

## **Sociological Impact of Femi Osofisan's *No More The Wasted Breed And Fire Burn And Die-Hard***

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### **Abstract**

*The society would always be the raw material from which playwrights masterfully design their creative writing. This is why sociological discussion is always part of the fabrics of written plays. This study, therefore, examines the sociological impact of Osofisan's No More the Wasted Breed and Fire Burn and Die Hard. Focusing on their relevance to the society, the study elucidated the imperative of playwrights to use their creative skills to document not only a society that they have currently, but the one they envisage as they continue their role as purveyors of proper society. This study analyses the depiction of the society from the lenses of Osofisan, which uses traditional Yoruba motifs and cultural pieces to showcase the unbalanced society that we live in, where those who are at the lower strata of the society are the sacrificial lambs to pay for the sins of the society, instead of lifting them from their lowly state. The study emphasizes the need for playwrights to continue calling out the ills of society as their contribution to a better society for us all.*

**Keywords:** Sociological Discuss, Society, Playwrights, Plays, Osofisan.

## **Introduction**

The African contemporary worldview is essentially religious. This is because religion permeates the lives of the people as it plays a major role in their development. In this light, leadership is viewed as a religious and sacred issue in African society, and so traditional rulers, as well as religious leaders, are regarded as God's representatives in the midst of their people who are believed to perform religious obligations to their immediate community and society at large.

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The Nigerian society which is rich in culture and blessed with both human and natural resources, allows individuals to express their emotions and to react freely to different individuals, situations and events so as to bring about the good of all. In the light of this, the society sees the dramatist as the watchdog of the society who sensitizes the people on the need for change. This affirms Akorede's statement that:

For the playwright to be effective in the society and to produce works that are socially relevant, he has to portray and interpret the historical, sociological, political, economic and cultural issues of his time. (1993 p.54)

Here, the playwright's sense of responsibility and commitment will condition his presentation of the prevailing situation in his society as well as the class struggle within the class structure such that through his literary work, he will portray his stand on how society should be organized ((Anigala (2005). This fact is exemplified in Femi Osofisan's *Fire Burn and Die-Hard*. With this, the smooth running of the society and in this case the Yoruba society is of great concern to both the rulers and the ruled, for apart from the ruling council made up of elders from every ward, the masses equally have their say in all the matters affecting them and their community (Ajadi, 2003).

Again, with the people's quest to go back to their roots which encompasses ritual, folk, festivals and any drama that performs both the efficating and entertaining functions, the drama becomes a communal feast which feature re-dedication for every individual in the community as it reinforces common values and also re-establishes link with the past which propels the living to participate in comradeship of the communal happenings (Adedeji 1971).

So, in the ancient African artistic form, the prime instinct of preservation and the ultimate survival of the ecological community is encouraged through, for example, the rites of cleansing dramatized by Soyinka in *The Strong Breed* and Osofisan in *No More the Wasted Breed*. (Awodiya, 1979) This falls in line with the Yoruba worldview hence, Yoruba secular dramas are seen to be mainly drawn from myths and rituals telling the history of the tribes because they encourage continuity that is, the preservation of each line where a person takes up from where his ancestors ended, as well as serve a common civic purpose of educating and initiating the young into the secrets or moral code of the society (Jones, 1979 p.24).

### **The Play *No More The Wasted Breed***

Osofisan got the inspiration to write the play from Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and in the play, he moves away from Soyinka's ideology where man is seen as the toy in the hands of

the gods who determine man's fate according to their wishes (Soyinka 1988), for he (Osofisan) is of the opinion that man is the custodian of his own fate.

In the play *No more the Wasted Breed*, Elusu the goddess of the shallow waters, is angry at the way the people of Egure, whom she governs, pollute her waters. While her husband Olokun tries to calm her down suggesting there might be reasons for man's actions, the town's people to appease her chooses Biokun as a carrier, a sacrificial lamb, an obligation he readily agrees to carry to save his dying son but he is stopped from embarking on the mission by his friend Saluga who is of the opinion that the time has come to put an end to human sacrifice in the name of societal cleansing (Osofisan, 1983).

Elusu is thus thwarted in her effort to get a career and coupled with the fact that her husband Olokun, the god of the ocean, is on man's side, she punishes Saluga for interfering, but the situation is remedied by Olokun, who believes that the time has come for the gods to retire and leave man to his fate. So, he commands Elusu to restore life to Saluga to her detriment.

### **Analysis Of the Play**

It is therefore seen that the play which is based on the myth of the relationship between the god and goddess of the sea with human society deals with the mystic story of the god of the sea (Olokun) and his wife Elusu, goddess of the lagoon, and their supposed irresistible power over man, which man accepts without questioning. This is linked with the helpless state of the people of Egure as they are submerged in a flood by the angry Elusu in a dialectic conflict in which the oppressed people, through ideological resistance, seek to reverse.

This shows that where the gods represent the minority who use their affluent and power to oppress the people, Saluga and Biokun represent the oppressed majority who constitute the revolutionary force challenging the status quo of the gods who symbolize the bloodsuckers and exploiters feeding fat on the people as well as facilitating foreigners' exploitation of the people thus subjecting them to double exploitation (Ajidahun, 2012).

The play shows a juxtaposition of two sets of beings - the gods and man. Here the gods attempt coupled with that of the priest (Tegun) to convince Biokun that he is a "Carrier" for the village just like his parents, who also died as carriers, is opposed by Saluga, thereby making him become the first person to challenge the gods and their evil influence on man. So, through Saluga, Osofisan tries to stimulate the spirit of defiance and hatred in the masses towards oppressive powers (Egharevba, 1987).

With this, we see that Osofisan's vision of a new society can be achieved through the gradual realization that things were not ordained to be as they were and that the masses, by challenging

the status quo, can reverse their fortunes. This is because the play awakens the consciousness of the people to the fact that they are the masters of their own fate for there is a call to abandon or reject religious beliefs which associate man's misfortune to the gods (Osofisan, 2001).

### ***The Play Fire Burn And Die-Hard***

The play opens with Alhaja Omotoseun, the President of the market women's association, her treasurer Mrs. Temilola Alakin who is also a mother of twins and the other market women earnestly preparing for the opening ceremony of their new market building which will be officially opened by the State Governor and blessed by the Priests for good luck. All their preparations are brought to a standstill when Dr. Dele Ibrahim, Special Assistant to the Governor and Miss Peju Thomas, Secretary in Governor's office brings to the women emergency message from the Governor that the market will not be opened as scheduled owing to the fact that the Chiefs and Elders of the village wished it so.

The reason for the delay is explained by Chief Ogunye, the blind Ifa Priest, sent by the Kabiyesi as a representative of the elder's voice. According to the Ifa Priest, when the Kabiyesi summoned all the guild of diviners, chiefs and representatives from the ten major houses who are custodians of the market, to bless the stalls and seek protection from the gods for all who will be moving in. the seventeen diviners all had the same message from the gods that a sacrilege has been committed in the land by one of the market women who is responsible for the destruction of the old market and is still intending to move in with the other women to the new market (Osofisan, 1990).

He noted that unless she confesses and the appropriate rites are conducted to purge her of the crime before moving in, she will carry along with her, a curse which will destroy the rest of them. On the alternative, he stated that if the real culprit is not found, then either the women president or her treasurer who represent the chosen leaders of the women must agree to stand in her place and make the necessary sacrifices.

The condition of the sacrifice requires that for seven years, the person must agree to forfeit her stall and not step even once into the market. That all her goods in the stall now already stacked will be carried away and burnt by the priest at the main market entrance with the woman herself in attendance lighting the fire. Afterwards, she will carry the ashes, strip herself naked and dance from stall to stall distributing the ashes while singing songs of purification and then after that, she will be blessed by the Ifa priest to go and return after seven years of abstinence from the market (Ajidahun, 2013).

According to him, if the culprit is not found and none of them volunteers, the Governor's decision is that the market will not be opened till further notice. Temi, motivated by her husband, volunteers to perform the sacrifice but is stopped by Alhaja, who finally reveals she is the culprit and that she intended to burn only her stall, for she wanted to destroy the evidence with which her son wanted to bring the police to arrest her for harbouring contraband goods. She did not plan for it to burn the whole market and so decided to bear in good faith all the punishments that Ifa stated (Osofisan, 1990).

## ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

In *Fire Burn and Die-Hard*, Alhaja Olowoseun, the President of the market women's association, to protect her name and position, burns down the market when her son Leke discovers that she sold smuggled goods. This act of burning destroys the younger and poorer market women who do not suspect their leader but extol her good qualities and are surprised at the turn of events in the end.

In the play, Osofisan shows the hypocrisy of the people in power, those who are supposed to be leaders of the people. Instead of selflessly guiding the people, they are the ones responsible for their subjects' predicament. It discusses the playwright's view on the indispensability of the market to the existence and survival of the woman folk and the call on the government to preserve and maintain the market so it can continue to perform its economic functions in society. The play also captures the writer's satire on the corrupt and greedy leaders who destroy the people's source of livelihood for selfish reasons without any compunction (Ajidahun, 2013) Osofisan uses the play to also question the immoral political structure in the society in the person of Alhaja to bring about a moral and social change in the society's system, The play also highlights the positive influence of the use of oracular divination in exposing and correcting the ills of society as symbolized by Alhaja, who thought that her unjust actions of the past would not be discovered by anybody, even the gods, without her having to confess and atone for them.

The gods in the play did not give clear and direct messages that point out who the main culprit is and even allocated someone else to atone for the crime of another if the culprit is not found. This goes a long way to show that the gods seem to have lost their will to decode past events. We find that it is only at the dying minute when the revelation of the crime came, that the gods were ready to punish the whole market of women for the sin of only one person who might not be adversely affected in the end.

This reaffirms Osofisan's belief that the gods are sometimes unjust in their judgment and punishment allocation. Not to be left unnoticed is the fact that, in the end, the judgment was for the governor, a mere man, to decide without the gods interfering. With this, we see that the fate of every man's action is left for the man himself to decide and judge.

### **The Relevance of The Plays To The Society**

The use of the dramatic medium as a means of propagating ideologies and the struggle for the control of the conscience of man has been noted by writers like Osofisan who sees drama as one of the most potent media in the struggle against cultural and socio-economic problems in Africa. Obafemi (1982, p.189) concurred this statement when he said that "Osofisan calls on writers to use their art to offer an ethical perspective to reveal possibilities beyond the present". An understanding of the social and political dynamics in Nigeria is essential to appreciate the structure of Osofisan's dramaturgy and his mythopoeic quest. The picture of chaos and disorder stems from his spectrum of experience. This is why, looking at Nigeria, Osofisan says, "I was bred and fed on its gangrenes and its fetid sores. I have grown old on its carrion (Osofisan, 1998, p.85). Essentially, Nigeria's sociopolitical and cultural influences play a strong part in Osofisan's dramaturgy, making him one of the most committed and relevant dramatists in Africa today in the company of others like Soyinka, Rotimi, Clark, etc.

The paper examines the functional and significant role of the literary works in the society. We see that in *Fire Burn and Die Hard*, Osofisan sets out to show the significance of the market to the people because it will be difficult for the people to survive unless the market is opened, for the market is their economic source of survival. The socio-economic consequences of the harsh situation by the market woman after their shop got burnt down include economic sabotage, inflation, brain drain, all of which robbed them of their statutory and economic roles in the society. The altruistic and self-mortifying behavior exhibited in the interest of the masses is tantamount to the readiness to pay the supreme sacrifice. In the case of Temi, the market women treasurer, this makes her a celebrated heroine because only very few men could do that. Temi exemplifies the kind of people the society needs for the advancement and growth craved by the people. To him, it is a selfless act where personal gain does not trump the good of the collective people which will make for a progressive and inclusive society, both socially and economically. Unlike Temi, Alhaja personified the worst of the way some people live whereby their belly is their god and their greed their pursuit. Motivated by money only, she (Alhaja) instigates an attack on her fellow market women, those whom she was supposed to fight for and protect as their leader. Instead, she decided it is foolishness to be a better person and help

sustain the economic activities that bring food to the tables of the common folks; her gender (Etule, 2020).

Osofisan raised the question of the place of women leaders in the society and how they can carry the responsibility of bettering the lives of the people they are leading. Broadly, he also questions the leaders in power and indicts them of gross corruption and unrestrained greed, which mostly fuels the stealing of billions of money from the coffers of the commonwealth of the people. Osofisan also indicated that leaders, especially those in government positions sabotaged the economy instead of helping it grow. The metaphor of the market stalls, where people transact their business for economic purposes, is not lost to us. The preoccupation of the government officials in *Fires Burn and Die Hard* is to close the economy thereby impoverishing the people and making them become beggars, instead of improving their economic situation, which is already in dire strait by the burden of taxation and inflation, eroding tenor of purchasing power (Ajidahun, Jan 2013).

Also, we are made to understand in *Fires Burn and Die Hard* that man lives with the consequences of his actions and so all are enjoined to always endeavor to do good and act upright because it is whatever man sows that he reaps. In as far as what goes around comes around every negative action must come back one day to hunt the perpetrator of the action. This is why every action we take must go through a thorough thought process to glean the cons and the pros, to know if what we are doing is for the greater good or if it would breed evil, destruction and societal degradation. This is especially true for our leaders in all walks of life, as their actions have a greater impact of the people they are leading. They must be seen to be above board and be a symbol of the people they are leading. They must be seen to be above board and be a symbol of uprightness to lead the people well. While this have been the case with the political and leadership class of contemporary society, Osofisan is drawing their attention in *Fires Burn and Die Hard* that there are not only ripple effects of the actions they take, actions that affects a lot of people, but that these actions would surely breed repercussions, just like what happened to Alhaja, who was ultimately exposed for her greed and poor leadership ethos that were the hallmark of her character (Ajidahun, May 2013).

In deploying tradition, Osofisan has also been able to prove in *No More the Wasted Breed* that traditional beliefs and religion are deceitful, and man should be able to know the forces at play to know how to react to them because, to him, ignorance and abuse cause man and the environment to squirm in the depth of degeneration. The people must understand when religious or traditional obligations are overkill and detrimental to social cohesion, especially when one segment of society is targeted at systemic annihilation under the guise of obligation



to the society or community survival. The survival of the people must be paramount and they should not be used as sacrificial lamb on the altar of perceived cleansing or social progress (Richards, 1990).

Tradition should not be used to further subjugate the vulnerable people of the society as it is being witnessed in different parts of the world. Tradition has thus become a stumbling block to the poor, women and children. Everyone should be free from such shackles. For example, traditions in most of the North have entrenched a circle of teenage marriage in the Muslim world, women have been subjected to varied restrictions that affect them educational and professionally (Ajidahun, 2012). These are the issues Osofisan is drawing our attention to in *No More the Wasted Breed*.

Furthermore, a collective environment is established in *No More the Wasted Breed* where man and the surrounding interact and are mutually influential in solving the problems posed in the play (Adeyemi, 2001). These are figuratively verified in the prologue where the audience is confronted with the scenic metaphor of a wasted landscape, flooded farmland and blighted crops as can be seen in the play where the spectacle of the sea front is displayed as a “cesspit of rotten flotsam” choked with ‘oil’ ‘cement’ and ‘shit’. Problems which in actual fact were caused by the white men who came and polluted the water through their oil drains and spills up the point that the people are afflicted with all manner of illness an example is Biokun’s son (Okafor, 1996).

In the play also, Osofisan identifies with the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed in the society while pondering on the reason behind their being called upon to sacrifice their lives at the expense of the rich and elites. This is why through the character of Saluga, he confronts the gods and accuses them of wickedness as they are always on the side of the oppressor. Through the play, Osofisan challenges Wole Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* which has strong belief in the inviolability of the gods and the irrevocability of destiny both of which are unarguably well delineated (Osofisan, 2001).

Finding the stand offensive, unpleasant and unacceptable, Osofisan believes that the carrier motif, as portrayed by Soyinka, is retrogressive and oppressive, whereas man should be allowed to hold his destiny in his hand. He, therefore, believes that the development and cleansing of society should be seen as a collective responsibility of everybody and not the oppressive tasks of a few breeds that have been destined for destruction by the gods. This is typical of Marxist ideology which the text represents (Asagba, 2001).

Employing the mythos-ritual systems to mirror the contemporary issues of oppression, injustice, exploitation and the call for a revolt, Osofisan reworked the myth of Olokun and



Yemoja where the two deities are traditionally regarded as husband and wife. Olokun is depicted as the archetype of justice while Elesu is the goddess of vengeance. So, Osofisan's most remarkable achievement is his ability to stay in tune and touch with the tradition he grew up with and it is the knowledge which he gets from his tradition that he uses to criticize the misuse of the traditional religion by the powerful leaders and religious priests who perpetrate themselves in their different offices towards exploring the belief of the people in the gods and holding unto the false hope that the gods will help them cover up their crimes (Uji, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Destiny as can be said does not prelude freedom of choice which exists to a greater or lesser degree in the religion of all African societies. The notion of destiny can also be understood as a way of balancing individual initiative with a society's need for co-operation in order to ensure the unity that it sees as necessary to its survival (Scheub, 1995)

This is because the power of the gods to do good or inflict harm on their disciples is counterbalanced by the power that the latter has over their gods, the relationship between them being one of reciprocity and independency (Traore, 2010). Each needs the other in order to achieve a meaningful existence which for the devotee consists of taking on the character of man and for the gods in making this possible. Hence the Yoruba proverb 'Character is a god'. This is the reality with and belief of contemporary playwrights bearing with myth (Sofola, 2001)

In essence, the play has a very significant relevance to present-day reality, especially in the contemporary socio-political and socio-economic structures of society. It challenges the system of government that conscripts youth to lives of waste, neo-colonialism, imperialism, apartheid as well as oppressive religious practices. It emphasizes the will to live, to be fine, to be accountable only to oneself, and to sip the joys of life as enumerated by Saluga. The message of Osofisan is clear: "Man's destiny is in his hands". The people are called upon to resist oppression and fight for their liberty even if it means dying for it (Akinyemi & Sofola, 2001). This reiterates the fact that the evils bedevilling African society can only be wiped out through the collective responsibility of the people and not through a single individual destined to die for societal ills. The will to survive therefore belongs to man and not to the gods as no force on earth can stop the movement of a people determined to collectively fight against oppression and injustice (Obuh, 2007 & Akporobaro 1994)).

Finally, while approaching “Art and Theatre”, Osofisan encourages man to take his destiny into his own hand so as to bring about a moral and social change in the society as against the immoral political structures in the society for he opines that socialism, is the solution to the socio-political and religious problems facing the 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries (Abubakar, 2006).

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