

Revolution in the Nigerian Literary Space: A Marxist Reading of Select Nigerian Dramatists

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Abstract

Literary writing and revolution are closely related, and this relationship is crucial. Writers are necessary for revolutions, as are ideas. Revolutions are social struggles which result in the transformation or reconstitution of society. Implicitly, human progress is produced historically by economic, social, political, and intellectual struggles which could be considered the locomotives of human history – propelling humanity forward. Leaning on Marxist theory of revolution, this study examines the treatment of revolutionary themes in select plays of Femi Osofisan and Esiaba Irobi. Adopting a critical content analysis approach, the study reveals a common theme of the Marxist Revolutionary Romanticism which is characterized by revolution as opposed to resignation to fate; the collective energy of the people that is vigorously employed in praxis is not based on metaphysicality but on social awareness and articulated struggle. Specifically, Osofisan handles revolutionary subjects such as compelling stories about peasant uprising and the metamorphosis of the wealthy class who join the struggle, the difficulties of revolution and the costs associated with it as well as class conflict and the struggle against subjugation. Irobi, on the other hand addresses concerns on the aggressive features of revolution and the pursuit of social and political transformation on personal initiatives leading to revolutionary transformation as well as support of a terror-filled environment to oppose political oppression. It could then be submitted that the plays studied lean on the Marxist worldview centred on the conflict between the exploiter and the oppressed, which ultimately determines whether society will advance or not.

Keywords: Literature, Marxism, Oppression, Revolution, Romanticism, Society, Struggle, Transformation.

Introduction

Literary writing and revolution are closely related, and this relationship is crucial. Writers are necessary for revolutions, as are ideas. This leans on the assertion of Vladimir Lenin, a Russian revolutionary who wrote: “without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement” (Lane, 2020). Williams (2022) quotes Marx who describes revolutions as “social struggles which result in the ‘revolutionary transformation’ of society. They are events which result in the ‘revolutionary reconstitution of society at large’”. Implicitly, human progress is produced historically by economic, social, political, and intellectual struggles; these are the locomotives of human history – propelling humanity forward, hopefully towards freedom,

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democracy, and socialism. In seeming tandem with Marx, Ekeke (2024) proposes “a form of popular theatre, of, by, and for the people engaged in the struggle for their liberation”. He adds that development should not be provided; rather, it should result from collective activity and introspection by all community members.... that the community's members must be enlightened by art in order to undergo transformation (Ekeke, 2024).

Literature has frequently expressed a direct relationship with revolution, both historically and currently, helping to both inspire and shape change. Notably, the greatest historical revolutions—the French, American, English, Russian, Chinese, and French Revolutions, as well as the current socialist uprising—all featured intellectual revolutions, or revolutions that fundamentally altered preconceived notions. It is on this note that Ekpe and Thompson (2020) describe literature as “a vital and persistent aspect of human experience utilized as a powerful tool of cultural interaction and communication”. Revolutionary literature has always played an active role. Coming down to the Nigerian situation, there seems to be a continuation of revolutionary acts which aligns with the approaches adopted by Dramatists such as Femi Osofisan, Esiaba Irobi among others. On a collective note, the concept that rings across their literary works is the theme of revolution, as opposed to resigning to fate. This revolutionary idea is associated with what Marxists refer to as revolutionary romanticism. Bringing home the theoretical context, Uji (2014) points out that in our context, romanticism is most closely associated with heroic themes; its gaze is focused on the earth in all its senses, not on the heaven of metaphysics, but on victory over nature and the opponent. Above excerpt distinguishes revolutionary romanticism from romanticism in general. It considers revolutionary romanticism as an artistic creation with a Marxist influence. This construct is anti-metaphysical and rests on what is described as revolutionary optimism, as the statement above presents. Romanticism offers elevated feeling of the sublime beautiful and for the most part, it has been associated with idealistic excursions into metaphysical dimensions and other worlds, leading beyond the boundaries of the objective world.

As a Marxist reading of select Nigerian Drama, this paper focuses on two playwrights – Femi Osofisan and Esiaba Irobi - whose works are purposefully written in a revolutionary romanticism-inspired manner, recognising the people's collective force, which is fiercely used in praxis and grounded on articulated struggle and social awareness rather than metaphysicality.

Arts and Society

In Marxist theory, art is a component of the social ‘superstructure’. It is a component of the ideology of a community; it is a part of the intricate web of social perception that guarantees that people in the community either accept or reject the fact that one social class dominates the others. Therefore, comprehending literature entails comprehending the entire social process of which it is a component. Georgy Plekhanov, a Russian Marxist critic, stated that the social relationships of a given epoch shape its social mentality. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the annals of literature and art (Eagleton, 2003). Literary works cannot be explained solely by the psyche of their writers or be magically inspired. They are certain modes of perception, or ways of looking at the world, and as such, they are related to the prevailing mode of perception, or the social mentality or ideology of a given era. In turn, that ideology is the result of the actual social relationships that men engage at a specific moment and location; it is the means through which those class ties are perceived, validated, and maintained. Implicitly, arts does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, social, political, and economic factors inside a given society provide it with momentum, form, and guidance (Ekpe & Thompson, 2019). Men are also unable to select the social relationships in which they participate because of material necessity and the structure and evolution of their economic production system.

Therefore, understanding Nigerian literature requires more than just deciphering its symbolism, researching its literary past, and appending footnotes pertaining to sociological details that are included into the works. The first step is to comprehend the intricate, oblique relationships that exist between those works and the ideological contexts in which they are set. These relationships may be found in the themes and preoccupations, as well as in the style, rhythm, image, quality, and shape of those works. However, unless we comprehend the role that ideology plays in society as a whole—that is, how it is a specific, historically relative system of perception that supports the authority of a specific social class—we cannot comprehend ideology either.

From a Marxist standpoint, this is a complex endeavour since an ideology is never just a straightforward representation of the beliefs of the ruling class; rather, it is always a complicated phenomenon that may include opposing, even contradictory, worldviews. Understanding the specific relationships between the various classes in a society is necessary to analyse ideologies, and understanding these relationships requires an understanding of the classes' positions with respect to the mode of production.

Conceptualising Revolution

In general parlance, revolution, according to Williams can be described as social conflicts that lead to a revolutionary change in society. They are activities with the propensity to reconfigure society. Arguably, the world needs social revolutions to change, the existence of social revolutions has been essential to every step of human history. Humanity is changed by social revolution, and frequently for the better. Since the dawn of class society, social strife and class struggle leading to social upheaval have characterized human history.

Coccia (2019), quotes Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel as suggesting that revolution is seen as an unstoppable transformation, embodied by the world spirit in a relentless search for self-realization. Under these circumstances, Marx (2014) argues that revolution is the product of irresistible historical forces, which culminate in a struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Hannah Arendt in her 2006 Book *On Revolution*, views the revolutionary experience as a restoration in which rebels fight to reclaim rights and freedoms that were lost as a result of the government's descent into authoritarianism. Interestingly, Tocqueville (1983) defines revolution as an ousting of the legally established elite, which began a phase of profound social, political, and economic transformation. These descriptions seem to suggest that, in human society, revolutions are essential to politics and history. The actual social development that humanity has made has been made via economic, political, social, and intellectual change and revolutionary warfare. Human societies have seen genuine political and social transformation as a result of revolution, particularly political revolution. The historical transformation of human society has been attributed to revolution, mainly in the form of social revolution. Modern human society was undoubtedly greatly influenced by the great revolutions of human history, primarily in a positive way.

Coccia (2019) identifies the different approaches for explaining revolution in society to include: Classical approach, Functionalism viewpoint, Marxist perspective, Comparative-Historical-Structural perspective, Agency-based explanations, and Contemporary discussions. Notwithstanding, this paper dwells on the Marxist approach which supports that revolution has been essential to human development. In fact, revolution is ultimately what brings about human development. Humanity has utilized revolution as a means of achieving genuine societal advancement and growth from the dawn of time. Humanity's progress through Feudalism, Capitalism, Ancient Society, Primitive Communism, and eventually Socialism may be attributed to genuine social strife, mostly shown in the form of revolution and social revolution.

On this note, it could be suggested that revolution is a necessary and beneficial aspect of human progress, humanity advances socially through revolution. Because social struggles are evident in contemporary culture, social revolution is possible in this setting. It is argued that societies that operate a capitalist system are based on oppression and exploitation thus breeding grounds for revolution.

Any society can experience a revolution. As history and historical development have shown, social revolution can occur in any kind of class system. Any type of class system, regardless of how underdeveloped, has the capacity to spark a social revolution. The history of revolution also implies that, under the correct social circumstances, revolution can take place in sophisticated and evolved countries. Revolution and revolutionary circumstances can arise from any type of class system, including capitalist, feudal, and ancient societies. Given these facts and realities, revolution is inevitable in human civilization. Revolution is undoubtedly possible as long as class, exploitation, and oppression divide humanity.

Marxist Perspective on Revolution

Class conflict prepares the ground for revolution. Revolution is observable, but class conflict is not. Class conflict intensifies and lays the foundation for revolution. While class conflict is a protracted process, revolution is brief, intense, and brutal. Marx posits that revolution serves as an essential intermediary for social transformation. Revolution is the process by which one historical stage gives way to another. Marxist theory asserts that slavery was abolished by the feudal revolution; feudalism was abolished by the bourgeois revolution; capitalism will be abolished by the proletarian revolution. Therefore, revolution always precedes any significant social change throughout an era. When the forces or methods of production are incompatible with the relations of production, revolution results. Revolution takes place to address this incompatibility, bringing about matching modifications to the superstructure and production relations to make them compatible with the forces or means of production. Developments in technology result in modifications to the methods of production.

Marx (2014) declares his stance further by stating that in the social production of their existence, men inevitably engage in specific relationships that are not determined by their will, specifically the relations of production that correspond to a particular stage in the development of their material forces of production. It is important to expatiate that the entirety of these production relations make up society's economic structure, or the true base, upon which a legal

and political superstructure develops and certain social consciousnesses are correlated. Marx further clarifies that:

The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. (iii)

The superstructure as a whole eventually undergoes alteration due to shifts in the economic base. When examining such changes, it is always important to make a distinction between the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophical forms—that is, the ideological forms through which men become aware of this conflict and strive to resolve it—and the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be precisely identified by natural science. The same way that one cannot judge a person by what they believe about themselves, neither can one judge a period of transformation by its consciousness; rather, this consciousness needs to be understood in light of the contradictions inherent in material existence, specifically the tension that exists between the social forces of production and the relations of production. Before all the creative forces necessary for it have been created, no social order can be destroyed, and new, higher production relations can never take the place of older ones before the material prerequisites for their existence have grown within the confines of the old society.

As a result, humanity will always limit the activities it takes on to those that it can handle because, upon closer inspection, problems usually appear when the necessary materials are either already in place or are just beginning to do so. The ancient, bourgeois, Asian, and feudal modes of production can all be broadly classified as periods that represent advancements in the social structure's economic growth. The bourgeois mode of production is the final antagonistic form of the social production process; this antagonistic form arises not from personal animosity but rather from the animosity that stems from the social conditions under which individuals live. However, as the productive forces within bourgeois society develop, they also create the conditions necessary to find a material solution to this animosity. Thus, this social construction marks the end of human society's prehistory. What then ought to be demanded by a revolutionary movement? According to Marx and Engels (2008), the main response is greater

collective and democratic control over production decisions, the methods and individuals involved in production, and the management of any surpluses generated.

Decoding Osofisan's Concept of Revolution

Osofisan frequently reflects the Nigerian situation in his plays, he seems to conclude that action about Nigeria's situation is both necessary and feasible. Rather than ending with a noble acceptance to a fate that rules mankind regardless of age, his plays typically conclude with a call for action and change. Right on stage, revolutionary action frequently erupts. His reflections are about new directions rather than consistency. Osofisan's plays examined here are: *Red is the Freedom Road*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Morountodun* and *No More the Wasted Breed*.

In *Red is the Freedom Road*, Osofisan explores the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed. The oppressed here are persons who were taken prisoner and enslaved in a foreign land, enduring a great deal of cruel and inhumane treatment. Before being taken into captivity, some of them had been kings in their own kingdoms, while others had been soldiers. Among the slaves is Akanji, who plots secretly to free all the slaves, including himself. It is obvious that the slaves and the monarchs are at odds in this situation. Aside that the slaves' offspring were offered as sacrifices to the kingdom's gods, the following stage direction highlights the inhumanity committed against them: "At this moment enter a group of SLAVES, with a SLAVE DRIVER. Chained together about the waist and ankles, the SLAVES carry boulders on their shoulders or heads." Another stage direction puts it that "The whip cracks. An OLD WOMAN falls. It is AKANJI'S MOTHER. He turns his face away immediately." (Osofisan, 1999). Against all odds, Akanji is able to organize the slaves into a powerful revolutionary force. He tells them that their oppressor is not the result of the gods or other spiritual creatures, and that the only thing that can ensure their freedom is their combined strength against the oppressor. In reply to one of the slaves, who believes in fatalism, Akanji has this to say: "No. The gods you speak are in our muscles! Surrender is in your willing, not in magic. I offer you freedom, but only to men. Only to those who can stand and beat their chest (Osofisan, 1999).

This idea of revolution as opposed to accepting one's fate is associated with what Marxists refer to as revolutionary romanticism – an objection to the underpinnings of today's industrial/capitalist society, with its productivism and consumerism, as well as a singular blend of subjectivity, desire, and utopia (Lowy, 2002). The four play texts in this study— *Red is the Freedom Road*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Morountodun* and *No More the Wasted Breed* -

could all be argued to be intentionally written in the spirit of revolutionary romanticism, and with recognizable reasons. The people's collective force, which is fiercely used in praxis in all four plays, is founded on articulated struggle and social consciousness rather than metaphysicality.

In *The Chattering and the Song*, Osofisan stages a conflict between the workers and the state in the main play. In the play, the workers' emerging revolutionary movement is known as the Farmers' Movement, and it is led by Leje, Sontri, Mokaan, Yajin, and eventually Funlola. They are the leading edge of the impending revolutionary storm. The Farmers' Movement seeks to raise awareness among farmers and labourers about the need to destroy the state infrastructure that exploits and dehumanizes people. This drive in the play seems to be inspired by “Marx’s account of workers (under capitalism) being treated in an object like manner” (Ekpe & Okoronkwo, 2024) thus aligning with Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton's concept of objectification. Nevertheless, Mokaan turns on the Movement and abandons it, joining the State as a covert police operative and taking Sontri into custody. Through a corrupt Public Service that exchanges human souls and conscience for narrow-minded materialistic advantages, the hideous coercive State apparatus is exposed. Sontri partially reveals this through his hilariously satirical and histrionic mock trial of the weaver birds. The weaver birds, a metaphor for the underprivileged in the drama's society, are found guilty because they constructed their nests. Osofisan (1977) writes:

The accused admit to constructing their nests without having to buy licenses, without procuring cement at inflated tariffs from authorized profiteers, without a priori development plans being forwarded for intellectual distortion in the press, and finally, without waiting for these plans to mature in the patient womb of time...a preliminary wisely assured elsewhere through the ingenious invention of red tape...ahem ahem...we can only wonder how their government functionaries manage to eat, deprived thus of their legitimate ten per cents... ahem... That’s just by the way ahem... Such retrogressive practices, we repeat, must not be allowed to proliferate! Therefore, guilty! guilty! guilty! The accused must be pursued, hunted and massacred without mercy.

Analysis of *The Chattering and the Song* reveals that the revolutionary concept is explored in deeper detail in the-play-within-the-play, which is actually the main scene of the bigger play. Both ways, the State and the oppressed parties are at odds. The effectiveness of Latoye's revolutionary action against the feudalist egocentricism of the Alafin is evident throughout the playlet, and it speaks of revolutionary romanticism. Ironically, Sontri's arrest adds fuel to the revolutionary inferno, despite the fact that he is one of the leaders of the Farmers' Movement

in the broader drama and is captured by the Gestapo before the Movement can completely implement theory into practice.

Morountodun also offers an interesting revolutionary theme. Here, the farmers stage a revolutionary belligerency against the State apparatus that uses coercion. In this play text, the corrupt, exploitative, and dehumanizing State is also highlighted. The play's revolutionary fighter, Bogunde, epitomizes the entire dramatic struggle when he says “. . . All because we refuse to pay money we haven't got. Because we refuse to let men with two balls like us march upon our heads” (Osofisan, 1999). Bloodshed breaks out as a result of this struggle between the affluent or oppressor class and the impoverished farmers. In this harsh and fierce struggle, the peasantry's main goal is to bring humanity back to a society that has been methodically and monstrously dehumanized by the State's forces. The play's wholesale capitalist state exclusively looks out for the interests of the wealthy and powerful.

The narrative in *No More the Wasted Breed* likewise depends on revolution. The traditional social purifying rite serves as the basis for the drama's construction. In the play's culture, this yearly rite of human sacrifice is meant to occur. It is thought that by the ritual death of ‘The Chosen’, the victim atones for his society's transgressions. Additionally, it's thought that this scapegoatism inspires social transformation. The drama exposes how religion, as a diabolic super-structural element of animist bourgeois society, has restricted access to this selfless duty to the general populace. Osofisan rather argues that the advancement and purification of society ought to be viewed as a shared duty by all, rather than the burdensome duties of a select few breeds that the gods have decreed shall be destroyed. The following conversations give weight to Osofisan's (1999) stance:

Saluga: . . . Tell me, why is it always us who give our lives? 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 fulfil himself in suicidal tasks? Why?

Togun: You must ask the gods, who decide such things. Carriers are born –

Saluga: Yes, Born poor –

Togun: With the mark of the chosen. Look at the mole on his chest.

Saluga: And who decided that chest moles are the mark of identity for carriers? Why not fat cheeks like yours for instance? Or a rotund overblown belly? I would have thought that a more juicy meal for your cannibal gods.

Osofisan's Marxist treatment in *No More the Wasted Breed*, suggests that he transcends the use of dramatic characters to address the theme of human exploitation by the gods. Through the horrific experience of play-within-a-play, he permits the viewing audience to witness exploitation firsthand. The audience experiences a cathartic effect from the scene, which stands in stark contrast to the deity's callousness and arrogance as they gleefully watch the play-within-a-play. They observe the manipulation and destruction of the hopes, emotions, and aspirations of everyday people by whimsical supernatural entities, who mock the scene as it unfolds. The goddess utilizes the scene to show the might of the gods and the necessity for Biokun to follow in his father's path, but Saluga, who is sensitive, has a different perspective. The play-within-a-play emphasizes the necessity of altering the relationship between gods and men. The use of re-enacting history to address the present situation evokes Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song*, where a play-within-a-play is employed to confront contemporary reality.

The victory of Saluga and Biokun in *No More the Wasted Breed* is similar to the triumph of the Yungba-Yungba group in *Yungba-Yungba* and the Dance Contest, and *The Farmers' Movement* in *The Chattering and the Song*. Osofisan seems to echo that the people's determination allows for the win. With the firm and united will of the masses, revolution would arrive and drive out oppression, injustice, and social inequity. Osofisan's criticism of the status quo is straightforward, and his recommendations for improvement are unambiguous. Giving a summation to Osofisan's treatment of revolutionary theme, Osakwe (2018) quotes osofisan as saying:

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...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.

Above statement from the playwrights can be interpreted in the play texts examined. The plays make statements that calls for an end to oppression, tyranny and injustice. They seem to be screaming out for justice to prevail while equality becomes the order of the day.

Deconstructing Irobi's Wave of Revolution

Esiaba irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Cemetery Road* presents fundamentally revolutionary perspectives on the socio-economic and political concerns facing modern-day Nigeria. His writings highlight the necessity for the oppressed masses in Nigeria to reject tactics of exploitation and intimidation by the country's governing or dominant class. Irobi uses a variety of cultural elements, including masks, music, chanting, and many other artistic trends, to convey his violent revolutionary vision in his plays, drawing on African oral tradition. In an interview with Ilagha, Irobi (1989) stated that "the unemployment factor will determine the shape and content of the revolution that is brewing, because revolutions do not start in the head but from the stomach". In what seems an admonition come through, the 2024 revolution recorded in Nigerian history, tagged #EndBadGovernance; #Endhunger, was inspired by economic hardship. According to Ganzallo (2024):

The most pressing immediate cause of the protests is the severe economic hardship faced by Nigerians. Inflation rates have soared, with headline inflation at 34.19% and food inflation exceeding 40%. The removal of fuel and electricity subsidies has significantly increased transportation and production costs, exacerbating the financial burden on the populace. These policies, implemented by President Bola Tinubu, have been criticized for worsening the economic situation rather than alleviating it. The economic policies have led to the exit of several multinational companies, resulting in increased unemployment rates.

On a related note, Irobi, in *Hangmen Also Die* echoes how economic frustration can ignite revolution, he does this through the character of Acid thus:

You are all young men in a third-world country where no one, not even your leaders, make any plans for your future, you are potential revolutionaries... revolutions is not a dinner party, it is not a disco competition, it is not an ideological romance. It is an act of insurrection where one party overthrows the other. It occurs as the accumulated grievances of the common man. It explodes like gunpowder. (Irobi, 2011)

In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi explores the problem of violence and how it affects society. The themes of corruption, militancy, misuse of authority, revolution, and the unsettling prophecy of the advent of the Niger-Delta militants are all interwoven in the text. The plays resound a terrifying, erratic catastrophe. The narrative dwells on the tale of the Suicide Squad, which consists of seven unemployed university graduates who were enraged by the government's

reckless corruption and the exploitation of the oil-rich Niger Delta. Irobi paints a terrifying picture of what could happen when young people misuse philosophy.

Written with the ideological fire of the promethean myth, *Hangmen Also Die* symbolizes the dramatist's divine spark of invention and thought to create resistance against arbitrary authority and the ability of mankind to alter their own fate through his revolutionary characters. The play is a work of literature that contains demonizing philosophical ideas that stand in for true revolutionary impulses intended to rebuild society. In addition to exposing the systemic problems and mockingly denouncing them, it also shows how an oppressed society might go forward. The Suicide Squad did not have the ideological conviction to use violence to alter society. They are so insanely frustrated that not even a glimmer of rational thought could remind them of their ability to alter society. Their practical manifesto called for violence against society. Before they met Tamara, who educated and enlisted them in the intellectual conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, the affluent and the poor, it was the Squad's most popular and beloved iconoclastic worldview.

They lack the intellectual fervour and fortitude to bring about social change, even while they possess the resources to do so by radical revolutionary techniques. In actuality, despite the fact that they clearly represent the latent radical power, they never even considered a revolution. The downtrodden masses of Izon State stood a chance at experiencing economic liberation as a result of Tamara's confrontation, challenge, and mobilization of their energy and rage. She makes it clear that the Suicide Squad should focus their radical efforts on the fashionable and communist philosophical underpinning of freeing the oppressed and economically marginalized from the poverty that is imposed upon them by individuals such as Erekosima. When asked by the firing squad if she wants to hire them, Tamara responds:

Tamara: (exploding) why should I hire you to recover money which belongs to you? Even if I had the money to hire you, would you accept it from a widow? A Grade 11 Teacher on level 05; N200 a month? Can't you show your humanness, your compassion, your sympathy for the poor, and how tough you are by fighting on the side of the disposed? The side of the poor, of those who have nobody? The wretched of the earth? Is there no vision to your rebellion? Are you emptied cups? Do you have in your skulls what should be in your anuses? (Irobi, 2011)

Marx and Engels, through their observations on the demands of revolution, endorse the moral light of revolution that Tamara offers the Suicide Squad. Although the populace is quite active, it is pretty apparent that there isn't a solid prop—a clear, concise paper outlining the steps for mass action. Marx and Engel (2008) admonish that everything will remain rather vague, and

the majority of people will be left in the dark until the principles are outlined in a few publications that demonstrate how they have historically and logically evolved from the way that people have thought up to the present point and from history as it has been up to the current stance.

Tamara, a key player in the play text, aids in spreading and rationally twisting actions to fulfil her revolutionary goals against the capitalist class. She is a character created by Esiaba Irobi with promethean guilt. She convinces the Suicide Squad to rebel against Chief Erekosima, who uses his avaricious throat to dig the graves of the impoverished masses, in order to improve the repressed state of Izon. She reminds the suicide squad that she is calling on them to wage a war between the haves and the have-nots, between the dispossessed and the self-possessed. Tamara depicts the depressing images of their seventy-year-old grandmother who continues to farm before she eats, the impoverished inhabitants, and the petroleum that is constantly being extracted from the Niger Delta's veins. She advises that members of the Suicide Squad should fight for their freedom and the independence of Izon State. Tamara presents the ongoing political and economic problems in the Niger Delta and defines Erekosima as a filthy, avaricious political vampire who is worse than any of the others. Irobi seems to advocate that the population of the Erekosimas is growing geometrically right now, whether in the Niger Delta or anywhere else in the Nigerian federation.

Esiaba Irobi recognizes the role of women in the liberation fight during this revolutionary section of the play. Tamara brings up the example of women in the Niger Delta's recent history, who stood out against the oil companies' economic abuse of their villages. Tamara's portrayal offers an instructive illustration of women's engagement in the Niger Delta's fight for economic emancipation and self-determination. Irobi highlights the symbolic interactionism theory, which holds that the militants' fight for a better contract influences the activism of women in the Niger Delta for economic self-determination. He once more highlights the evils of disregard, divide-and-rule, and men's insensitivity to the suffering of the Niger Delta's people, especially those in authority. Additionally, Irobi seems to draw his motivation for revolution from the Frustration Aggression Theory which according to Alam (2023) holds that “the occurrence of aggression always presupposes frustration”. He seems also to draw from Berkowitz's (1989) assertion that appropriate environmental cues (stimuli associated with aggression or having an aggressive meaning) can strengthen the aggressive reactions produced by a frustration.

Interestingly too, Hangmen Also Die severely criticizes the Nigerian country and the Niger Delta. From philosophy to the revolutionary fight of the oppressed masses, from politics to the economics, the play consistently expresses social criticism and social reconstruction. It supposes that the play text functions as a bridge for social criticism because of the dialectical romance between drama and society. Irobi skilfully presents and reflects upon the Nigerian nation in general and the Niger Delta region in particular as a tragic society in this examination of the text as a testament of social criticism. The playwright's court of justice vehemently indicts social Darwinism, the struggles and tragedy of a society, the violent political culture of attack, the negative indoctrination and mobilization of educated youths to join suicide squads, and the tragic story of the younger generation of Nigerians living a hopeless life.

The tragedy of the individual, the terrible experience of being ruled, controlled, and manipulated by the very enemies of the masses, the collective cruel fate of youths frustrated and abandoned by the awesome force of capitalism, and the involvement of women in the transformation agenda of a society in need of transition are all graphically depicted in the play text. Irobi's language creation and its appropriation for the realization of the revolutionary vision he provides for the reconstruction of his society are powerful reflections of his Marxist intellectual involvement. The analysis seems to be in tandem with Bertolt Brecht's assertion that drama is a topic for philosophers, especially those who want to alter the world rather than merely describe it.

Diala (2011) considers Irobi's Cemetery Road as "Irobi's most ambitious". The play emphasizes the power of theatre as a transformative instrument for African activism against the persistent and recurrent political, economic, and sociocultural ills of the post-colonial era. Irobi recognizes the African mask as an important component of ritual and ancient dramatic heritage that can be brought to the contemporary stage by putting it at the centre of this advocacy and revolution. He also emphasizes the African mask's adaptable revolutionary sensitivities. Irobi seems to contend that an ancient mask tradition may hold the key to a contemporary economic, social, and political revolution. When Mazeli and his university acting students practice a play to kill Nigeria's military ruler during a commissioned performance at Nicon Neo Niga Hotel, it is implied that they are organizing a coup, this is implied in the conversation below:

Amina:What happens to us after we have assassinated the president? We will be shot, won't we?

Mazeli: Are you afraid of death?

Amina: We are not afraid. But we don't want to die.

Mazeli: You don't want to die?

Chorus: We don't want to die , Dr Anyanwu.

Mazeli: Alright, bring the mask to my house. I will be the spirit in the mask. In fact, give it to me now. (To the student in the mask) Remove it.

Mask: (waves his head) Dr. Anyawu, I will not remove this mask.

Mazeli: Do you want to die?

Mask: Yes, I want to die provided it is after assassinating the president. (Irobi, 2009)

Mazeli's reference to the mask as 'ancient spirit' implies that it is a part of African cultural legacy that predates history. The mask existed before western civilization was brought to Africa through colonial contact in the 19th century. According to Irobi, the African mask is a component of the forces that can overthrow the proscenium arch, which represents Western cultural hegemony.

Irobi uses his characters to struggle against all sorts of oppression, emphasizing the need to free oneself from all forms of servitude and cruel treatment. In Cemetery Road, Irobi uses the Marxist revolutionary theory to suggest oppressive practices in government as he refers to the military dictators as "The Beast of Sand Hurst" (Irobi, 2009) which has to be subdued by a bloody revolution. The character Mazeli is created around an ideological foundation that applies populist interpretations of Marxism to African political history. Mazeli's use of a combination of Thomas Sankara, Che Guevera, and Queen Amina's characteristics as symbols of his battle suggests this loudly. He personifies a Marxist conception of the colonial and class struggles that is applied throughout Africa. Class struggle is illustrated in Mazeli's improvised documentary, which follows the colonial fight and follows the peasant community of Bakalori farmers as they are uprooted and relocated to an infertile area. The documentary exemplifies a fight against both the government attempt at compensation and the uprooting of the peasant community. Mazeli challenges the simplistic Western belief that class conflict in Africa is a result of the region's prevalence of poverty:

It is rather about struggle. The struggle of the peasants of this country who are daily humiliated by the snobbery of the ruling class which is modelled on your own upper middle class. The military leaders who were trained in Sandhurst. The Beasts of Sandhurst. And the civilian politicians; the everlasting donkeys of democracy in a country where democracy means a government of demons by demons and for demons. (He now has the tape) It is about the mad mathematics of politics, the abuse of power and the determination of the dispossessed and the down-trodden to regain their dignity and self-pride because

they now understand the chemistry of their suffering. No, it is not about poverty. Its theme is Struggle. Struggle and Regeneration. Its title is ‘The beauty of resistance.’ Yes, (screaming) ‘The beauty of resistance!’ (Irobi, 2009)

It is noteworthy to mention that Irobi centered Mazeli's goals and vision around theatre. Mazeli's theatre is positioned as a phenomenon derived from African ritual and mask imagery that shouldn't be ignored or viewed as a form of entertainment. The compelling rewriting of African politics and history in a neocolonial setting serves as a solid foundation. Mazeli's veneration and reverence to the mask prior to performances serve as evidence of this. From this angle, Mazeli's deity is the mask. For him, it stands for the essential answer to post-colonial world's issues. So, a performance is a symbol of worship.

Notable is Mazeli's use of improvisational dramatization to portray a variety of contemporary concerns facing the continent. This manner of operation places a premium on production mobility, which might turn strategic if contentious issues prompt the military junta to react politically. This is expressed when Mazeli's drama class ensemble began to improvise even more prophetic and revolutionary skits while he was being held in custody. It also implies that the performance tradition will endure and continue even after the legendary Mazeli passed on. Following Mazeli's passing, the group goes on the rampage, wearing the mask and fatally stabbing Lawani to death as payback. Considerably, the mask represents a timeless custom that endures beyond the lifetime of its most famous user.

Revolution in Nigerian Drama

Revolutionary plays come as opposition to metaphysical and romanticism plays. They reflect Marxism as a comprehensive, if not utopian, account of social reality, as a mostly prescriptive and methodical examination of the connection between social position and social consciousness, between the superstructure and the economic foundation of society. Their stance is one of contemporary reality which according to Bertolt Brecht means:

Laying bare society's causal network/showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators/writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society/emphasizing the dynamics of development/concrete and so as to encourage abstraction. (Drain, 2004)

Brecht emphasises that we need to have a wide, political definition of realism that is unconstrained by convention and aesthetic constraints. In his 1938 essay “The Popular and the Realistic”, Brecht examines the connection between realism and popularity in literature and

art. He argues that it is in the interests of the general public, or the broad working masses, for literature to provide them with accurate depictions of life. Since accurate depictions of life are actually only useful to the general public, or the broad working masses, they must be suggestive and understandable to them, or popular (Drain, 2004). Brecht underlines that the idea of popularity should not be viewed as completely clear-cut or defined. Rather, it necessitates thoughtful analysis and a complete comprehension of its ramifications; he writes that popular implies understandable to the general public, assuming control of their own modes of expression and enhancing them, adopting and solidifying their position, or embodying the most progressive segment of society in a way that allows it to assume leadership (Drain, 2004).

The two playwrights studied in this paper have their concerns fixed on freeing the masses from the repressive ruling class's economic exploitation. They seem not to be interested on cultural renaissance and if they happen to reflect culture in their works, it is to question the status quo imposed by some frames of metaphysics. Their concerns include the country's economic viability, fairness, and the elimination of social vices such as nepotism, oppression, and corruption that plague the society. Generally, the plays examine issues related to political revolution, ideology, and class conflict. Specifically, Osofisan has handled revolutionary subjects such as compelling stories about peasant uprising and the metamorphosis of the wealthy class who join the struggle; the difficulties of revolution and the costs associated with it as well as class conflict and the struggle against subjugation. Irobi on the other hand have addressed concerns on the aggressive features of revolution and the pursuit of social and political transformation; on personal initiatives leading to revolutionary transformation and support of a terror-filled environment to oppose political oppression.

In Irobi's plays, the peasants, poor, and underprivileged are the main players in the revolutionary struggle; their radicalism in support of the public and communist cause of rescuing the populace from the poverty that has been imposed upon them; the need to emancipate one's self from all forms of slavery and inhuman treatment are key concerns as Irobi makes lucid use of his characters to revolt against all forms of oppression. Osofisan, through his plays project a philosophy which places the destiny of the people in their hands. His plays highlight the power of art as a vehicle for social mobilization and conscientization. Through these works, Osofisan demonstrates his faith in the ability of literature and the theatre to educate the public and inspire them to take decisive action in the fight against an unjust system that does not work in their favour.

Conclusion

Revolutionary plays that tackle socio-political themes have a long history in Nigerian theatre. The playwrights examined in this paper have notable writings which emphasize the necessity for drastic change, and they frequently depict the terrible reality of revolutionary conflicts anchored in the Marxist theoretical framework. Considering the aforementioned, the plays under examination offer a framework for assessing the theme of revolution attained by humanized efforts rather than by divine design or support. They lean on the Marxist worldview centred on the conflict between the exploiter and the oppressed, which ultimately determines whether society will advance or not. And in a class society like Nigeria, they emphasized dialectical knowledge of literature as class-based and predicting class propaganda in place of metaphysics.

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