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NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CONCEPT OF COMPASSION IN OSOFISAN’S *ESU AND THE VAGABOND MINSTRELS*

Adebola Adebambo Ademeso

INTRODUCTION: DRAMA AND SOCIETY

The most prominent preoccupation of drama in society is in its function as a tool for social change. If drama cannot be designed for the good of society, it means then that it is a wasted enterprise, according to the Marxist ideology of literature (Eagleton, 1976). Drama may be based on the historical, political, social, religious, and economic events of a society, and if it is meant for the promotion and appraisal of the status quo without a considerable and practical motive for the advancement and upliftment of the masses, it is not to be considered as a functional drama. Drama as Marxist literature is masses-oriented. It is a medium of expression for the oppressed. Such drama is tilted towards a better society, and a redefinition of man within the ambit of humanity. Thus, it attacks man’s inhumanity to man.

Humanist literature, on the other hand, promotes the qualities of life of man. It re-emphasizes the nature and the relevance of man to his society, fellow human beings, and to himself. The aim of such literature is not to change the society through “radical” means but rather to maintain the “good” qualities of man. Religious plays are meant either to bring man closer to God or to promote religious doctrine, while morality plays are meant to make man reexamine his conscience in relation to his attitudes to his fellow man and his society at large. This of course gives support to the religious plays, for morality and religious life of the people are for both the spirit and heart of man. This is a means through which man sees himself as man and not as animal. The focus of the above premise is to outline the various reasons why drama exists in a society and to assert that it
is aimed towards a changing society and for the betterment of man. It is from this angle that Femi Osofisan’s *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* will be discussed in this chapter.

**RECONSTRUCTING A SOCIETY THROUGH MORALITY PLAYS**

Marxist aesthetics promotes the good of a society by identifying with the good condition of the common man in that society. The humanist sees humanity as the basis for a better society, while the religious doctrine targets the conscience, man’s heart, the general behavior of man in relation to his fellow human beings, society and God, without being compelled to be just only for material gains. The ability to discern truth from lies, the just from the unjust, and right from wrong is the attribute of morality. However, morality is an ideological basis for the plays that seek to change the status quo, or deconstruct the social and political class polluted by the materialistic desire of man. Therefore, it is only a moral man (a man who holds morality as a basic condition for the existence of man) who will postulate various ideological theses for a better society. His ideological view, perceived as moral, could use political, economic, social, or religious theses as its bedrock.

In the late Middle Ages, morality plays developed after the religious plays which were regarded as mystery plays. It was termed a morality play:

> by the fact that it was a dramatized ALLEGORY in which the abstract virtues and vices (like mercy, conscience, perseverance, and shame) appear in personified form, the good and the bad usually being engaged in a struggle for the soul of man. (Thrall, 293)

The essence of morality plays was therefore not to determine the moral upbringing of man alone but to lay a good foundation for a better society through man that lives in such a society. Man is the bedrock and the mainstay of society; he determines the economy, politics and religion of his society.

Femi Osofisan’s *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* is an example of a morality play that is meant to tune the various human perceptions to the reality of class structure with a guided hold on the social, political, and economic views of man using the myth of Eṣu, a deity in the Yorùbá pantheon, as the illustrative medium. The thrust of the play is in its explicit illustration of the opposing views between humanity and inhumanity, between human compassion and the blind quest for material values at the expense of an oppressed society. It is a play that seeks to examine the basis of change in the society. Man is seen as the catalyst for a revolution, and if such a man is corrupt and inhuman, society is bound to
go back to the gutter and chain. Man is at the center of his society and the tool for self-determination and emancipation. The society, to Osofisan, is filled with oppressive conditions in the form of class disparity, unequal distribution of wealth and material means, corruption of all forms, killing and assaults, lawlessness, and injustice. As reflected in many of Osofisan’s works: Birthdays are not for Dying, The Inspector and the Hero, The Chattering and the Song, Who’s Afraid of Solarin?, Once Upon Four Robbers, Morountodun, and Midnight Hotel, the only thing that society needs is to embark on the creation of a new order through a “new” man. Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels as a morality play is a thesis aimed at searching for a new man, for a total reexamination and redefinition of a man who could truly live above human temptations in the world of dialectical materialism.

A SEARCH FOR A NEW MAN AND THE OPPOSING IDEOLOGIES

Osofisan sees modern society as being dominated by opposing ideologies; the world of materialism, and the world of humanity where the need to survive does not rely on the amount of wealth one is able to acquire but on how much one can give to the needy; how much relief one can give to the people in pain or how much water one can give to a thirst. The class structure in this way does not preoccupy itself exclusively with the material well being of the elites alone. It means, however, that amongst the poor or common people, or the masses, there prevails oppression, as pointed out by Paulo Freire. The Minstrels are poor and they have a common goal-to-survive, but only one of them, Omele, could see things beyond material acquisition. The search for a good society does not necessarily mean that the common man is the most prefect man for the job. The poor man must be examined so that if he finds himself at the helm of affairs, he would not turn against the masses.

The man who would lead the society out of its predicament does not have to be a poor man alone; but if a rich man, with a pure heart, and full of compassion for humanity is available, the revolution could start from there. The bottom line of Osofisan’s canon in Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels is that through compassion a new society could be created: the society of Omele where charity brings the people of different races, minds, and origins together. Omele, a character in the play affirms:

Charity! That was the creed we were all raised on, and the whole village practiced it! Not even a stranger passed by without finding a roof, or a warm bed. They taught us to always give, freely, like

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Mother Nature. They said God owned everything, and that every man was a creature of God. Created in his image! (7)

Compassion and charity must also be supported with the fear of God, and it is upon this premise that society could be seen as truly egalitarian. Human compassion gives rise to the blessings of God, if man can have the fear of God. The balance on which the world is created, according to Osofisan, has “the forces of Good and those of Evil” (17) and these, in turn, are represented by human feelings, and the quest for material wealth. This is why Esu puts all the Minstrels to the test by giving them a charm that will make them rich, provided they are willing to help any human being that comes their way and is in need, the reason being, according to Old Man, that:

Esu loves to help man but only when they show that they can live happily among other human beings. For human beings are greedy...
Esu does not see into the hearts of men, only their actions... (18)

Man’s virtues and vices determine his closeness to glory and eternal poverty. It is an attempt on the part of Osofisan to create a balanced judgment through the deeds of man: what he has been able to achieve through his effort. The trick in the charm could only work if the minstrels sing and dance with a suffering man. The Minstrels are the representatives of the individual members of society, especially those that are pursuing the same goal: survival. While Epo Oyinbo would prefer to invest his magical power on an impotent rich man for “House,” “Lands,” and to “be one of the wealthiest men in the land” (24). Sinsin takes a wealthy man who uses human beings to make money as her choice, and all the other Minstrels choose material things, the only things they could invest their healing charm on, thereby denying the suffering of the healing power. Only Omele could save a woman who has been pregnant for nine years from the agony and shame, for nothing and against the wishes of his friends. He also relieves a couple with leprosy because he sees them as human beings in need of help. To Omele,

It’s my choice! It’s no use now. If I let you go, I’ll never grow old.
For I’ll never know happiness again! I’ll be thinking only of this single moment of cowardice, when I turned away some...human being in need...I’ll do it, even though I’m trembling (52)

Omele prefers to “gamble” with his life just for the protection of humanity and to denounce all the riches in the world as the sources of happiness, which his fellow musicians preach. Apart from this, the lepers also appeal to his emotion to restrain him and also to put to the test the extent of his willingness (true conscience) and commitment, as reflected in the words of Femalo Leper:
Young man, may be after all...may be you shouldn’t try. I’m afraid suddenly, afraid for you! Look at you. You’re so young! We’re older at least. We’ve known life, given birth to children, made something of our lives! Even if death comes now, it cannot come with too much regret... (52)

It is a way to discourage Omele, but if true commitment is the bedrock of an action, no matter the implication, one would be ready to bear it. The positive result of an action (especially for the benefit of the majority) should be an overriding impulse or motivating factor for a cause. Omele knows that he is taking a risk just for the happiness of the leper – couple against all pressures from his friends and the condition for using the charm. Omele’s words affirm this:

It doesn’t matter. I accept. Don’t blame yourselves, it was my decision. What was I before now anyway? A Corpse! So what does it matter? I remain a corpse. I accept... (5)

This statement is in consonance with the idea that no life is thrown away or wasted for the sake of humanity. If a sacrifice is made for the progress and advancement of society or individuals in need, the joy derivable from this gesture is more than living in a world of affluence. What is in the life of a common man if he cannot make a sacrifice? This is quite different from the theory of “scapegoatism” in the Soyinka plays—The Strong Breed, Death and the King’s Horseman, and The Bacchae of Euripides—where the playwright deals with the issues of carriers that are compelled to carry out the spiritual cleansing of the society because of their class or social status. Society forces Eman to be a carrier; tradition, as a unit of society, turns Elesin Oba into a purifying tool for the progress of society, while Tiresias accepts his fate as the carrier of the societal burden. Omele’s disposition is a clear indication that man can, if the need avails itself, submit, willingly, for the progress of humanity. He deprives himself of all the immediate needs and the material quest, for the salvation of humanity and the continuous existence of the will power of man. Omele says:

Because it doesn’t matter to me. I have only one life, and it’s not worth much. I’ve always lived in want, as a vagabond. Oh yes, my life itself has been like leprosy. So I am used to it, I can live like this for the rest of my wretched life. But look at them, aren’t they handsome as they are? They have a name, a career, they have kid. They have money in the bank, an insurance policy no doubt, THEIR LIFE IS A HYMN TO THE FUTURE. SOCIETY NEEDS THEM, NOT THE DREGS like me. (66)
Omele’s gesture towards a total submission to leprosy for the sake of the leprous couple is not of self-glorification or gratification or in expectation of the material rewards. Compare the above speech of Omele to the speech below, by Epo Oyinbo:

We have reduced suffering for ourselves! No more hunger and no more wandering for us! Finished, the Vagabond life. We’ve planted our feet down firmly in fortune! (59)

One may therefore conclude that society is purely dialectical in all the spheres of human endeavor, especially in the material and wealth acquisition. In spite of his outright rejection by his friends, Omele still identifies with them. He sees himself as the product of his society and therefore cannot dissociate himself from the society or isolate himself. An individual must, however, be ready to accept both the good and the bad side of life, even if he is not a part of the creation of such results. When Omele’s friends chase his witness away, he is asked by the Old Man to put up a charge against them, but out of his compassionate feeling he does not see the need for a fight. According to Omele:

Nothing. What shall I do against them? They were once my comrades. They taught me all I know. How to sing, and lie and fight. Shall I turn all that against them? I am part of them (65).

OSOFISAN AND THE GODS

Omele’s punishment (or is it reward?) for his compassionate disposition is caught in the webs of dialectics when the Old Man (Esu) appears in his characteristic trickery, by allowing the audience to subscribe to the debate. Omele is therefore rewarded while his friends are “writhing in agony as they are caught by the dreadful god, and gradually covered in spots” (68). In some of the plays of Ososfan, such as *No More the Wasted Breed*, he sees gods as non-superhuman, as the people see them to be when they cheat and oppress humanity. The status of the gods is given to them by man and they can be derobed by man. The gods can also fall or make mistakes like men; they are not perfect. In *Another Raft* the gods do not exist but the muscles and the forces of man can make man survive his predicaments. In *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, Ososfan demystifies the age-old perception of modern man’s attitudes towards the issues of Esu. Most Christians in Africa believe strongly that *Esu* is the same person referred to in the Bible as the Devil or Satan, whereas the appropriate parallel or the equivalent of the Christian’s Devil does not exist in the Yoruba pantheon. Esu is one of the deities in the Yoruba pantheon known as the “errand boy” of Orunmila. He is a “trickster god of revolt and unpredictable forces,” an embodiment of
“the principle of justice whose operation often eludes man’s predictive abilities” (Awodiya, 73). To any ordinary human being, Esu is synonymous to all forms of negative thought and deed of human beings. The tragic end of man and the eventual death, collapse, or total extinction of a society is regarded as the manifestation of the handiwork of Esu as replicated in the study of traditional African philosophy and religion using Western paradigms by Western trained scholars (Sophie B. Oluwole, 2007).

Osofisan wants us to believe that Esu, as a bad god, is only in our minds and does not exist, but that our own efforts and deeds bring about whatever results or situation in which we find ourselves. However, God creates the world with two sides like a coin – the good and the bad attributes – and therefore leaves man to make his choice, and the responsibility of Esu, according to Osofisan, is to oversee these affairs and dispense justice. Esu sees his power in the affairs of men as a divine one. Old Man says: “The owner of the World has created a balance between the forces of Good and those of Evil. He appointed Esu to watch over them…” (17). It is in this light that Osofisan finds the motif of Esu as the most relevant in determining the fate of the Minstrels who are in need. Their fate, of course, hinges on how their compassion can yield to the need of humanity. He does not go to them but they come to the crossroads to meet him with the hope of dinning with him. Redio says: “We’ve come to the end of the road. And it looks like you can help us, as a priest of the gods” (17-18).

SEPETERI: THE CROSSROADS AND THE DESTINY OF MAN

The crossroads where Esu resides is the meeting point for the good and the bad attributes of humanity. It is a symbol of confusion which Esu himself represents. It provides a variety of choice for people to choose. Man could, through the crossroads, choose the road that leads to eternal tragedy or poverty. It is the choice of man that determines his success in life. Esu allows man to use his will power, through determination at the crossroads, to determine his doom, failure, or success. The Minstrels find it difficult to proceed on their journey when they get to the crossroads in search of food because they are unsure of where to get food. Symbolically each of them represents a road, which they must take. Their decision becomes a way out of their difficult situation. The crossroads, then, become a chessboard to the human beings and the gods. A man who cannot use his brain well in the game becomes a successful pawn in the hands of the gods. Esu puts the Minstrels to the test here in order to seek a new man who will change society through his selfless service and sacrifices to humanity. Male Leper says:
Esu Laaroje, lord of crossroads, trickster, he set you a test, to see whether between compassion and greed, you would know the road to take; between material wealth, so ephemeral and the unseen riches of tenderness... (68)

Osofisan sees both the crossroads and the Minstrels as metaphors to the contemporary social, political, and economic situations in society. Every society is at the crossroads as far as the situations of life are concerned. Man is therefore free to choose either the right panacea to his problems or pursue ‘worldly material’ and lead himself to eternal doom. The progress and the fate of man are therefore in his hands. Revolution should thus begin from within the man.

Orunmila is the molder and the symbol of knowledge and wisdom of humanity but the examination officer is Esu. However, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* could be seen as the springboard for social change for its strong diagnosis of man’s attitude towards material acquisition and oppression. Materialism, to Osofisan is the bane of modern society because the average individual wants to consolidate his selfish and corrupt gains, leaving the idea of better society in the hands of the powerless, the oppressed. The political and economic life of society is being controlled by the greedy and corrupt few, and the only way to change society is to embark on a search for compassionate men. The oppressive class that the oppressed tries to break is seen as the model for the oppressed. What some oppressed people try to avoid is the immediate pains afflicted on them by their oppressors; they, too, want to oppress the people below them. In the case of the Minstrels they aspire to be in the position of affluence so that they can determine the life of the class below them. Consider Redio’s words:

Come here, boy! Have you swept the carpet this morning? The cars, you’ve washed them? And madam’s dirty clothes? Yes? You’ve bathed the kids? What of the dog, have you taken it for a walk? And, God, all this dust on the furniture! Why do you think I’m paying you all that money? As soon as you take your pay tomorrow, you have... you are sacked! Pack your load and leave the boy’s quarters! Don’t ask me where you’re going, idiot! Go to hell if you wish!... (42)

Osofisan strongly believes that the oppressed exhibit the trait of “dog eats dog” because they do not fight for true causes but selfish needs. He sees Omele as the only person aspiring to be nothing in his quest for struggle. This raises, therefore, a question left unanswered. How can collective force work when there are people with selfish motives outnumbering the few committed ones? If the collective force is strong with a true determination and conviction, society would be better for the collective good of the majority.

In his attempt to portray the gods as the reasoning entities, like man, Osofisan makes the gods – Esu, Obaluaye, Orunmila and Yeye Osun – to participate in
the play of man. He brings them closer to man as in the Greek plays. Though the Minstrels are made to see Esu as the Priest of Esu, Old Man, Orunmila, and Yeye Osun as Male Leper and Female Leper respectively, as part of the dramatic technique in the contradiction that makes the play a symbolic one. It should therefore not be interpreted as a play of lies and deception. Esu is known as trickster and Ososifan sees this motif of deception as the only way to test the nature of man in the world of an unending quest for wealth. In Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), Dionysus appears as the ordinary man but Ososifan uses this technique of making the gods to appear on stage to test man’s knowledge of himself. He believes that man must be brought out of the world of perpetual illusions to the world of reality. The reality in this case is in his self-realization.

*Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, like *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle*, has some historical events that need to be pointed out. The play, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, is set during a period when a coup has just taken place, and it has a metaphorical relevance to the Nigerian coup of 1983 led by Major General Mohammed Buhari and Brigadier General Tunde Idrisogbon which dramatically sent the elected civilian government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari packing. The excuse was based on the gross abuse of power and high level of corruption and sycophancy among the government officials. See Chief’s sarcasm:

With the coup d’etat and the change of government in the capital.
"The government changes, the people remain". Let them go on with their fighting over there in the Capital! (1)

With the arrival of the new government the people are exposed to all forms of torture and inhuman treatment. For a proper understanding of why the military struck in 1983, another work should be read, for Ososifan catalogued this in his play, *Midnight Hotel*, and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* provides the dilemma of a nation in transition and strong effect of the military take-over. Many of the civilian government apologists, sycophants, contractors, and businessmen were cowed with the various decrees, all in a bid to stamp out all forms of corruption and indiscipline. Nigerians never forget the historic WAR AGAINST INDISCIPLINE (WA1), which later became a common song and later changed to WA1-C during the late General Sanni Abacha’s regime, many people were either imprisoned or beaten and those who had the opportunity to escape went into exile.

The musicians in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* are the types of Minstrels (praise-singers) in the era of the Second Republic of Nigeria who became scavengers in their land because they were jobless. Epo Oyinbo’s words below justify this:

The band has been proscribed. They said we play too much for the politicians. We were banned, and all our assets seized! So when do you think the new government will change its mind about us. (11)
The unbearable conditions of the Minstrels are a metaphor for the experience of the masses during the reign of a dictator. The only consolation is that, "Governments are not eternal. Some day there'll be another one, with its ideas" (11), according to Redio. Ososfan converts and subverts history in order to give strength, in terms of relevance and authority, to his metaphor. It should be seen as a thesis that tries to project the idea that the society should not be made to suffer beyond human endurance if revolution is to be effected. It is only the living that carries on the revolution. To mix historical events with fiction in a dramatic piece like Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels is to make society to see itself within the ambit of the overall result of such a play. The dilemma of the crossroads, Sepeteri, the residence of Esu according to the Yoruba mythology, is the dilemma of the society that is going through a socio-political and economic transition. The dilemma in this case is as a result of the conflicting and vague (ambiguous) ideological points of view expressed or postulated as the panacea to the society's problem.

Ososfan, in Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels, does not see the problem of society from the political point of view alone; he sees the moral question as the yardstick for measuring the sincerity and credibility of individuals' commitment towards the advancement of their society. How sincere is the military or the civilian government in delivering the masses from protracted suffering? This posture, of course, does not seek to heighten the skepticism pervading the minds of people but to make the individuals to reexamine and redefine their positions and conscience with the aim of improving the status of humanity. In the "Song of Khaki and Agbada" Ososfan makes us to view the civilian and the military governments as the offshoots of corruption, gross embezzlement of public funds, and abuse of power. One is the "imitation" of the other:

Khaki and Agbada
De two dey waka together
Khaki comes to power
Imitate Agbada!
Agbada come to power
And go dey do like Khaki
Power dey sweet man pikin! (2)

The most fashionable ways of leaking (looting) the national treasury is "with immediate effect" or "with immediate dispatch" by buying a "jet for Mecca" or "going to shop in Rome." They have also perfected the art of buying up food available in the market to the detriment of the common man. But "still Agbada no go care and then Khaki go thunder."

The play treats the issue of human compassion as a pointer to the universal problem of oppression (in all ramifications) motivated by the "mad quest for class
and power” through the acquisition or wealth. Osofisan wants us to see man as the sole determining factor in the kind of life in which he finds himself. He is the foundation and the peak of his society. The immediate society of Osofisan provides a variety of great influences on his visionary posture. He sees his society (Nigeria) as a microcosm of Africa and a universal symbol. The socio-political and economic progress of a nation lies in its ability to disassociate itself from all forms of superstition about the existence of the god or goddess as the determining factor for the fate of man. It is only when the reality of the world of illusion is; x-rayed that man can see himself as his own god and goddess. Man is, therefore, not a property of the goddess. Man is also not a property of another man; he is the property of himself. Osofisan’s views of life are in consonance with the late existentialist philosopher and writer, Albert Camus who expressed the view that moral value has a primary role to play in the social, political, and economic life of a society, thus leading to national development.

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