IMF or the World Bank (“And After the Wasted Breed”? 258)

Osofisan’s argument has been corroborated by Chinweizu. It is worth noting that Osofisan remains deeply antagonistic to the carrier ritual despite admitting that Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* “treats the subject from a fresh and astonishingly revolutionary perspective by humanizing it” and further arguing that Soyinka’s play “did not just preach about countering the rhetoric of colonialism, as Negritude did, but…was the actual counter-text and refutation itself” (“And After

---

73 Chinweizu has stated that in Africa, “Young and bright-eyed recruits to elite status visualize for themselves, not a lifetime of productivity but one of sinecured and luxurious indolence. It is for the peasants of Africa to produce the export crops that earn the foreign exchange; and it is for this petit-bourgeois elite to use the peasants’ earnings to buy for its own glamorous consumption the products of the West. That, for them, is the proper world division of labor and rewards. They want the rewards of productivity without organizing productive enterprises.” *The West and the Rest of Us*, p.346.
the Wasted Breed”? 250). Does that then imply that No More the Wasted Breed denigrates Yoruba culture and that Osofisan has been brainwashed by foreign ideas? Is the play an instance of “Western-style dissidence in African societies,” a style which is “both anachronistic and misguided”? (Owomoyela 24). Osofisan’s play is not calling for an outright elimination of Yoruba customs but a progressive modification of tradition in the interest of social justice. Being a carrier is not the issue; who the carrier is is. If someone must suffer and atone for the sins of a community, as Osofisan has earlier noted and quite rightly in my view, it should not be innocent ordinary citizens but members of the ruling class who are responsible for the socio-political and economic woes of the society. Given the dangerous nature of the task, Osofisan’s argument about using the corrupt members of the elite rather than poor innocent citizens remains valid.

As we can see, No More the Wasted Breed vigorously challenges the carrier ritual as dramatized in Soyinka’s The Strong Breed. Observing that “like Soyinka, Osofisan is concerned about the materiality and political dimension of culture and mythology in propelling postcolonial desire and agency,” Awam Amkpa concludes that, “[u]nlike Soyinka, however, Marxism and revolutionary political philosophies and movements have heavily influenced him” (Theatre and Postcolonial Desires 49). Amkpa further argues, and rightly, that “[i]t was in this ideological context that Osofisan’s dramaturgy entered into an oppositional dialogue with that of his senior compatriot” (Theatre and Postcolonial Desires 49).

In calling for immediate liberation from unfair and inhuman traditional practice, No More the Wasted Breed “argues instead for a materialist perspective that emphasizes the social, economic, and historical determinants of human identity” (Richards 13). Saluga’s death at the hands of the goddess validates the deceased’s or rather Osofisan’s argument on the fairness of the gods and the socio-economic considerations that influence the practice of religion. Being
autocratic, draconian, exploitative and selfish, the gods, particularly as represented by Elusu, are naturally allergic to the truth hence Elusu’s destruction of Saluga. Saluga, in the view of the oppressor, sets a “bad” example for the likes of Biokun. The supernatural forces are made to look ordinary because of Saluga’s argument. Uko Atai has rightly noted that Saluga “demolishes the arguments of the goddess with superior, human reasoning” (356). The magical power of Saluga’s verbal exchange with the gods validates the following postulation by bell hooks:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice (9).

Like mortal oppressors, the supernatural forces of oppression usually thrive on the silence and ignorance of the oppressed, knowing full well that armed with knowledge the oppressed is likely to demand and achieve freedom from oppression. The ability of the oppressed characters to reclaim the power of speech is very crucial in the social emancipation achieved in No More the Wasted Breed. Saluga it is who initiates the whole process of “talking back” that influences Biokun and ultimately results in the liberation of society. It is indeed an “ennobling and enabling play” (Atai 359). According to Chris Dunton, what Osofisan’s play does “is to displace the romantic emphases in Soyinka, suggesting…a historical failure on the part of the gods to intercede to prevent colonial domination” and “rejecting the significance of the carrier, and arguing for a new focusing of concern on social justice and environmental development” (Make Man Talk True 87-88).
Making the gods appear on stage is also a way of ensuring their demystification in the eyes and minds of the people. In Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*, we do not see the gods on stage; the human characters operate on behalf of the gods to ensure the execution of traditional customs. But when the gods appear in the likeness of mortals in *No More the Wasted Breed* and partake in arguments with ordinary humans, one might be forgiven for concluding that it is a deliberate attempt by the author to stress a number of points such as this: when gods do not appear on stage, it is easy to say that they do not exist, but when they appear on stage they acquire the same existence as the human characters.

Osofisan’s emphasis on collective rather than individual effort as a means of achieving social revolution is manifested yet again in *No More the Wasted Breed*. Contrary to Soyinka’s play that features Eman as an isolated, individual protagonist who is more elevated than the rest of the villagers, Osofisan’s play presents Biokun and Saluga as two ordinary heroes whose coordinated effort is instrumental in the liberation of the people. “For Osofisan,” writes Richards, “the possibility of collective renewal lies with ordinary men working together to realize their dreams of freedom from economic and social exploitation” (23). Osofisan seeks a paradigm shift from Soyinka’s dramaturgy whose typical cast depicts lower-class characters “as a mass of items, without individuation, and in supportive, subsidiary roles, playing chorus to the characters that matter, the grand, visionary heroes” (“And After the Wasted Breed?” 260). However, contrary to what obtains in *Morountodun* and *Aringindin*, for instance, the role of women in the liberation of society in *No More the Wasted Breed* is not particularly attractive. Consider, for instance, the flashback confirming Biokun’s biological antecedents as a carrier and which also shows how his mother Salewa was killed by the villagers for trying to prevent his father from executing the ritual. Salewa’s attempt to stop her husband stems from her fear of leading a life of
loneliness and misery should her husband drown in bad weather while performing the ritual. Her selfish reasons stand in sharp contrast to Saluga whose motivation for trying to prevent Biokun from undertaking the ritual is that it is not the antidote to the problems of Biokun’s family and the entire community. And then, too, Elusu is portrayed as being irrational, bitchy, myopic, callous and unjustifiably vindictive while her husband Olokun appears to be more analytical, considerate and compassionate. Critics such as Okafor and Richards have both fulminated against the play’s gender politics. So disappointed is Richards that she notes that “the social commitment overtly espoused in this text is suspect. While it attacks class oppression, it repeats and validates patriarchal oppression” (24). She has further argued that “in fashioning Olokun as the agent of justice and physical transformation, Osofisan repeats the patriarchal prejudice and idealism of the earlier [Soyinka’s] play” (24). Okafor has expressed the view that “Olokun’s depiction as a god of justice is spurious for in punishing his wife for being vengeful, he leaves himself unpunished for his own complicity in the calamity as well as his action through the centuries of neo-colonial times” (122). Okafor further contends that “the liberation of the masses from their exploiters does not take cognizance of the gender inequalities in the system” (122).

Overall, the portrayal of female characters in *No More the Wasted Breed* lends credence to the notion that women are governed purely by emotions while deep reasoning and thoughtful appraisal of issues are the exclusive preserve of men. Such a representation contradicts the more inspiring portrayal of female characters in other plays by Osofisan. But Osofisan rejects this claim:

There is no contradiction in fact…women are not good just because they are women; at the same time they are not bad just because they are women. There are astonishingly brave women and there are pitifully cowardly ones; women who are generous and others
who are just the opposite. My aim is to show both kinds. Mostly my predecessors portrayed their women either as goddesses or glamorous strumpets, that is, they were more or less puppets or glorified idols. We never saw women in actual living roles, as physical, telluric agents of history, of domestic dramas. I don’t see women as paragons of anything—whether evil or good. Some are admirable and some are not, just like men. So it’s not a contradiction. That’s my feeling about women.74

Despite the apparent justification for the demise of Elusu and Salewa, their deaths recall the title of Gayatri Spivak’s influential essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak”? Spivak’s argument is that since the subaltern cannot speak the language in which the hegemonic can hear then the subaltern cannot speak. As Salewa’s death in particular illustrates, there are unfriendly forces that always feel threatened by the voice of the less privileged and are eager to quell it. Her death substantiates Spivak’s position that “the subaltern as female is…more deeply in shadow” and experiences “double silencing” (32). That the poor woman is a stranger to the community and quite ignorant of its customs or the fact that she seeks to have her husband to herself is no justification for stoning her to death. It is particularly disturbing that while her husband chose to be unresponsive to her feelings by proceeding with the ritual, her husband’s people compounded her woes by eliminating her in such a brutal manner. So we can truly appreciate her “double silencing.”

It is also worth viewing the play through the lens of eco-criticism, a branch of criticism whose concerns include but are not limited to issues of environmental degradation, depredations of land, physical surroundings and animals. In dealing with these issues, eco-criticism raises important questions that address equity and justice as well as the living conditions of a people.

---

Osofisan’s play draws attention to the pollution of the waters and environment of the riverine community in which the action takes place. This environmental degradation arguably supplements the revolutionary impulse in the selected Osofisan titles. It is instructive to note that the gods are substantially responsible for this pollution by causing a flood that has devastated the community. This act by the gods is comparable to that of the foreign oil companies in Nigeria like Shell and Chevron who are operating in collaboration with the indigenous ruling class and whose activities have endangered the lives and environment of the people in the nation’s oil-rich Niger Delta. Oil exploration has wreaked untold havoc on the farms and aquatic life of the residents of the oil-producing riverine communities. The late Nigerian writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa has observed that “[t]he flares of shell are flames of hell” (qtd. in Wiwa 59). Like Osofisan’s Biokun and Saluga, many of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta are fishermen and the pollution of their waters is a severe threat to their economic survival. And for the farmers among the inhabitants, a ravaged farmland is an equally serious threat to their means of livelihood. It becomes particularly disheartening that the water and oil, both of which ought to be a blessing, have actually become a curse not only to the people of Niger Delta but the entire nation mainly as a result of the corruption and high-handedness of the oppressive ruling class represented by the deities in No More the Wasted Breed. The environmental damage perpetrated by the gods in Osofisan’s play amounts to what Saro-Wiwa would consider “ecological suicide” (71). The inhabitants of riverine communities in today’s Nigeria, as exemplified by Osofisan’s fisherman characters, are known to be poorer than their grandparents and a visit to the area might best help to illustrate the following argument:

unlike many oil-rich nations, Nigeria has little to show for its wealth. Its infrastructure is prehistoric, overwhelmed and poorly maintained. Many of the roads are potholed death
traps, and the telephone system is notoriously inefficient, almost useless by Western standards. There are frequent power shortages and virtually no running water. Public services are chronically inefficient and undercapitalized. Nigerians routinely die of treatable diseases like malaria and tuberculosis, while AIDS and stress-related illness stalk the collective health of the nation. Most hospitals would be best described as mortuaries; simple and routine operations are often a matter of life and death. Infant mortality is among the highest in the world, and life expectancy is only fifty-four and falling (Wiwa 4-5).

For the oppressed characters in the riverine milieu of No More the Wasted Breed, the environment captured in the preceding quote is a fact of daily existence. The ecological theme of Osofisan’s play is validated by the flood-devastated environment of the physical setting. Osofisan’s play has used the issue of oppressive religious custom to equally decry the toxic environment of Nigeria’s riverine communities. Environmental decline has partnered with social problems, Byron Caminero-Santagelo has argued, to constitute “a significant threat” to Africa’s “present and future well-being” (698). And William Slaymaker observes that “global ecocritical responses to what is happening to the earth have had an almost imperceptible African echo” (689). Although Osofisan’s play is not strictly an environmental text, it demonstrates solidarity between the struggle for environmental protection and anti-class oppression in postcolonial Nigeria, and at least partially addresses in positive light the arguments by both Slaymaker and Caminaero-Santagelo.

3.4 Dramatic Techniques

Osofisan has employed several devices such as flashback, role-playing, signs, symbols, music and language among others to pursue his ideological vision and revolutionary message in this
play. The flashback tracing Biokun’s inherited carrier status is done through role-playing. We see Biokun in his late father’s role and the Acolyte in the role of Biokun’s late mother. This play-acting confirms the carrier ritual as an age-old practice. And the re-enactment also enables us to see how members of a particular family are being dehumanized in the name of tradition. Seeing Biokun’s recreated mother Salewa desperately clutching Osoosi, Biokun’s father, and pleading in vain with him not to proceed with the ill-fated journey is an emotionally moving moment. This brief re-enactment further confirms the callousness and stone-hearted disposition of the gods. Not even the anguished cries of an imminent widow can dissuade the supernatural forces from insisting that Osoosi proceed with the mission. Elusu in particular was an eyewitness to this intense emotional moment between husband and wife. As the goddess confirms just before the re-enactment, “I was there…it happened…like this…give way” (100). Through this re-enactment Elusu seeks to justify her insistence on the continuation of the carrier ritual and instill fear in subsequent carriers like Biokun should they flinch in the face of duty. The re-enactment is therefore part of the techniques employed by the playwright to further indict a retrogressive tradition:

ACOLYTE: But look at the water! You are going to your death.

BIOKUN: The boat waits. This burden is heavy and my heart hurts. Look! The goddess beckons, impatient.

ACOLYTE: Let her wait. Or find another victim. You’re mine, mine!

BIOKUN: Clear the way woman, woman! Time is running out!
ACOLYTE: No. You will have to kill me first. Better to die than stay here alone, a widow even before marriage, a mother without— (101).

Salewa’s apathy towards the gods, as evident in the above lines, indicates Osofisan’s persistent disenchantment with the gods and oppressive customs. However, the re-enactment is such that it somehow strains credulity. Why is it Biokun, who is obviously too young to have known about the subject of the re-enactment, who plays his father? Would it not have been more convincing had someone else, say, the priest, done so? Although the priest himself is also quite young, his playing Biokun’s father would have enabled Biokun to step aside with the rest of the non-acting characters and, from that vantage point, to better appreciate the events of the past. Nor would it have been really out of place had Olokun played Biokun’s father. If the ageless gods can afford to argue with ordinary mortals, they can also afford to partake in their dramatic re-enactment if that could strengthen the credibility of characters and situations. It may be tempting to argue that the re-enactment may be less literal and more symbolic and hence Biokun need not know his father’s history since he is merely acting symbolically. But the fact remains that the re-enactment is primarily intended for him rather than someone else. Further issues of credibility arise from contradictions in the plot. Consider the fact that the same gods protesting neglect by the villagers are equally responsible for the demise of their cult. That Biokun’s father was unable to return from that ill-fated journey is not actually his fault or that of other villagers. We are told that “Olokun and his wife had taken away their carrier, and killed their cult” (102). So why are the teeth that chewed eggs complaining about the scarcity of chicken? Could it be that these structural weaknesses stem from the fact that No More the Wasted Breed is actually a short play? Dunton argues that the play “packs too much plot material into a short span to be very
convincing” (*Make Man Talk True* 88). I am not sure the playwright thought carefully about this problem. Nevertheless, the play has effectively utilized various signs to enhance mood and create the appropriate atmosphere at various moments. The eerie, spooky atmosphere usually associated with the presence of supernatural forces in traditional African life is captured with the appropriate signs. Consider, for instance, the following stage directions which, for the first time, disclose Elusu’s identity as a goddess:

> At the same moment her mask cracks, and her garments begin to drop off, revealing a very pretty, light-skinned woman with strikingly long black hair, whose body, from below her breasts to the hips, is covered with fish scales. Fevered drums accompany this process beating out the goddess’ eulogy (106).

The combination of human and animal features in Elusu’s physical appearance is worth noting. The directions above come immediately after Elusu strikes Saluga for the first time. The physical appearance of the goddess as captured in the directions is the concrete sign that finally convinced the human characters that they have indeed been arguing with the gods. Also worth noting is the use of the appropriate rhythm from the drums to augment the mystical atmosphere. That the drums are particularly “fevered” contributes to the nervous excitement and reaction of the human characters at this particular moment. I think that the mystical atmosphere in addition to the action of the supernatural powers against Saluga enables us to better appreciate the uncommon courage demonstrated by the peasant characters who proceed to win their battle against the gods. Osofisan seems to be saying that no amount of awe-inspiring powers associated with the gods should prevent the underprivileged from confronting the gods in order to achieve emancipation.

> Again, the market is employed as a metaphor for social life:
SALUGA: A market, Biokun! That's what life is. And we come in our different canoes. From time to time, inexplicably, some fall overboard, beyond rescue. Or a young child we cherish dearly suddenly tires of the haggling and, even in the midst of affection, decides to return home (93).

Here Saluga is trying to make Biokun realize that his son’s illness is a normal life experience and as such doesn’t warrant any sacrifice to the gods. Language plays an important role in exposing injustice and the need for change. The language of the gods, as exemplified by Elusu’s remarks about her flooding of the village, is characterized by haughty indifference and sadistic pleasure. Consider this earlier cited speech:

ELUSU: And more! You should see their farmlands, which I have turned to swamp. Roots of their precious crops, I held so tight in my embrace, till they rotted away. I am a terrible goddess of vengeance! (88).

Elusu comes across as the supreme creator of the entire universe without whom the villagers can never know a happy existence. The language of the goddess borders on senseless malice. Also through the use of language, Osofisan commences the demystification of the gods even before their argument with ordinary mortals. The quarrel between Olokun and Elusu in the prologue over the ideal conduct of supernatural powers and their relationship with mortals confirms their status as deities in human disguise but simultaneously mirrors a quotidian spousal disagreement among ordinary humans. Indeed the tone of the quarrel is such that it diminishes the prestige of the gods. What follows clarifies my point:

OLOKUN: I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all. You’re going to pitch me once again against Obatala. I hope justice is on your side.
ELUSU: Is that why you have brought me here, in this disgraceful human form?

OLOKUN: I came back from a long journey across the ocean. I was coming home to rest. But all I hear is wailing.

ELUSU: And so? I will go no further with you. I wish to return to the depths (88-89).

As expected of revolutionaries, Saluga and later on Biokun pepper their speech with rebellious rhetoric and well-orchestrated arguments. Previously quoted remarks, for instance Saluga’s “[w]hy is it always the poor who are called to sacrifice?” (105), should be enough to substantiate my argument. Metaphoric images and personification are occasionally inserted in the characters’ language so as to further strengthen the message in our minds. For example, Olokun’s “their [the villagers] land has ceased to breathe” (88) treats the hard-surfaced “land” as though it were alive. This enables us to better appreciate the magnitude of the punishment Elusu has inflicted on the villagers and which in turn necessitates the need for the villagers to fight for liberation.

Having examined the dramatic techniques of this play, the discussion of the entire selected Osofisan titles is now complete. It is worth concluding the chapter by taking a moment to briefly look back and make certain connections with some preceding chapters so as to refresh our minds on how our journey proceeded to this point prior to the formal conclusion of this study.

That the oppressed are able to achieve liberation in both Aringindin and No More the Wasted Breed without taking to arms represents a paradigm shift from the armed confrontation in Morountodun and The Chattering. As we saw earlier, at the conclusion of the preceding chapter, Osofisan argues that the oppressed are usually compelled to stage a highly violent revolution
because oppressors do not voluntarily relinquish their privileged positions without putting up a good fight. As well-articulated as this argument is, it appears that the beauty and success of the less violent revolution in *Aringindin* and *No More the Wasted Breed*, may have to compel any smart-thinking oppressed person to first question the necessity of armed struggle as a means of achieving his or her freedom no matter how stubborn, violent or aggressive the oppressor might be. In expressing this view, I am compelled to recall Lakoju’s argument about Ngũgĩ’s *I Will Marry*, and which might be worth taking a moment to reflect on:

If the Ngugis are preaching armed struggle as the only solution to the crisis, they have failed woefully in not realizing the inadequacy of Kiguunda’s sword against the sophistication of the modern weaponry at the command of the oppressor. Symbolically, it is a woman…who calls Kiguunda’s bluff with a pistol (156).

The above argument makes a good case for rethinking the wisdom of suggesting that the oppressed will defeat the oppressor in the event of violent confrontation when the latter is armed with more sophisticated weapons. To expect that the underling will definitely overpower the ruling class under such circumstances is a bit unrealistic. The words of Fanon, in connection with Angola’s war of liberation against the Portuguese colonizers, is equally relevant here: “thousands of Angolans were mown down by colonialist machine-guns. It did not take long for the leaders of the Angolan rising to realize that they must find some other methods if they really want to free their country” (107). The alternative strategy or rather “other methods” which the Angolans eventually employed were “guerilla techniques,” a style in which “the struggle no longer concerns the place where you are, but the place where you are going” (107). It therefore follows that conventional armed struggle is not necessarily the only option or the best strategy of liberation from oppression; both *Aringindin* and *No More the Wasted Breed* have underscored
this point and contradict the seemingly putative notion that Marxism inevitably requires a highly violent or heavily blood-stained political change. However, despite how attractive the option of a less violent or relatively peaceful revolutionary technique may be, the fact remains that the Nigerian people have not employed it to effect a radical social change just as they have not employed the highly violent means dramatized in Morountodun and No More the Wasted Breed. Neither of the socially transformative techniques portrayed in the four selected titles has spurred the masses into revolutionary action in order to improve their socio-political, economic and religious lives. But whatever revolutionary method Osofisan chooses to propagate, there are several issues he may have to address in the practice of revolutionary drama. As we saw in chapter one, these issues are both artistic and non-artistic and broadly bifurcate: language and non-linguistic factors. Some of these factors have been addressed in this chapter and the preceding one besides the critical dissection of all these issues in the first chapter. It is up to Osofisan to choose what to make out of the several suggestions that have been offered in my analysis of these issues.
Conclusion
This dissertation has investigated the potential of theatre as a revolutionary tool in postcolonial Nigeria, with a close reference to selected works by Femi Osofisan. Studying the political force of theatre or rather theatre’s power as an instrument of social change is worthwhile because theatre should not just be about ordinary entertainment. It is no crime for a playwright or theatre practitioner to attempt using his/her works to exert a positive influence on the destiny of his/her society.

As we saw, Osofisan has both denied and acknowledged that his dramatic works seek to inspire the audience to achieve immediate revolutionary transformation of Nigerian society. My analysis of his works demonstrates that the latter position is accurate. This insistence on or perception of a causal link between a play and social transformation appears to be misguided. Isn’t there a nomenclatural difference here? Theatre is still a sanctioned spectacle witnessed by an audience. Political revolution, on the other hand, presents itself as action and transformation rather than as spectatorial witnessing. The question is: Can theatre turn its audience from spectators to actors/agents? And if it can, is it any longer theatre? Doesn’t such theatre become something else? Successful revolutions leading to the liberation of the oppressed have occurred in the pages of the analyzed Osofisan titles, but Osofisan’s plays have not precipitated a revolution in Nigeria. So it becomes difficult to disagree with scholars such as Michael Etherton, Sudhanva Deshpande, Mark Fortier and Diana Taylor who have expressed pessimism about theatre’s ability to inspire a revolution. This pessimistic position stems from the fact that there are hardly any historical antecedents. As Fortier has precisely stated, “[s]tories of plays changing the course of history are woefully rare” (164).

Yet as we saw earlier, nearly every student of New York University professor Diana Taylor dropped her class when she told them that theatre can never inspire a revolution. It is
clear that the students hold a contrary view. It is possible that they are guilty of over-reaction or that they are quite justified in the face of unwarranted pessimism. If the latter is the case, it may be tempting to use the actions of political authorities against some revolutionary theatrical performances to validate the reaction of these students. Consider, for instance, that South Africa’s apartheid government, as earlier noted, banned revolutionary plays while Kenya’s Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, as earlier noted, was imprisoned for staging *I Will Marry When I Want* by a government that also destroyed the venue of performance. As we saw earlier too, Safdar Hashmi was murdered in India because of his theatrical performances, and the Tsarist Russian government in a bid to prevent an uprising dispatched a team of security personnel to the venue where Gorkii’s *The Petty Bourgeois* was being performed. It therefore follows that though we cannot establish a causal relationship between theatrical performance and socio-political change, we cannot completely discount or underrate theatre’s capacity to inspire fear in oppressive regimes. If theatre cannot directly precipitate a revolution, its potential as an indirect or contributory instrument of revolution may not be completely dismissed.

With regard to Osofisan, who remains the primary focus of this dissertation, we can still describe his plays as revolutionary even if, in doing so, we use the term in a different sense from that in which the playwright uses it. The selected titles for instance may not be revolutionary for not sending people to the streets, but they remain revolutionary for showing the capacity of the human mind to undergo positive transformation. Consider, for instance, Titubi’s class suicide in *Morountodun* or Biokun’s final rejection of his carrier status in *No More the Wasted Breed* as a result of Saluga’s argument. These instances are fundamentally revolutionary for they show that the human mind is not actually closed and incapable of changing; the intellect is elastic and capable of accommodating new ideas if given the opportunity. To always insist on the material
notion of revolution is potentially misleading and narrows the concept. The ideas which the audience takes home can be revolutionary on their own just as Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* is arguably revolutionary for telling its story in a way that is intended to compel the rest of the world particularly the West to re-think its misrepresentations of Africa.

One particularly notable fact that emerges from this study is that Osofisan considers the pre-colonial identity of Nigeria’s ethnic nationalities a non-issue in his analysis of the plight of the masses and subsequent prescription of revolution. His reference point remains the post-colonial era whose leadership he holds solely responsible for the plight of the people. But it is instructive to note that like many other postcolonial societies, the socio-political unit that won Nigeria’s independence from the European colonizer was the colonial rather than the pre-colonial unit. And by insisting that the diagnosis of the plight of the majority of Nigeria’s population and subsequent prescription of remedy must begin and conclude within the context of the socio-political unit inherited from the colonizer, Osofisan appears equally to be insisting that post-independence Nigeria can be understood only in its relation to colonialism. Such a position clearly negates Ania Loomba’s valid reminder that the practice of colonialism in a given geographical area “necessarily meant un-forming or re-forming the communities that existed there already” (8). Loomba further argues that “[c]olonialism did not inscribe itself on a clean state, and it cannot therefore account for everything that exists in ‘postcolonial’ societies” (21).

Therefore, much as it is tempting to blame the sufferings of the post-independence Nigerian people solely on bad leadership, it is instructive to note that the borders of a typical postcolony—as represented by Nigeria for instance—usually bring together traditional enemies. The colonizer has no respect for the linguistic, cultural and religious differences of the various groups whose nationality he has determined. Before Osofisan can insist that only a revolution can liberate the
underprivileged from the excesses of Nigeria’s postcolonial ruling class, he may have to address the following questions posed by Loomba: “What came before colonial rule? What indigenous ideologies, practices and hierarchies existed alongside colonialism and interacted with it”? (20-21). These questions have not been specifically formulated with reference to Nigeria but they are particularly relevant to that country since the average Nigerian, at the moment, may want to settle for a Sovereign National Conference that will decide the basis of his/her ethnic group’s association with the rest of the country rather than have a revolution for the liberation of the people. That Osofisan’s theatre has so far been unable to precipitate a revolution may stem from his prescription of the wrong solution to the plight of the underprivileged. No amount of improvement in his dramatic technique and ideological commitment will enable his theatre to precipitate a revolution if Osofisan has indeed misdiagnosed the main cause of the oppression of Nigerian people.

Future studies on Nigerian revolutionary drama may do well to investigate the oppression of the masses beyond the issue of bad leadership. This suggestion stems from my belief that for a people to know where they are going they have to know where they are coming from. In order to understand how best to achieve the liberation of the people which has been the persistent message of Osofisan’s revolutionary plays, prospective studies may do well to examine these plays in juxtaposition to the political history of the nation right from when the country was formed to the present. The studies should attempt a more critical examination of the following questions: Would Nigerians prefer to divide the country and assume alternative nationalities if given the option? Would they want to stay together under a different, negotiated political arrangement? Or would they rather stick to their current nationality but stage a revolution to permanently eliminate the oppressive leadership that Osofisan holds solely responsible for the
oppression of the majority of citizens? These questions are particularly imperative because the issues of ethnic chauvinism and distrust and religious intolerance that led to the nation’s civil war between 1967-70 are not only present in today’s Nigeria, as earlier noted, but have become worse. And a revolutionary theatre, such as Osofisan’s, is likely to prescribe a more accurate solution to the oppression of underprivileged citizens after a more critical dissection and diagnosis of the real or more important cause of their oppression. The portrayal of characters and situations in his plays may benefit from a more sophisticated engagement with the politics of the country, beginning from the pre-colonial times in order to understand how best the liberation of the masses can be achieved.

Although many will agree with Osofisan and like-minded Nigerian playwrights, it is doubtful whether the revolution that they have been preaching with relentless determination is the best solution to the problems of the oppressed. Should further studies validate the need for a revolution and the necessity of theatre in achieving the revolution, then a major question that would still remain is how best it could do so. Can the theatre do so singlehandedly or in collaboration with other activities? Either way, my study has made some suggestions pertaining to the relevant issues in the composition of revolutionary drama such as language, venue of performance, medium, dramatic technique and ideology among others. These suggestions are intended to help improve the revolutionary potential of Osofisan’s plays. It is hoped that the suggestions will be useful in implementation or serve as a catalyst for subsequent studies. Or achieve both.
Bibliography

Abah, Oga S. “Perspectives in Popular Theatre: Orality as a Definition of New Realities.”


Ajayi, Omofolabo. “Gender and the Revolutionary Ethos of Class in Morountodun.” _Femi


Gbilekaa, Saint. “Harnessing Radical Theatre as a Potent Tool for Community Development in


---.Personal interview (by Chima Osakwe). “Metaphorical Language and Revolutionary Ethos.”


---. “University Theatre and the Pressures of Freedom in Africa: A Dramatist Writes Back.”


Plastow, Jane. “A Debate on Tactics for the Best Way to Overthrow Vile Regimes: Osofisan


Slaymaker, William. “Echoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African


Taylor, Diana. Public Lecture. Graduate Centre for Study of Drama (Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Toronto.) Toronto, 15 October 2009.


Ukpokodu, Peter. *Socio-Political Theatre in Nigeria*. San Francisco: Mellen Research University


