

Innovations

Femi Osofisan's The Chattering and the Song: A Dramatist's Perspective Towards Building Resilience and Recovery in a Global Turbulence Time

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Abstract: *The Nigerian dramatists from the colonial period's performances of Hubert Ogunde's 'Bread and Bullet,' the post-independence performances of Wole Soyinka's A Dance of a Forest, and Ogunde's 'Yoruba Ronu' the indigenous radical dramatists have not desist from probing into the future or raising their voices against the ruling class ineptitude that characterized the nation's growth and development. Today however, theatre seems to have lost its stings and theatrical-current among a few scholars who perceived the theatre scholars/practitioners as professionals whose hues and cries are of less importance in the discussion of the nation's socio-political albatross. Arguably, turbulence in any form in an ever-expanding national landscape is unavoidable where injustice, unemployment, insurgency, and nepotism reign. However, when turbulence coincides naturally with a national upheaval like the END SARS protest of 2020, and insurgency, it places a nation squarely with an unprecedented time of 'certain-uncertainty' which arguably is the new term that suits the Nigeria's sociopolitical terrain. The nation Nigeria is now bedeviled with insurgency. Various militant and terrorist groups that are mostly dominated by youths have turned the once peaceful nation into a country where foreigners have become skeptical of visiting. While some of these groups are hiding under the claim of fighting for equality in the sharing nation's wealth, some believed that the nation Nigeria as ceded to them by the Colonial Masters, while most are religion fundamentalists who see other religions faithful as infidels. This paper examines Femi Osofisan's perspective as a dramatist who believes that sociopolitical turbulence is a humanly created disaster and building resilience and recovery lies in the collective efforts of the citizenry. The paper concludes that in most sociopolitical calamitous issues which hinder the growth, development and peaceful co-existence of citizens, the youths are the principal players and participants and, it is this category that surfs the significances of most turbulence.*

Keywords: *Nigerian Dramatist, Building Resilience and Recovery, Global Turbulence, Demographics, Certain-uncertainty*

Introduction

A fractional part of the World today is experiencing a period of 'certain-uncertainty' which is a significance of the inability, inexperience, incapability, and greed of political gladiators in addressing salient socio-political and economic factors needed for human development, coupled with the lack of understanding the managerial knowledge required to reawaken the economic and socio-political terrain of the country from comatose. This 'certain-uncertainty' is what James H. Johnson, Jnr. (2020) describes as "the new normal for our society and economy which requires new leadership capabilities and managerial understanding to properly respond to our nation's expanding demographics."

From the display of flagrant obstinacy and impatience of the Russian leader Vladimir Putin who "unleashed the biggest war in Europe since World War II with the justification that modern, Western-leaning Ukraine was a constant threat and Russia could not feel safe, develop and exist" (Paul Kirby, BBC News, 13 April, 2021 Updated 9 May, 2022), to Britain Boris Johnson's "inappropriate increase of taxes in the middle of the worst cost of living crises in London, which are taken to be the significances of the Prime Minister's lack of focus and ideas" (Owen, M. BBC News, 7 July 2022) to the inadvertent attitude of the Nigerian government led by President Muhammad Buhari towards unemployment, poverty, human and infrastructural development, illiteracy in some regions of the nation, and the nation's gruesome experience with banditry, terrorism, kidnapping, and other violent tendencies that had taken thousands of innocent lives. The government of the day is not faring better as insurgency has finally encroached into the most populous nation in Africa where even the military personnel are not protected from the onslaught. The government's reactionary and scattered response to insurgency in Nigeria had made the issue looks like a self-imposed calamity from which many are been blessed through kidnapping and many others are been impoverished and in sorrowful conditions.

Coupled with this was the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, and, a national protest on the 20th October, 2020 that was as a result of the brutality, injustice, and oppression from a department of the Nigeria Police tagged 'End-SARS' which further exposed the self-centredness', greed and avarice of political leaders, and the unpreparedness and inability of the government to proffer solutions to an emergency social turbulence. While governments all over the world adhered strictly to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) social distancing and quarantine measures to curb the spread of the contagious pandemic and with it palliatives for the member nations, the Nigerian government hoarded the palliatives for no just course while the populace suffer at home during the imposed holidays as a result of the pandemic. In another instance, the Nigerian government could do nothing to pacify the End-Sars protesters but wielded the baton of power by killing armless

protesters (youths) while some remained incarcerated, and adapting to the discomfort of political captivity.

Findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey confirm the significant psychological effects of social distancing and quarantine measure on young people causing stress, anxiety and loneliness. The results of this survey is also affirmed by the findings of studies conducted in the United Kingdom by Etheridge and Spanting (2020) and in the United State of America by Mc Ginty, et al (2020) revealing that the young adults experience higher level of distress compared to other age groups. In Nigeria, the principal characters in the End-Sars protests were young adults who felt that the maltreatment and injustices being experienced from the police was targeted at them more than other age groups in a nation where people with questionable characters are being given national awards. All these calamitous, unpalatable are terrestrially created occurrences with adverse effects on all kinds of demography but, with horrendous impact on the youth who is always at the receiving end of sociopolitical turbulence; either as an active participant or as a victim.

Demography here refers to a section of the population that share common characteristics such as age, sex, status and ethnic background. Hence, the paper focuses on the young demographic of the nation. These young people dominates the population of principal actors in banditry, terrorism, kidnapping, raping, armed robbery, and other violent tendencies rocking the Nigeria nation today as a result of the inadequate care and neglect that expose them to these horrendous acts. We are dealing with a bunch of extremely traumatized age group who due to neglect are less concerned about the decadence and declination rocking our national heritages, and, who trivialize the impacts of their acts on national growth and development as if nothing serious is happening. They seek solutions to their problems without minding whose arse is gored. They, rather than waiting for government intervention in their plights, prefer to find succour anywhere and everywhere which has today led the nation into socio-political turbulence that requires urgent solution.

Defining Certain-Uncertainty in the Nigeria Context

The word suggests an inevitable event, occurrence or situation as a consequence of people's lack of focus, political knowledge and wisdom, organisational skills, administrative acumen as well as the negligence and injustice meted to some regions in the country. It is a 'borrowed term' that suits the Nigeria's socio-political terrain which today demands new leadership capabilities and managerial understanding needed for a quick and proper response to her expanding demographics. Nigerians today, need a committed-competent leader that has the capacity to take the nation out of the present sociopolitical and economic turbulence. A cursory observation of the nation's socio-political environment reveals that while

our chosen demographics continues to increase with the nation's landmines, the impact in terms of youths' development, empowerment, employment, poverty alleviation, and involvement in partisan politics remain minimal as those at the helms of affairs have turned judicious positions to their inheritance. A myriad of social realities have conspired to complicate the case of youths' involvement in political administration and empowerment where challenges such as unemployment and poor governmental support exist. When all these social anomalies are present in a government, it is certain that at a point uncertainty will rule the nation. This is so obvious that a few serious gubernatorial and presidential aspirants always include in their campaign manifestoes the creation of incentives to rejuvenate the economy to absorb the youths. Thus, the common thoughts in the minds of the citizenry at every period of political transition, in the face of the myriad of problems that have gradually generated into turbulence today are: Who are they handing over to? What are they handing over?

Literature Review

The granting of independence that focuses political freedom at the expense of economic independence to Nigeria in 1960 by the colonialists was indeed a turning point in the political history of the country. This political freedom enabled the nationals to sail the ship of state that has yet to reach the desired destination due to maladministration, selfishness, greed and avarice of the privileged few (political/military leaders) who have been blinded by personal gains and therefore lost the focus, vision, and direction towards shaping the nation's destiny. The various governments from independence drifted away from several facets required for nation-building. They failed to embrace the "tapping of potentials of human resources while there was increase in social and economic disparity that exists in the society which has today led to insecurity wherein individuals cannot live freely and attain the best in life" (Abdullahi, 2020).

Abdullahi, Adekeye, and Balogun (2014) note that, prior to and immediately after independence, young Nigerians, under different political and intellectual platforms had individually and collectively instituted and succeeded in fostering progressive change in the Nigerian polity, most times without violent and destruction. Through their platforms, they were able to checkmate and monitor the excessiveness of the ruling elites. However, it appears that such spirit of nation building and patriotism is fast disappearing in contemporary Nigeria.

These post independence young who had witnessed decades of independence celebrations of the nation Nigerian as noted by Abdullahi, et al (2014) were responsible for the present national calamities being encountered today as they have refused to vacate the political scenes or have turned the political arena to their

inheritance. These set of people had turned the political arena to their birth right and when retired played the god-father roles for the younger politicians. They have also failed to groom younger people for possible continuity but instead engaged them in political thuggery, vandalism, and hooliganism especially during political transition periods. What should one expects from political gladiators with outright failures in leading the nation towards economic stability. Injustices that include but not limited to environmental injustice, poverty elevation, and gender inequality, have been the lot of our chosen demographic without recourse to the adverse effects on the citizenry. In a cursory look at the regions in Nigeria, Alabi (2014) in Bassey (2018) notes that, “the thesis of historical injustices in the Niger Delta region expectedly has produced an antithesis of violence, militancy, and restiveness. The current realities in the zone are such that coincide with considerable protest, killings, kidnappings, hostage taking, and other indices that are everything but conterminous with national economic development and the foisting of national integration” while Ibe (2020) notes that,

while the Southern geopolitical region people, South-West, South-East and South-South have laid premium on education, the North has been lagging behind in respect... there is large illiteracy rate, high population growth, large drug abuse, large violent, large youth unemployment and a gullible religious followership. It is therefore not surprising that fanatical religious leaders found ready hands in unemployed and unemployable youths and this is an indication of a great threat ahead if not well managed.

Onuora (2014) while writing on Youths, Radicalisation and Affiliation with Insurgent Groups in Northern Nigeria observes that the involvement of the Northern Youths in insurgency is the consequence of “ignorance of the true religious teaching, unemployment and poverty, children with poor upbringing as opposed to alleged excess of security forces as a major driver of youth extremism.” Osuji, Ekhanheye, and Tony-Okolo (2021) align with Onuora’s observation when they note that, “in every country or nation especially the developing countries, the major aim of leadership is to gainfully employ its citizenry especially the youths in order to reduce if not eradicate crime of juveniles... Once these age bracket are busy with one legitimate vocation or the other, it will reduce or possibly eradicate youths’ restiveness.”

Arguably, these identified national problems are responsible for the involvement of youths in these dastardly juvenile crimes that led to the state of confusion and instability in the sociopolitical terrain of the nation. Although started in an insidiously slow pace, it has today escalated beyond imagination and thus requires political leaders’ sincerity to put it under perpetual control that can possibly return the nation to the status quo ante of the oil-boom. Agreeably however, social turbulence occurs in an ever-expanding natural landscape occupied by our chosen demographics

whose desire for survival cannot be underestimated in a nation that jokes with a better future for her citizenry. The socio-political plane of most African nations, especially Nigeria, due to neglect, mismanagement, maladministration, greed and avarice, danced and swayed in the turbulence constantly buffeted by the increasing in the wind that blows towards same direction – deficiency in national growth and development. Hence, a turbulent time connotes a lot of change, confusion and disorder. However, in order to control or

avoid exacerbating intergenerational inequalities and to involve young people in building societal resilience, government need to anticipate the impact of mitigation and recovery measures across different age groups by applying effective governance mechanism. An inclusive response to and recovery from the crises requires an integrated approach to public governance that anticipates the impact of response and recovery measure across different age cohorts. Building better requires decision makers to acknowledge generational divides and address them decisively in order to leave no one behind (James, 2020).

Psychologically, young people born between 1982 and 2002 in Nigeria, arguably, would have experienced a traumatic situation or one major socio-political shock. It is no exaggeration therefore to note that young people within these age bracket cannot be easily separated from the pangs of rejection, discrimination and injustice that have eaten deep into the socio-political fabrics of the nation. This young people, apart from the “shocks” (Johnson, Jnr. 2020) created through military palace coups, have been part of political dispensations that started with Olusegun Obasanjo/Atiku Abubakar in 1998/2006, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua/Goodluck Jonathan in 2007/2010 and Goodluck Jonathan/Mohammed Sambo in 2010/2015, Muhammadu Buhari/Yemi Osinbajo 2015 to 2023 and Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Shetima from 2023 to date. Each political dispensation came with its own economic and sociopolitical shock which today has culminated into youths' active involvement in militancy, drug trafficking/addiction, armed robbery, terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, prostitution, and internet fraud. What Nigerians are experiencing today, with regards to high cost of living is horrendous. Isyaku and Mohammed (2018) note that, “reactions to elections since 1999 have been opprobrious. These reactions have been the result of the fraud that has always characterised the process. It will seem that the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 elections progressed from bad to worse respectively.”

The Indigenous Dramatists and the Nigerian State: A Brief Analysis

The Nigerian dramatists can be classified into two major groups: the pre-civil war generation that started with the establishment of the University College, Ibadan in 1948, and the post civil war generation whose works like some of Femi Osofisan's are responses to the first generation's perspective of the society. The pre-civil war dramatists “tagged as the old generation of Nigerian writers, are primarily

concerned with the distortion of their cultures by the colonial masters. As a result of their exposure to the Western ideas, the literature of this old generation of writers was essentially to protest against the Western prejudices" (Ajidahun, 2012). Literarily, Wole Soyinka was the first to foresee the dirty and repulsive betrayal which would follow the rituals of independence as composed in his *A Dance of the Forests* (1964) that was presented at the celebration of Nigeria independence in 1960. The aftermath of independence celebration witnessed an era of frustration with the ruling class. This in essence spurs Soyinka to write *The Strong Breed* (1973) in which the playwright sees himself and his peers as heroes, a generation that Osofisan classifies as the Wasted Breed. Femi Osofisan in Ajidahun (2012) himself quoting Olatunde (1983) explains that, "I deliberately wrote it (No More the Wasted Breed) in answer to Soyinka's position stated in the *Strong Breed*" (1973). Most of Femi Osofisan's satires are essentially philosophically influenced by Marxists dialectical-historical materialism which emphasizes the apprehension of the objective reality of the world as well as changing that reality for the benefit of his immediate society. Others include Bode Sowande, Kole Omotosho, Ahmed Yerima, Abiodun Adeoye, and many others. However, Osofisan stands out among these radical dramatists as the most proficient. He has a divergent view with regards to the society as he shuns, as well as refutes the path of tragic vision for the society in most, if not all his plays. He rejects the tragic vision expressed in the works of the older generation of Nigerian dramatists because their literary visions are not capable of raising the revolutionary impulse and consciousness of the masses which he weaves into the phantasmagoria of his plays.

The Nigerian dramatists of post-independence period advocate for the required freedom and social reforms for the desired growth and development of the society. This radicalism in dramatic composition is a departure from the Negritude season of Wole Soyinka and Pepper Clark (now Clark Bekederemo). Kershaw (1999) clarifies the essence of the radical nature of the style of these younger dramatists when he explains that, "the freedom that radical performance invokes is not just freedom from oppression, repression, exploitation – the resistant sense of the radical – but also freedom to reach beyond existing systems of formalized power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action – the transgression of a transcendent sense of the radical." Another notable European theatre personality of the radical style, Erwin Piscator (in Innes & Shevstova, 2013) notes that "more and more insistent grows the demand: theatre is actions, the action of the proletariat. The stage and the masses, a creative unity, not present in the drama of contemporary life.

One major difference between these two generations of Nigerian dramatists as noted by Uji (2014) is that, "while the drama of the non-radical idiom views conflict in society the rough and the medium of theatre as being the divine design of the

gods/goddesses, spirits and forces of nature in a perpetually irredeemable situation, radical dramaturgy perceives the conflict as generating from class struggle in society.” While Osofisan (2001) in Ajidahun (2012) notes that, “Soyinka’s writing invariably conclude in a grim and somber epistemology, offering a bleak picture, which is only the mirror of history as he and his contemporaries have lived and experienced it,” Charles Uji in his emphasis on Gerald Moore’s (1981) critique of drama, theatre, and the modern Nigerian dramatists notes that

... the younger Nigerian dramatists are determined that something can and must be done about Nigerian condition. Their plays end usually with a call for action and change, rather than with noble resignation to a fate which masters men in every age. Often there is an explosion of revolutionary action right on stage. Their concern is not with continuity but with new directions. Their assault on the way things are is direct and their prescriptions for cure are clear. Often this makes their texts less rich in meaning and ambiguity than the poetic dramas of Soyinka and Clark, but they are winning a new audience for theatre and giving it a new role in the struggle to change the consciousness of Nigerians (2014).

In this paper therefore, we shall examine Femi Osofisan’s *The Chattering and the Song* as a radical dramatist’s perspective towards building resilience in a turbulent period. The Nigerian dramatist from the neo-colonial period till date have played significant roles in exposing sociopolitical problems with suggested probable solutions which could have eradicated or reduced the impacts on our targeted population or, and the populace.

Femi Osofisan’s the Chattering and the Song

Osofisan in most of his works weaves its thematic structure around the problem of the society with focus on the have-nots against the government. To Femi Osofisan, dramatic composition is a medium of instruction that needs to arouse the conscience and awareness of his audience in a critical manner that will open his eyes to the prevailing sociopolitical decadence and spurs him into taking a decisive and appropriate action. Osofisan achieves this through the provision of critical insight into the primary causes of sociopolitical decadence and most times proffers or suggests solution. His plays consistently attack all forms of corruption as he depicts in *Who’s Afraid of Solarin?* (1987), oppression as depicted in *Red is the Freedom Road* (1983), injustice as revealed in *No More the Wasted Breed* (1983), and tyranny as stated in *Morountodun* (1983)... His drama shocks the spectator into critical awareness and knocks them out of their lethargy by stirring up thought among them...Osofisan is aware that the true liberation and the attainment of humanity cannot be achieved by the ego and indefatigable efforts of an individual protagonist, no matter what his or her level of commitment may be. His plays thus

address to the people generally for it is they rather than the individual that are the victims of change (Uji, 2014). (Emphasis mine)

It is in this view that our discussion shall be premised on Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song* (1976), a play composed in an elliptical plot, that is, composed in broken rhythms of image ridding games, music, song, dance, and dialogue that underlies the background and foreground action" (Jeyifo, 1986).

In Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song*, the conflict is between the state and the workers – the Farmers' Movement led by Sontri, Moka, Yajin and later Funlola. These characters constitute the vanguard for the budding revolutionary storm as they can be found in different ethnic groups that constitute the nation Nigeria. However, Moka betrays and backstabs his people and decamps to team up with the state as a security police agent who eventually returns to arrest Sontri. As an ideology known with radical dramatists, Femi Osofisan believes that to resolve the conflict created by the oppressors in any society, the majority in society has to fight it out in the form of a revolution since the oppressor hates and resists the idea of relinquishing his privileged position. The effect of this act on the oppressors exposed their jittery nature in the face of a revolution in October, 2020 during the 'End Sars' protest.

The conflict in *The Chattering and the Song* (1976) is between the government – represented by the various states in Nigeria and the Forces – the downtrodden who are powerfully represented by the characters like Latoye, the agitator who exposes the high-handedness of the mean and miserly monarchical systems. He appeals to the Alaafin's guards to make him understand the people's plight that is encapsulated in ignorance to support him in the tooth and nail war against tyranny and oppression. In the play,

Latoye: Alaafin and his men are fed and are flourishing, but they continue to steal your lands. They are rich; their salaries swell from the burden of your taxes. Their stores are bursting, your children beg on the streets (*Chattering*, p.9).

The main aim of forming the Farmers' Movement is to stimulate the consciousness in the members – workers and farmers – towards the annihilation of the oppressor's stick of exploitation and inhumanity in their style of governance. The state's inhumanity and ineptitude are exposed through corruption and mismanagement in public service which trades in human conscience for their selfish and parochial benefits. This is exposed through Sontri's (a character in the play) mock trial of the Weaver Bird which appears histrionically comic and satiric in the play. The Weaver Bird as depicted in the play within a play is a theatrical representation of the downtrodden (the poor) in the society who are convicted for building their nests; the accused Weaver Bird which must without mercy be "hunted

and massacred” (Osofisan, p. 36). Sontri in his mock trial of the weaver bird by the State:

Sontri: Without procuring cement at inflated tariffs from authorised profiteers, without 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...we can only wonder how their government functionaries manage to eat, deprived thus of their legitimate ten percents...that’s just by the way ahem...such retrogressive practices, we repeat, must not be allowed to proliferate; therefore, Guilty! Guilty! Guilty! (Chattering, p. 8).

Most plays of Osofisan deal with the exposition of government debilitating act of corruption, exploitation, dehumanisation, and injustice. These acts are satirically exposed in plays such as *Morountodun* (1982) *Red is the Freedom Road* (1982), *No More the Wasted Breed* (1982), and *The Chattering and the Song* (1977). These plays in summary are dominated with revolutionary thematic structures that always place the ruling class against the workers and low income earners. The End-Sars protest of October 20, 2020 was a sort of confrontation between the government and the Youths who like Bogunde, a revolutionary combatant in *The Chattering and the Song* narrates that the brutality meted out to them by the government was simply 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.” The conflict in *The Chattering and the Song*, like in the dramatist’s other plays mentioned above precipitates a physical combat with resultant bloodshed on both sides. The major aims of the ‘EndSars’ protest in 2020 is to restore justice and sense of humanity in a society that has been systematically dehumanized by the diabolic agents of the government- the Police.

Conclusion

Victoria Gimby (2017) in Abe and Abe (2024) asserts that, “the world is built upon stories; stories that are woven into the very history and fabrics of life. Theatre has a way of telling stories in a way that is immediate, visceral, personal and inclusive and from every vantage point. The ‘one time only’ nature of theatre is one of the factors that make it unique among other arts – a life experience that cannot be replicated.” Although history is dynamic in Osofisan’s drama, it is viewed not as a static human activity, but, as being apprehensive from different angles. Osofisan continues to show that even in the past the abuses of power were challenged. By showing the misdemeanor of the past and the challenge from the people, the radical dramatist is subtly calling on the oppressed to challenge injustice and oppression. Osofisan has claimed in *No More the Wasted Breed* (1973), another of his radical approach to man’s survival in the society that,

people who are carriers...are deliberately made to carry the sins of society...it has a lot of valour, a lot of bravery, but for what purpose? I think they are being cheated. Let each man carry the burden of his own sin. It's part of the ideology of the ruling class, that they should indoctrinate these people to like it." This systematic and uncritical manner of inculcating in the youths the spirit of vandalism, killing, and destruction that endanger their lives and others is popular among Nigerian ruling class. The ruling class engages idle youths to attack for money their opponents at the detriment of the attackers' lives' (Osofisan in Ajidahun, 2012).

This is the case in *The Chattering and the Song* (1976) where both the Farmers and Moka challenge the injustice of constituted authority. The revolutionary theme in our chosen play exposes the government's involvement in daylight corruption, exploitation and dehumanization of the young people in which action of our chosen demography was in accord with Paulo Friere (as quoted with emphasis by Charles Uji, 2014) who asserts that: "while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is man's vocation. This vocation is constantly negated, yet it affirmed by that very negation. It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity."

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