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Femi Osofisan's discourse on Pan-Africanism and reconciliation in *Nkrumah-Ni...Africa-Ni* and *Reel, Rwanda*

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The paper is a critical appraisal of Femi Osofisan's ideological perspectives of Pan-Africanism, imperialism and reconciliation as exemplified in his plays especially in *Nkrumah-Ni... Africa-Ni* and *Reel, Rwanda*. The paper also explores the playwright's views on the dynamics of the problems confronting the African continent such as bad leadership, military intervention in politics, imperialism, betrayal, hatred, greed, disunity, poverty, injustice among others. Nkrumah, the play's eponymous hero in *Nkrumah-Ni... Africa-Ni* is eulogized as the epitome of Pan-Africanism—a panacea for African recurrent problems. The article further interrogates the justification for the continual meaningless carnage, massacre and genocide in the African continent as dramatized by Osofisan in *Reel, Rwanda* in a most tragic form and supports the recommendation of the playwright that only true justice and reconciliation can ensure the success of democracy in Africa. In conclusion, the paper notes the splendid literary creativity of Osofisan in transposing history to the stage. **Keywords:** Femi Osofisan, dramaturgy, Pan-Africanism, imperialism.

Femi Osofisan in *Nkrumah-Ni...Africa-Ni* (1999, in *Recent Outings II*) employs history to express his vision for the African continent in a revolutionary and optimistic way. The play, which is structured into four major parts and forty-six scenes, is an attempt to publicly acknowledge the significant contribution of Kwame Nkrumah to the emergence of a distinctive African personality, black consciousness and African socialism.

Kwame Nkrumah was the first leader of a black, independent African country, which the British colonialists had called the Gold Coast but which Nkrumah changed to Ghana. Nkrumah has been described as a fervid nationalist and a dogged apostle of Pan-Africanism and welcomed various liberation movements to the country to the provocation of the western powers.

Nkrumah was in China in 1965, on a peace mission to Hanoi when a coup d'état was carried out in Ghana. His regime was replaced with that of the National Liberation Council (NLC) led by the Kotoka – Afrifa – Harlley triumvirate. On the invitation of Sekou Toure, the then President of Guinea, Nkrumah went to Conakry and remained there for the next six years. Toure too was another fervid nationalist who dared western imperialism (Osofisan, *Recent Outings* 14).

It was in Conakry that Nkrumah met Amílcar Cabral the leader of *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC), a liberation movement engaged in a bitter-armed conflict with the Portuguese colonialists. Conakry was then the headquarters of the movement. Coincidentally, three of the most fervid and radical African nationalists lived together in Conakry for about six years and worked out strategies for the full emancipation of Africa. Osofisan laments that no record of their discussions exists (Osofisan, *Recent Outings* 15).

The play *Nkrumah-Ni...Africa-Ni* is first, an attempt, to dramatize and recapture the historic meetings and dialogues of these most revolutionary African leaders—Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Toure of Guinea and Amílcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau. Osofisan focuses on Nkrumah. In fact, the play is a tribute to Kwame Nkrumah as the pioneer of Pan-Africanism and a tireless fighter for African unity, the philosopher, and thinker and fighter of imperialism. Kanu (1982) has also described Nkrumah as “an astute politician, an indefatigable leader, an able statesman [...] a man with a dream, a man with a vision for Africa—a great man” (143).

The philosophy of Pan-Africanism is a recurrent theme in several plays of Osofisan’s like *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986), *Another Raft* (1988) and *No More the Wasted Breed* (1999). Osofisan amply demonstrates, in these plays including *Nkrumah-Ni...Africa-Ni* that the Blacks must jettison their colonial heritage and come together to combat the imperial forces of oppression, injustice, suffering and exploitation. Pan-Africanism as an ideology is synonymous with African nationalism. It was conceived with nationalist consciousness, African aspirations in the modern world and the quest for continental unity.

Abiola Irele observes that after Ghana’s independence in 1957, “Nkrumah gave prominent attention to African unity, since Africa appeared to him as a geo-political zone rather than as the spiritual nation of black people” (106). He is thus of the view that Nkrumah has become very significant in the history of Africa such that “the position of Kwame Nkrumah as the living pivot on which the ideological and affective reciprocity between Pan-Africanism and African nationalism revolved is too well known” (Irele 121–23).

The play, *Nkrumah-Ni...Africa-Ni* begins on a very serious note, with the “death” of Nkrumah. Osofisan jolts us in the opening scene with the funeral oration intoned by Cabral. While Cabral, Andree and Jane mourn and lament the loss of Nkrumah, the Jesters on the opposite side of the stage, with placards, drums and other makeshift instruments, ridicule Nkrumah. They compare him with the Biblical fallen Lucifer. They see him as an oppressor. Suddenly, the dead figure begins to remove the flags that drape him. As soon as the song ends, the figure stands up, reveals himself as Nkrumah and shakes his fist to confront the Jesters. But they have all retreated from the scene. To Nkrumah, these Jesters are “liars! Imperialist stooges!” (22). With this dramatic exposition, the stage is set for a protracted conflict between Nkrumah and the Jesters.

Through the use of interview and broadcast techniques, Osofisan sets to debunk the people's accusation against Nkrumah as presented by the Jesters. The playwright presents Nkrumah's ideology and agenda for the African continent. But, he first of all addresses the complex question of leadership and the various problems confronting the entire continent. Some of these problems are military intervention in politics, imperialism, betrayal, hatred, greed, disunity, poverty and so on. All these are responsible for the general instability in Africa.

On the eve of Nkrumah's 57th birthday anniversary the characters Cabral, Yankeh, Andree and Jane persuade him to make a broadcast to the people of Ghana. In the play, Osofisan's Nkrumah in a broadcast throws light further on some of these problems besieging the African continent:

Fellow countrymen of Ghana, chiefs and people, I am speaking to you again from Radio Guinea's "Voice of the Revolution" in Conakry. I send to you all, greetings and warm regards. It was on this day that the combined forces of the Ghana people secured Independence from British imperialism. This achievement was not an easy task. It involved sacrifice, suffering and deprivation on the part of all of us. What has been going on therefore, since that bleak day of February 24th 1966, when a group of misguided rebels in my army decided to seize power, is a tragedy of monstrous proportions. They have sold our freedom, led us back into the nest of the imperial masters. And once again, it is great suffering for our people. These are dark days indeed for Ghana. But tomorrow, I assure you all, it will be noon and light will appear again in Ghana as naturally as day follows the night [...] There is victory for us! (55-56)

Nkrumah's broadcast is laden with passion. The army is indicted for serving as the agent of the imperialists. In part two of the play, the character laments the frequent incursion of the military into the politics of Ghana: "Nine coups d'état already, and nine puppet regimes in place! All arranged by imperialists" (70).

Nyamikeh, Nkrumah's maternal nephew, and one of the characters in the play supports the fact that the military is an aberration in the politics of the African continent. Nyamikeh confronts the Jesters who make Nkrumah the object of their mockery, jibes and satirical songs. The Jesters believe that Nkrumah is a tyrant and an extravagant ruler who builds himself a personality cult. Nyamikeh that the soldiers are worse. He asks the Jesters to answer him if the soldiers are better:

So why do you come here now, cowards? Every country in Africa today, where the soldiers came to power and displaced the civilians, what has happened in all these places? Has life improved or worsened for the people? Do the people have greater freedom, and is the press now unfettered? Is food more abundant, so that the people feed better? Are there more industries? And those they inherited are they even thriving today? How many more dams have sprung up since the Volta project?

Answer me! [...] A continent broken by debt, that's what your new leaders have made of us! A continent in the grip of recolonization by white capitalists! Or do you pretend not to see? (149–50)

Nkrumah in the play has a great vision for Africa and he is prepared to work towards its fulfilment. But he expresses his limitation in a sympathetic tone: "So much to do! So much to do for Africa. But it's the traitors who are in power everywhere!" (64)

The only way out of this impasse is for African leaders represented by Nkrumah, Toure and Cabral to convoke an African summit where they will fashion out strategies that will lead to the total emancipation of the African continent from its seemingly intractable travails. In the play, Nkrumah, Toure and Cabral express a common compassionate but revolutionary vision for a dispossessed and suffering Africa. They believe that Africa needs unity, economic independence, security, self-reliance, formation of an All-African People's Revolutionary Army and Black Nationalism to combat imperialism and other vices plaguing the entire continent. These are the hallmarks of Pan-Africanism. Osofisan in an article entitled "The Nationalist on Target" expresses support for the Pan-Africanist ideal as the only alternative to save the continent from its problems. He opines: "We in Africa who are already so many years behind, are going to be utterly crushed unless we move fast onto the lane of Nkrumah's pan-Africanist ideal, and come together in large political units" (10).

In the play, Nkrumah longs to return to Ghana to set things right. He dreams of this vision often but the dream soon becomes a mirage. During the period of his waiting, he becomes ill. On the advice of Jane, Nkrumah agrees to go to Bucharest, as there are no adequate medical services in Africa to take care of him. But before Nkrumah embarks on the journey, he collapses and he is proclaimed dead. The play finally ends on a tragic note with a funeral oration intoned by character Cabral.

Cabral pays tribute to Nkrumah as a great leader and a pioneer of Pan-Africanism. He believes that "Nkrumah will be born again in the hearts and the will of freedom fighters, and in the actions of all true African patriots" (175—76). As we have seen in the opening scene, Nkrumah again rises as Cabral believes that Nkrumah will rise again in the hearts of freedom fighters. Nkrumah and the others pick up the flags and raise them, proclaiming, *Nkrumah-ni... Africa-ni!*

Osofisan uses a number of dramatic devices such as songs, play-within-play, folk games (*kwamenis*), Biblical allusions, proverbs, code mixing, appropriate metaphors and historical facts to give credence to his vision. Although the situation, words, actions, and mannerisms are uniquely African, they depict a universal language. Osofisan's vision for Africa's emancipation, therefore, has a universal application.

In *Reel, Rwanda* (1999, in *Recent Outings II*), a play that is set in Kigali; Rwanda, in East Central Africa, Osofisan dramatizes the Rwandan war and its horrendous miseries. The play is an enactment of the ethnic animosity between the Hutus and Tutsis,

which eventually leads to a full-blown war with its devastating consequences. In the play, the Hutus and Tutsis have lived together for centuries. They speak the same language. They have the same traditions and physical appearance. One can hardly distinguish the Hutus from the Tutsis. But for selfish interest and colonial exploitation, the Tutsis were used as agents of the foreign western powers, especially the Belgian government, to cause division. To reinforce this division, the western powers give each ethnic group an identity card. This is what Alain, the Belgian lawyer and one of the characters in the play means when he says:

But I am also a Belgian, and I know that we Belgians are largely responsible for the ethnic animosity that has destroyed this lonely country. Before we came here, these people, Hutus and Tutsis, had lived together for centuries [...] They spoke the same language, had the same traditions [...] And then, in 1993, for the purposes of our own colonial exploitation in order to use the Tutsis effectively as our agents, we brought division here [...] And to reinforce this division, we gave each one an identity card. (207–08)

Osofisan indicts the United States of America and the United Nations Organization (UN) in general for masterminding the Rwandan war. Even the troops sent by the United Nations to keep peace in Rwanda are merely acting as agents of death as they unleash terror on the helpless victims of Rwanda. Alain remarks this in his discussion with Françoise, a retired University Professor:

The world body, led by the US voted instead to cut down the troops! Worse, they refused to give the few left behind even the right to defend themselves or to protect the helpless civilians who ran to them for help [...] One of my best friends died here in Kigali because of that callousness. (208)

Ironically, the UN, which is supposed to be the world's hope, is now serving as an instrument of oppression and destruction. No wonder, Françoise ridicules it and calls it a "clown house" (196) and Alain refers to the foreign powers like the UN and the USA as the so-called "Civilized world" (210). Such a war orchestrated and executed by the western powers has brought a number of miseries to the Rwandan people. The government soldiers and the *interahamwe* thugs openly invade houses, hospitals, offices and university campuses. There is general insecurity in the land. Those who manage to escape to the convent are captured and killed by the soldiers. There is wanton destruction of lives and property. Pregnant women are openly slaughtered. Maidens are raped. Children have their throats slit. Thousands of people die in the carnage. Even those who survive the war are completely dehumanized. They live in bitterness and hatred and they regularly experience nightmares.

The plot of the play revolves around Rose, one of the victims of the war. She loses Christine, her daughter, Jean, her son and Pierre, her husband, because she is a Hutu

and her husband is regarded as a traitor. Her humiliation with the death of her children as narrated by her provokes pity and terror:

I threw myself down in the mud and pleaded with them [...] they laughed, and took me into the bush, and I [...] gave them my body, one after another [...] And then, when the last of them was still on top of me, I heard the screaming on the road, and above it, the raucous laughter of the *interahamwe* thugs [...] I heard them screaming for their mother as thugs hit them again and again with the butts of their guns and crushed their skull! [...] I saw it, the blood [...] I fainted. (184–85)

Rose is completely traumatized and dehumanized. To her all those grand themes about humanity, culture and civilization which she learns in Françoise's class are all lies. All the humanity in her has been killed. She is tired of life and wants to turn into a mask so that she can stop brooding over her grief. Rose is fortunate to have Françoise, her former schoolteacher around her. Françoise encourages her to accept the situation as an act of God. To Françoise "those moments [...] are to test us, to help renew our strength. We must never succumb to despair" (188).

Osofisan preponderates the play with the horrors of the Rwandan war to provoke us to reason and thereby condemn war in its entirety wherever it is found in the world. The playwright condemns and compels us to regard the shameless and wanton destruction of lives in the Rwandan war as an unfortunate waste to the African continent and to humanity. All four characters in the play—Françoise, Rose, Jean-Baptiste and Alain—are in one way or the other victims of the war.

Describing the war, Alain observes: "For we are talking of genocide. Not just the usual crimes against humanity, but the systematic and cold-blooded elimination of a portion of the populace" (197). Jean-Baptiste also remarks about the killings:

Callous murderers! They killed and raped and maimed my people [...] Such a pogrom as we've never witnessed on this continent! Genocide, Françoise! I was here, I saw it all... The savagery of it all! The wanton callousness! You just can't imagine it! [...] In the night, shooting began on the campus. Soldiers and militia had invaded the dormitories [...] Somehow I found myself at last in the forest. I was bleeding all over, from machet wounds and knife cuts. I tore my shirt into bandages, bound my wounds the best I could [...] We've had civil wars here before, we've killed one another. But this was different! It was coldly planned. Systematically, brutally executed! These were no random killings at all. The militias were trained by the government for this specific purpose [...] And the politicians at the UN went on with their debates while the blood of thousands flowed on the streets [...] If you'd stopped anywhere, and stepped into the bush, even just a couple of steps, you'd have stumbled against the mounds of human bones and decapitated heads in the long grass. (199–202)

One other serious theme, which Osofisan addresses in this text, is the fate and the dilemma of the refugees of the war. While the streets are littered with corpses and people's nostrils twitch because of the pervasive odour those who manage to escape seek protection and refuge. The UN troops on the so-called Peace Keeping Mission cannot guarantee the security of the refugees. According to Jean-Baptiste "even the aid you carry there, the soldiers and the *interahamwe* thugs are the ones who corner them" (204). The refugees are thus left to starve to death. The few strong ones scrounge around. Françoise laments the parlous condition of the refugees:

I mean literally thousands—sitting, lying appallingly in this mud, dying in pools of vomit and diarrhoea, with nobody able to help them. Large-eyed children with bloated stomachs, mobs and mobs of them in all kinds of rags, scavenging everywhere, fighting each other ferociously to collect dead bodies and carry them to the large pits dug by the aid workers, so they can earn some tips [...] A Canadian journalist, a friend of mine, burst into tears by my side at the sight, and became a nervous wreck. She had to be flown out at once [...] So what do you want us to do, with such horrendous misery before us? (203—04)

The problem of refugees is an endemic and a recurrent issue in Africa. It is also one of the unfortunate consequences of war. According to Charny (2007), it is prevalent in the Darfur region of Sudan, Chad, northern Uganda, Ivory Coast, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to the Refugees International's report revealed by Charny, "there are about three million refugees and eleven million internally displaced people on the African continent, which represents about 40% of the total number of people displaced by conflict in the world." After the assassination of President Laurent Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo in January 2001 and the subsequent appointment of his son, Joseph Kabila as President, many of the refugees in Congo were attacked by the Tanzanian troops in their bid to escape and look for food elsewhere. The war in Congo has "claimed an estimated three million lives, either as a direct result of fighting or because of disease and malnutrition." The refugees of war are often seen as unwelcome guests. They are thus subjected to a number of humiliations. Many died of starvation (BBC News Africa). War thus becomes one of the most ferocious and destructive forces responsible for the emergence of refugees.

The survivors of the war are full of fear, hatred, bitterness and distrust for one another. Rose, for instance suffers from insomnia, schizophrenia and hallucination that she longs to go back to the spot where her children were murdered. Françoise also notices that the war has changed the personality of Jean-Baptiste:

Françoise: Your eyes, J. B. something has changed in your eyes. Suddenly I don't recognize you any more.

Jean-Baptiste: I know what you mean. We're turned into walking corpses, many of us. (222)

The survivors of the war daily experience psychological and psychotic tortures.

Osofisan depicts in this play that there cannot be an end to this war unless there is true reconciliation. True reconciliation can only be achieved if all the culprits of the war are brought to book. This view is reinforced by Alain: "not until justice is done, some kind of restitution [...] Unless and until the killers are brought to book the worlds have learnt nothing. And full reconciliation would be impossible here" (207). Therefore it becomes imperative for Alain and Jean-Baptiste to search for the culprits of the war so that they can be prosecuted. This is what leads to the discussion between Françoise and Jean-Baptiste with Alain. During the meeting, Françoise brings out Rose so that Jean-Baptiste can help her to overcome her nightmares. Ironically, it does not take Jean-Baptiste a long time to identify Rose as one of the worst murderers of the Tutsis.

Investigation reveals that the government uses the educated and the influential women in government to exterminate "Rwanda's most experienced professionals, those essential to the development of the country" (217). Rose is identified as one of the most influential women in government because she works in the office of the Prime Minister, Mrs Agatha Unwilingiyamana, as a lawyer. Initially, Rose denies ever participating in the killings. As the confrontation becomes intensified, Rose confesses and admits that Jean-Baptiste's allegations are true. This admittance of guilt leaves Françoise bewildered since she has always regarded Rose as an innocent suffering woman. This climactic scene of confrontation is similar to the scene of confrontation between Inspector Akindele and Chief Ereniyi in *The Inspector and the Hero* (1990). The difference though is that while Chief Ereniyi's wife offers a bribe to Inspector Akindele, Rose on the other hand accepts responsibility for the murder of many people during the war and prepares herself for prosecution.

Asked why she chooses to join the killers, Rose says "and my courage failed me [...] Yes, I surrendered to their hate, I became a killer too. And after that, there was no turning back" (220). Osofisan insists that justice be done so that there can be true reconciliation and so the war can end. This view had been expressed earlier by Osofisan in one of the subtitles of *A Restless Run of Locusts* (1975) that says, "But after a war, there is reconciliation, after a war, there must be reconciliation" (41). Françoise pleads with Jean-Baptiste to have compassion on Rose for she believes that it is only through compassion that the war can end. But Jean-Baptiste insists on prosecuting Rose and all other culprits of the war: "If we do not punish those who make genocide happen, no man on this planet will ever be safe. Just the fact of being born in a certain place with certain features would be sufficient crime for someone to condemn you to gruesome death. Is that what you want? No Françoise, it's a duty we all owe ourselves to fulfil." (222) Rose knows the end has come. She gives up herself for trial and bids her alter ego, Françoise goodbye with an embrace. It is a sad, but inevitable parting for both of them. Rose, the heroine of the play is torn between divine justice and natural

justice. Osofisan juxtaposes the efficacy of divine and natural justice and boasts of their potency to identify torture and punish the wicked. Jean-Baptiste, a Tutsi government official is a symbol of natural justice while the Yoruba death mask symbolizes the divine or supernatural justice.

To Osofisan, the wicked cannot go unpunished. That is why Rose is tormented daily by the blood of those she has slain. She too confesses: "The nightmares would have followed me there. All the blood on my hands [...] there's no escape. Goodbye" (223). Surely for her, there is no escape. This is divine justice in operation, as the blood of the slain cries up for justice just as the blood of the slain Biblical Abel cried unto God for vengeance. That is also why Rose is haunted by the Yoruba ritual death mask. This mask is used to invoke the spirits of the dead. Each time Rose sees this mask or looks at the mirror, she is always tormented as her face always looks like the face of a monster. Eventually natural justice catches up with her when Jean-Baptiste arrests her for possible trial.

Osofisan in *Reel, Rwanda*, seems to be saying therefore that for the incessant killings, massacres, arsons and ethnic clashes to stop in countries like Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan, Burundi and others, culprits of the wars must be tried and punished, so that there will be true reconciliation. No country can survive or exist as a true nation where there is unity and peaceful co-existence without justice and fair play. The recent carnage in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria has been likened by Wole Soyinka to the Rwanda genocide. Osofisan's play thus has a timeless applicability.

The play, *Reel, Rwanda*, is replete with images of horror, fear and death to depict the evils of wanton destruction of human lives. This exemplification accentuates the tragic tone of the play. Rose, the heroine of the play is pitched against certain inevitable antagonistic forces of life to which she naturally submits herself. Rose is a woman of courage and of aristocratic standing. She falls because she is completely overwhelmed by the internal and external forces and pressures of life. The play is therefore a splendid attempt made by Osofisan at transposing history to the stage.

In conclusion, Femi Osofisan *Nkrumah-Ni...Africa-ni!* is a vivacious historical drama that interrogates the problem of political leadership in Africa and its role in the failure of African independence focusing on Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral and Sekou Toure "who are generally regarded as radical, enlightened and charismatic in their time, but whose contribution has nevertheless yielded no better results in their countries than in others with less gifted leadership" (Osofisan, *Insidious Treasons* 233). The play is skilfully packaged to portray Nkrumah's doom and to celebrate his greatness. *Reel, Rwanda* should be seen as Osofisan's call for reconciliation and justice as panacea for the success of democracy in Africa. The two plays are, therefore, Osofisan's radical comments on the socio-political challenges facing the African continent.

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