

---

**ISSN:**

Print - 2277 - 078X

Online - 2315 - 747X

© UNAAB 2011

---

---

**Journal of  
Humanities, Social  
Sciences and Creative  
Arts**

---

---

**VIOLENT RESISTANCE IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S *THE  
CHATTERING AND THE SONG***

---

**L.O. ONWUKA**

Federal University of Petroleum Resources, Effurun, Nigeria.

**E-mail:** oguguaonwuka@yahoo.com**Tel:** +2348038038720

---

**ABSTRACT**

This article posits that social change is desirable and can be by violent or non-violent means. It examines how Osofisan in *The Chattering and the Song* recommends violence as an instrument of justice in an oppressive system. The analysis in the paper is based on the concept of violence that purifies the system.

Osofisan stresses the relevance of violence as a veritable weapon in the fight against institutionalised injustice, dictatorship and cultural imperialism which are some of his major thematic pre-occupations. He wants a society where wealth must be equitably distributed. To study the use of violence in the play, the paper employs the sociological and Marxist theoretical framework. Through characterization, songs, diction and setting, Osofisan reinforces his belief in the potency of violent revolution.

**Keywords:** Violence, Non-violent, revolution, exploitation, resistance, weapon.

**INTRODUCTION**

Resistance literature is basically a product of post-colonial writing. It takes into consideration the social, political and historical circumstance of a particular work. The assertion of resistance literature is straight forward. It asserts that literature represents an essential arena of struggle for those who seek liberation through armed resistance and sometimes non-violent or passive action from oppressive regimes. It belongs to the third phase of writing which Franz Fanon describes as the fighting literature, a revolutionary literature and a national literature (1994). Implicit in resistance is the fact that there is a need for change in an unfavourable condition. This change can be through violent or non-violent means. In the play under review Femi Osofisan en-

dorses violent resistance as a more potent tool for change.

**Violent Resistance in *The Chattering and the Song***

Femi Osofisan's writing undoubtedly belongs to the third phase of African writing where emphasis according to Dan Izevbaye is on "art as a commitment, on writing with a specific and explicit political design on its audience" (1999). He has therefore embraced the Marxist ideology as the most potent weapon to address socio-political problems. In this regard in most of his plays, he advocates a revolution which must give birth to a new social order. Leon Trotsky maintains that "the fundamental premise of a revolution is that the existing social structure has become incapable of solving the urgent problems of the development of a nation" (1957).

In consonance with Frantz Fanon's philosophy of revolution, Osofisan proposes that the oppressed individual can only free himself by a violent revolution. His theatre debunks the myth that the world cannot be transformed. He upholds the belief that man can overhaul the society and can change his destiny. Like Ross Kid, he believes that: "it is not enough simply to express problems through theatre if this is not linked with critical analysis of an action on the underlying causes and structures, it is not enough to rehearse struggle if this does not lead to struggle." (1981). In view of this, Osofisan through his techniques and themes, preach that the masses should doggedly fight for their right to ensures that national wealth is distributed equitably. Ogunjimi Bayo believes that the "dysfunctionality" initiated by oppression cannot be averted by the simple logic of pacifism" (2012). This idea is emphasized by Frantz Fanon when he maintains that, "the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence." (1961).

Femi Osofisan, projects his social vision of the Nigerian society in *The Chattering and the Song*. He portrays a society that is plagued by rot, corruption and dictatorship. In various methods, he exposes the ills in the Nigerian society. *The Chattering* depicts a revolutionary action against oppressive agents in the society. The play is set in a middle class house belonging to Sontri, who is the major character in the play. Sontri, a revolutionary leader embarks on the education of the masses to awaken their consciousness. His displeasure for the social conditions is highlighted in the drama between him and Funlola. He had kept some weaver birds which Funlola sets free; he is annoyed by this action. To him, the weaver birds are representatives of the down-trodden who

are exploited. For instance, cement is sold to them at inflated rates from authorized profiteers. Sontri identifies with these birds, who though deprived and neglected, stay together in spite of all odds and fragility of their nest. The weaver birds that allegorically stand for the masses have defied the oppressive agents by building their nests which symbolically represent their houses built without cement from profiteers. For this act of defiance, the weaver birds are to be hunted, pursued, and massacred without mercy.

Sontri accuses Funlola of indifference, he states:

"Of course, you wouldn't know! And isn't that the point... look, my dear, that's you! Those soft eyes, soft... and blind.

And those painted eyelids, those gentle curtains nicely cordoned around your sweet romantic dreams while the world groans around your wounded wings! Close your windows with curfews of indifference."

By this statement, Sontri accuses not only Funlola but the upper class who, because they are comfortable, are indifferent to the suffering of the masses. He carefully chooses words like "soft", "gently" and "sweet" to depict the comfort enjoyed by the upper class while words like "cordoned", "curfew" show their indifference. Sontri defines resistance as the only solution to oppression.

According to him:

A commotion is ...  
A violent disturbance  
Like a riot  
Of a bad government (P. 17)

To bring about this commotion he joins the farmers' movement, an outlawed movement, which aims at over-throwing the government. He becomes so deeply involved in the movement that he uses his skills to compose the Farmers Anthem. The corrupt, ineffective judicial system is mocked at by Sontri. The judicial is portrayed as a system which does not take the harsh condition of the people into consideration.

Osofisan's Marxists' stance is clearly defined in the rehearsal of a play devised by Yajin for the eve of her wedding. In that play, Osofisan recreates the History of Oyo, a confrontation in 1855 between the rebel Latoye and the famous Alafin Abiodun. In his use of this event, Osofisan shows his abhorrence for all forms of autocracy. Gerald Moore remarks that "Osofisan is against all forms of autocracy, however benevolent. For him, heroism is a collective, not a kingly virtue" (1976).

During the rehearsal for the revolution, Latoye is allowed a long speech detailing how the autocrats have used religion as a smoke-screen to exploit the masses and secure themselves in power. According to him, "For centuries you have shielded yourselves with the gods. Slowly you painted them in your colour, dressed them in your cloak of terror. Injustice and bloodlust" (P.45).

Through Latoye's speech, Osofisan portrays that he is not against the gods whom he knows are governed by checks and balances. He asserts:

Edumare gave power, and fragility, so  
That none of them shall ever be a  
Tyrant over the others, and none a  
Slave (p.145).

He, rather, criticizes the kings, who use the gods to oppress others. The Alafin and his wife symbolically represent the oppressive agents and must be exterminated. It is significant that the masses represented by the bodyguards are brought in to kill Alafin and his wife. This indicates that the masses must compulsorily be involved directly in the fight against oppression.

At the end of the rehearsal, Mokan, who acts the role of Aresa, a palace guard, arrests Sontri and Yajin. Only after the rehearsal does he reveal his identity as a member of the secret police. He uses the rehearsal as an opportunity to arrest Sontri and Yajin who are members of the subversive movement. Although they were arrested, the seed of revolution has been sown and nobody will prevent it from germinating and blossoming, just as birds cannot be stopped from chattering. As Sontri puts it after his arrest,

There is nothing, nothing you can do to  
Stop the bird from singing  
Mokan, the revolution is already growing  
You cannot halt it! ( p.47).

The play advocates collective action in the wake of mass political awareness. This is highlighted in the Epilogue, in the dialogue between Leje and Funlola. Funlola, the artist, depicts the suffering of the masses in her canvas. In Leje's words:

...on your canvas  
Suffering ceases to be an abstract thing.  
Those gnarled limbs, the hollow eyes, the  
sunken  
Furrowed faces of the poor... (p. 51-52).

The word captured by Funlola, is the truth but only the truth of a bystander, an outsider. She has to belong to the masses to

help transform fantasy into reality. Her dream to remake the world will only materialize if she works collectively with others. According to Leje:

It can, you know. If we work together,  
All of us, we can remake the world (p.52).

Leje states that the world is alterable. The oppressors perpetually devise new means of oppression and they succeed because they do not encounter resistance from the masses. He states:

Yes, You see, the weaver birds accept  
It all, and everywhere, everyday, we  
All are throwing our arms down  
Getting down to crawl on our  
Bellies like lizards  
We say yes to everything  
We say yes too soon, too easily,  
Because we long desperately to  
Settle down and rest even before  
The fight is done. (p.52).

Leje therefore calls for resistance from the masses. He advises that like the oppressors, the masses should device new weapon of eliminating the oppressors. Leje's identity is not revealed till the end of the play. His drunken attitude is used as a ploy to disguise his real identity. The revolution seed has been planted on a fertile soil and his arrest will not stop it from flourishing. He has indoctrinated people, awakened their political consciousness and there is no limit to the extent of the revolution.

Leje enlists Funlola into the Farmers' Movement. Together they return to the game of riddles, which Sontri and Yejin played at the beginning. In the riddle, which is couched in metaphor, the two characters play the parts of hare, tortoise, frog and fish. According to Michael Etherthon,

"Through this metaphorical behaviour, Osofisan hopes to show the dialectical relationship between characters and how through their opposition, one to each, they resolve their beings into a new phase of the struggle" (1982). The play ends with the game but with different actors signifying that the revolutionary struggle must continue. It does not matter if the originators are arrested or dead. Those available should continue, not in a cosmetic manner but actively until a new world is created.

Osofisan has been described as a socialist because of the ideology he expounds in his literary works. A careful study of his plays will reveal that he is always on the side of the down-trodden. His heroes and heroines are the masses, the deprived and the exploited. In his plays, he displays like Brecht that theatre must get down to the fundamentals, it must inform people and it must show its audience how they can change their circumstances. His themes principally deal with different types of resistance. In some plays he expounds both active and passive resistance, while some deal primarily with active resistance.

In *The Chattering and the Song*, Osofisan portrays farmers who are involved in active resistance. In the rehearsal, the oppressive agents are violently eliminated. Metaphorically it means that there will surely be a revolution. In history; most revolutions involve bloodshed. The impending storm will sweep away the King and the Queen because the "earth fouled with the (Queen's) contagion cries for cleansing" (P. 39).

The plot of *Chattering* is linear and a bit complex. The play-within-a-play constitutes the principal revolutionary message of Osofisan and a rehearsal of the imminent revolution.

And Mokan uses the opportunity to arrest Sontri and Yajin for their subversive actions. Leje's camouflage poses another problem in the play. Ironically, Sontri and Yajin are arrested and the leader of the Farmer's Movement is not. Leje's true identity is unknown even to his friend, Mokan. Osofisan uses Leje's drinking habit as a ploy to disguise his real identity.

Osofisan, using characterization, enhances his theme. His characters are categorized into two classes; the oppressors and the oppressed. In *The Chattering*, using a group of intellectuals, he displays his vision of the Nigerian society. Sontri, the major character, is cast in the mould of a revolutionary leader. His character is revealed by Yajin, his spouse. Yajin describes him as the incarnation of Orunmila, a god gifted with knowledge and wisdom. He has to be so endowed to be able to perform his duties of educating the masses. According to Yajin, he is a complex personality and none of the usual words seems to fit. She compares him to a volcanic mountain. In her words: "sometimes he's like a mountain with a volcano inside..." (p.11).

Yajin takes us back to their school days and reveals that from that time, Sontri has always exhibited his radical qualities. She describes him as 'the wild, untamed one, running with streetbrats, garage touts, and the like...' (p.13). Sontri, a restless man, got his revolutionary qualities sharpened after his initiation. Yajin reveals that he had always been restless and could not stay anywhere. One evening he disappeared and when he came back, 'He grew...harder, angrier, but also more concerned. That was when he joined the Farmers' movement (p.13). As an artist he composed the Farmers' Anthem. Like the volcano he has sown seeds of

revolution and is brave enough to confront Mokan.

Yajin as an artist is well versed in history. From her knowledge of history she is able to write a play and direct same. She insists that the play be rehearsed for her wedding. She, like Sontri, is politically aware and is radical too. She belongs to the Farmers' movement and is arrested with Sontri at the end of the rehearsal. Her friend, Funlola another artist, has represented the suffering of the masses in her canvas but needs a leader to interpret her work for her. She is also portrayed as a rebel against tradition. She defies the tradition that stipulates that women must be married. She sees marriage as a form of imprisonment, a union that will prevent her from fulfilling destiny. She acknowledges that there's music in the chattering of pots and pans but she still prefers painting to marriage.

Leje is another revolutionary character. He is disguised all through the play. His real identity is revealed in the Epilogue. He is the leader of the Farmer's Movement and it is only proper that he plays the part of Latoye – the rebel. Through his indoctrination, Funlola joins the Farmer's Movement in the struggle against oppression. In the riddle between him and Funlola, he uses words that portray him as a revolutionary character. In the Marxists fashion he expresses hope in the Epilogue. In his words, "We will weave. We will weave new patterns out of our world. And make of our dance a journey of hope" (p.55). Sontri, Leje, Funlola and Yajin are positive characters. Mokan belongs to the secret police, whose main concern is to hack down all the members of the Farmer's Movement. He uses the rehearsal as an opportunity to arrest Sontri and Yajin. He thus represents the agents of exploitation. The

other agents are portrayed in the persons of Abiodun and Olori. In Latoye's speech to the Guards, he highlights the atrocities of Alafin Abiodun. The masses labour for him and yet do not enjoy the fruit of their labour. Latoye tells them,

Look around you. Look into your past  
Look into your future. What do you see?  
Always  
The same unending tale of oppression  
Of poverty,  
Hunger, squalor and disease! Why?  
You and  
Your people, you are the soil on which  
The Alafin's  
Tree is nourished, tended until it is  
Overladden with fruit! And yet, when  
You stretch out your

Hands, there are no fruits for you (P.42).

The masses must resist this, to extricate themselves. To ensure that they benefit from the bursting stores, Abiodun must die. Osofisan, advocates complete elimination of the exploitative agents and that is why Olori must die with her husband.

Osofisan's diction is another device used by him to reinforce his theme of resistance. *The Chattering*, is couched in metaphoric language; this is revealed right from the title of the play, *The Chattering and the Song*. The weaver birds in the chattering and songs are metaphoric for the coming revolution and as Sontri says, "there's nothing you can do to Stop the birds from singing (P.47).

The play-within-a-play, is a metaphorical rehearsal for revolution. It is hoped that after it has been rehearsed, the revolution can effectively be carried out.

Osofisan uses numerous botanical meta-

phors to show that the idea of revolution has been implanted in the minds of the people and nothing, not even the arrest of the leader of the masses can stop it. Latoye, in his dialogue with Abiodun says:

Yes, you will kill me. But your hands  
Cannot reach the seeds I have already  
sown, and they are on fertile soil.  
Soon, sooner than you think, they will  
burst into flowers and their scents alone  
will choke you (p.37)

In the riddle between Sontri and Yajin, Osofisan carefully chooses words that depict the exploited and the exploiter. Sontri in that riddle acts the role of the exploiter, while Yajin represents the exploited. Sontri is the frog, while Yajin is the fish. Sontri urges Yajin to run for her life else she would be preyed on by the frog. Again, Sontri is a hawk and Yajin a hen. As a hawk, he is swooping down, with the beak of steel. This riddle prepares the reader for Osofisan's message. The masses are the weak animals who are vulnerable to attacks from the strong exploiters. Also, in the Epilogue, Osofisan uses words which depict that revolution is not a one man show. Leje is the tortoise; the great traveller, and with the experience he has acquired from his journeys, he will lead Funlola to fertile lands. Leje is the shuttle and Funlola the thread and together they will weave new patterns out of our world. And make our dance a journey of hope" (P.55).

Using the game of cards, Osofisan foreshadows Mokan's treacherous act at the end of the rehearsal. Mokan takes a cue from Leje's statement that crosses must always fulfil their purpose. And the only purpose is crucifixion. In response, Mokan states "someone's definitely going to be crucified

tonight" (p.31).

Mokan's statement can refer to two crucifixions; the arrest of the Alafin and the arrest of Sontri by Mokan. Leje also predicts what will befall the exploiters by recalling the football match between their club and the Lions. He highlights the magnitude of the defeat of the Lions, and observes that the Lions were reduced to rabbits. Similarly, the exploiters who were hitherto Lions shall be tamed by the time the masses rise against them.

While Latoye's language above shows his bravery, it also portrays active resistance. He tells Abiodun..."I don't like you and I don't fear you. I spend nights dreaming of how I will attack you and cut your neck off" (P.37). He goes on to stress his role of radicalizing the people and asserts "I am going to shout so much that even Sango would lend me his thunder. I shall raise the whole earth against you" (p.37).

In a figurative language, he predicts the fall of Olori and her husband. "Last card last card' and you will shudder in all your bones because the storm will eat up" (p.40) is the violent resistance of the people which will destroy them.

With the use of proverbs, Osofisan indicates that once the revolution kicks off nothing can halt it. Sontri tells Yajin, "A flaming ember takes his bath and still maintains his fiery look" (P.2). Yajin in turn replies:

The ripe palm fruit does wear  
A flame  
It wears a flame.....

Which, even in rain, still burns and glows.

Latoye in his encounter with Abiodun stresses the same point and with the use of proverbs adds, "The sapling which tries to halt the passage of the elephant will be plucked from its roots. He expresses the following view:

Whenever the storm  
Starts on a journey, not all the branches  
in  
The forest can bar its way: If the hill  
will not yield to  
The flow of the river, it will have its  
Bosom furrowed (p.41).

Osofisan uses these proverbs and riddles to project an ideological view point.

With the techniques of a play-within-a-play adopted by Osofisan, men are portrayed in the process of liberating themselves and determining their destinies. Using history, the audience is shown how situations can be transformed and changed historically through self-liberating effort undertaken collectively. In that Play-within-a-play, we see elements of history, magic and incantation. These elements help reinforce Osofisan's ideological point which according to Olu Obafemi is "the triumph of a social revolution over a reactionary and exploitative establishment" (1982). Latoye uses magic to appeal to the consciousness of the masses to awaken them to their unending tale of oppression.

In *The Chattering*, songs are used to emphasize Osofisan's ideology. The song and dance about crawling things, apart from en-

tertaining reveals the spinelessness of the nation which is symbolically represented by the millipede:

He has no bite he has no fist  
He has no tongue to voice protest  
This naughty thing is – a millipede  
This millipede a curious thing  
It signifies our nation now:  
But in our shells, behind our gins  
Behind our wide embroidered gowns  
Is coming the piercing knife (P.15).

The song is used to satirize the body-politics of the nation and it is also prophetic. The coming of the piercing knife of truth predicts the social change that is imminent. The farmers' anthem, though couched in agricultural metaphor is revolutionary. It expresses hope that when everyone becomes a farmer, the pests will be wiped out. The pests represent the exploiters, who, if wiped out, will cease to exploit and there would be no more injustice and oppression.

Using these literary elements, song, dance, folktale, Osofisan, according to Olu Obafemi, "employs in a dialectical and progressive fashion, the medium of total theatre." (1982: 126)

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be observed that Osofisan has communicated his ideology through the theme and literary techniques of the play used for the study. He copiously uses facts from history, to tell the masses that they cannot perpetually wait on the gods and their agents to transform their society.

His play provides a means of building a critical consciousness in the masses and even goes a step further to show how they can mobilize for action that would transform their conditions. In this play, Osofisan justifies, violence that brings about positive changes to the condition of the people.

### WORKS CITED

- Etherton, M.** 1982. *The Development of African Drama*. London: Heinemann. 290
- Fanon, F.** 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth*. England: Penguin. 68.
- 1994. *On National Culture in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. A Reader Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Great Britain: Longman. 41.
- Izevbaye, D.** 1996. "Forward to Femi Osofisan," in *Interpretive Essays 1*. Ed. Muyiwa P. Awodiya. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, Lagos. 9.
- Kidd, R.** 1981. *People's Theatre, Conscientisation and Struggle in Drama and Theatre in Nigeria – A Critical Source Book*. Ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi. Nigeria Magazine.
- Moore, G.** 1976. "Against the Titans" in *Nigerian Literature Afriscope*, 7:19.
- Obafemi, O.** 1982. "Revolutionary Aesthetics in Nigerian Theatre" In *African Literature Today*. No. 12. Ed Eldred Jones. London: Heinemann 129.
- Ogunjimi, B.** 2012 *The Crisis of Revolutionary Ideology in African Aesthetics*. Retrieved from Free library.



**Osofisan, F.** 1977. *The Chattering and the Song*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press. **Trotsky, L.** 1957. *Literature and Revolution*. New York: Russell and Russell 229.

*(Manuscript received: 29th October, 2012; accepted: 23rd January, 2013).*