

A RECONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO MYTHOLOGICAL AESTHETICS IN OSOFISAN'S ANOTHER RAFT

Kemi Rashidat Olatinwo

Abstract

The commitment of Osofisan's *Another Raft*, focuses on emancipation of the masses in a society where unbalanced class structure exists through cultural retrieval and revival particularly myths. The paper employs a textual reconstructionist approach to mythological aesthetics in Femi Osofisan's play *Another Raft* and delves into the intricate interplay between myth and aesthetics; examines Osofisan's innovative interpretation of traditional myths. It investigates how the playwright reconstructs mythological elements to create a unique aesthetic experience, shedding light on the socio-cultural implication of the transformative context of *Another Raft*. The myth theory was used as analytical instrument to expose the relationship between revolution and myth and the process of history. The paper discovered that Osofisan deplors myths in *Another Raft* for the purpose of achieving cultural retrieval and revival; social transformation using counter text approach. The paper concludes that Osofisan's *Another Raft* brings to fore mythological elements on one hand to embellish his dramaturgy; and on the other hand, to step towards the promotion and modernization of oral performance as indices of identity for African literary plays through which society can be transformed.

Keywords: mythological elements, cultural retrieval and revival, textual reconstruction

Introduction

There exists a symbiotic relationship between culture, tradition and modern plays in Africa. This relationship is highlighted by Irele (1990) who believes that the 'distinctive' impact of written African literature in European languages is striving to attain the condition of

oral expression even within the boundaries established by Western literary conventions. The development of African literature leads to various reflections on the future of the continent and its ever increasing population. This brings about the development of drama on the African continent; through which most African writers present various themes on issues affecting their societies. The major source of inspiration for African creative authors would naturally raise the subject of myth as a major source of material in African literary writings. Play as an art form, naturally concentrates on human problems and aspirations; and the African playwright taps from the traditional material sources as major tropes to deliver his message. Though influenced by the exposure to education, culture and Western Worldview, the African oral tradition still remains a strong source of material for African dramaturgy to achieve its purpose.

The paper therefore examines how Osofisan employs myths to create literary aestheticism using elements of subversion typified by legendary figure in *Another Raft*. Femi Osofisan is a Nigerian playwright touted as one of the notable second generation writers. Specifically, this work *Another Raft*, is a re-working/reconstruction of oral cultural material materials particularly myths to cater for his socio-political and artistic targets. The mythological materials in *Another Raft* include history, myths, legends, folktales, music, songs and dance. Osofisan's choice necessitated by his ability to synthesise traditional elements of play and modern techniques of theatre in his series of attempts to project injustices, moral decadence, corruption, deprivation, hypocrisy of political leaders and other societal ills. His natural artistry simplicity and the use of corroboratory natural images in the play endears it as a complete play in the true African sense as the spectators are thoroughly entertained as well as informed.

Osofisan as a Social Crusader

African writers and playwrights are social crusaders who have used their literary works to express their concern over the depressing conditions in the society. Social writers and playwrights like Ngugi wa

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa Mirii, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ayikwe Armah, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi among others have used their literary works to liberate the people and sensitize them on the imperative to have and maintain an ideal society through protest against all forms of oppression that tend to pauperize them. Osofisan's most intriguing and significant contribution to African drama has been his proactive link of mythological resources to knowledge and myth, which he takes as pivotal in challenging and conscientizing post-independent Nigeria. This paper explores Osofian's contribution to the use of myth in his play texts with primary focus on *Another Raft* as a play used to achieve socio-political change.

Reviewing of the development trends in Nigerian theatre from the post independent era to the present day, there has been a noticeable change in the tone and dimension of Nigerian plays both in contents and form. This, no doubt is as a result of the influence of oral traditions being reworked in contemporary African play as a deliberate attempt at indigenizing dramaturgy. The Marxist overtone could be detected in his writings, like in the works of other African radical writers with ideological motivations such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sembene Ousmane. Handling of African oral tradition is peculiar because of the re-orientation of such elements of artistic forms of communication (oral story-telling ode, myths, legends, folktales, songs, riddle, jokes and oral poetry) in a new creative milieu. This is a proof that a playwright is breaking a new ground in the radical use of oral traditions to meet the challenges of contemporary socio-historical situations and to espouse his vision for the society.

Theoretical Framework

Myth has been in existence for the past centuries so also evolutionism and diffusionism as reaction to functionalism and structuralism which generated the 'grand narratives' of human development and focused on the forms of myths worldwide. It shows that human beings and their cultural artifacts have much in common. It is an undeniable the fact that any aspect of a culture, including myths,

is a specific, local form of something found in other cultures as well. The concept of myth predominates African cosmology; and as a result, the study of myth in African literary contexts encompasses a complex relation between African literature and universal theorizing. The creation of myth is quite for some reasons including the explanation of the unknown, natural events and forces, to show the duality and pureness of human nature and human mind, and to help societies maintain law and order and remain stable among other reasons.

Another Raft and Socio-Economic Situation in Nigeria

Nigerian political and economic landscape is bedeviled with corruption, poverty unemployment, insecurity, political instability and upheaval and bad governance. Economic situation has polarized the people into two classes-the poor and the rich, the privilege and the marginalized, the ruler and the ruled. The gap between these categorises of class continue to widen as a result of the factors mentioned above and leadership failure to prevent kleptomaniac in plundering the nation's resources and common wealth diverted into the private pockets and use by the political class. It is this appalling situation that Osofisan reacts to in his dramaturgy as typified by *Another Raft* which aims at effecting societal change by sensitizing the poor to take their destiny *into* their hands by revolting against oppression.

Myth in *Another Raft*

Another Raft coming after notable plays like *who is Afraid of Solarin? Morountodun, Once Upon Four Robbers, Chattering and the Song*. Obviously, a myth such as this one functions as an explanation, but the narrative form distinguishes it from a straight forward answer to an intellectual question about causes. The function of explanation and the narrative form go together, since the imaginative power of the myth lends credibility to the explanation and crystallizes it into a memorable and enduring form. Hence, myths play an important part in many traditional systems of education which is used extensively in Osofisan's *Another Raft*. Many myths explain ritual and cultic customs. Also ritual

sacrifices are typical of traditional peasant cultures. In most cases such customs are related to mythical events. In every mythological tradition one myth or cluster of myths tends to be central. The subject of the central mythology is often cosmos (origin of the cosmos). Ruling families in ancient civilizations frequently justified their position by invoking myths – for example, that they had divine origins. And in every known cultural tradition there exist some mythological foundation that is referred. Mythology has already been demonstrated his various literary works, has also exerted an aesthetic influence in more modern societies. Example is the prevalence of themes from Greek and Roman classical mythology in Western painting, sculpture and literature. It is this realization of the role of myth plays in literature and other arts that myths are explored and exploited to send clear messages to his audience in his poetic and literary works.

Osofisan's *Another Raft* as a Textual Reconstruction of Clark's *The Raft*

Reconstruction in the play begins with the story-telling motif era, Yemosa. In fragments Yemosa one and two make us agree that the whole action is artificially orchestrated. In part five, the scene emphasise the position of the play that gods and their supernatural powers are the creation of man: men must evolve the will power and determination to chart their destiny as stated in the excerpt below.

Excerpt: 1

Gbebe: He was dead before I was born. What do you know about it? He died the day he swore his life to a powerless cult. Let his goddess rescue him now. He gave his life, but that was not enough! They wanted my life too into the bargain, he and his goddess, Break? Please...understand! I've conquered the goddess, haven't I? I've killed her dead at last! (p.43).

The excerpt above shows how Osofisan has used myth to reflect and present contemporary situation as seen in what Gbebe is saying: The creation or reconstruction of a new play based on existing plays is reflects in the play *Another Raft* in his dramaturgical approach. This

artistic creation is established for artistic continuity which paves way for original version text to be used in the production of the new version text.

Reconstructing Myth in *Another Raft*

Clark in *The Raft* presents an absurd-existential condition of humanity on the fatal tide of the Niger Delta using the compressionist form. Each character(s) with different values that populated the raft all die despite their struggle for existence. *The Raft* is a symbolic representation of the Nigerian nation. However, critics consider the death of all the characters on the raft as the total annihilation of the Nigerian society even though Clark in *The Raft* attempts to reflect on the psychological collapse of the Nigerian Nation. The Marxian class who believes seriously in social realism brands him as a critical realist dramatist who does not provide a way forward for the troubled nation. This is the deficient point in *The Raft* which *Another Raft* by Osofisan textual reconstruction responds to. The awakening of the consciousness of the people to create a new Nigeria in Osofisan's *Another Raft* which is not available in *The Raft* is what the demystification and the destruction of the Yemosa-sea spirit stands for. Osofisan leaves the human characters like Reore, Oge and Orousi to take their destinies into their hands without the intervention of supernatural forces. This is demonstrated in the excerpt below.

Excerpt: 2

Itan la mu wa: We have come tonight with an entertaining tale
Keleti feti e gbo o let the hearer hear ... (p.7)

Osofisan adopts story-telling as a device to inform, instruct and educate his audience thereby reconstructing history to reflect contemporary issues. Thus, through narration, Yemosa One awakes and conscientises the audience in the following expression

I am here to warn you about a number of things. Some of you come to the theatre, expecting to see a marvelous world of dreams. A magic world, full of fantastic stunts and fabulous

gadgets, machines flying dizzily through the air like, say, in Arabian Nights...” (Pp.8-9).

In another swift Osofisan adopts the ancient moonlight storytelling technique as a mythological material source to reach out to his teeming audience and critics alike. This style leads to another device employed by him; story-within-a story device which reinforces meaning and develops the main action of the play as highlighted by Yemosa Three: Well my dears, this plays not like that. Our dream here has all its eyes awake. Just like on any of our ancient moonlit nihs a he soy-teller’s ee, all we do here is an open lie, a known and visible fairy-tale, well-worn and it is only your imagination that will colour it (p.9).

Here, we can see how Femi Osofisan makes use of myth, fables and stories in this play and how beautifully he logically presents it. It is therefore, obvious that *Another Raft* is a theatrical thrust that has the potential of questioning the status quo and in the end allowing the people to be active participants in the determination of their fate within historical context by reflecting on various myths of human existence.

Subversion in *Another Raft*

The creation of myth, just like any other artistic creations in African literature, is based on issues, subjects, and objects fundamental to the existence of a community; hence, a story reflect the philosophy of the community within which it is set.

Osofisan in his own artistic composition employs the use of myth and ritual in *Another Raft* and succeeds in experimenting with nature by exploring the mythological resources to depict the social and political problems of his time using the sea goddesses as agents of information dissemination and servicing tool to achieve a desired societal change. Osofisan subverts the divine roles of the Yemosas as they are to be worshipped and served but however, the opposite is the case.

Subverting the royal and divine function of the Yemosas, he now subjects them to the whims and caprices of the citizenry in which ironically the Yemosas are now at the mercy of the people of the land.

Another Raft also prepares the ground for the citizenry to assume their history without the terror of flood or fire... Orousi goes into a chant in supplication to Yemosa. In Orousi expression, the need for the society to have peace is highlighted in the following excerpt.

Excerpt: 3

Orousi: So that we can have peace at last. So the fruit trees can shed the cramp in their waist, the barren earth take seed again, the forlorn farms quicken with the laughter of fresh crops. Yes, so that our people can resume our history, without the terror Flood or fire... (pp. 20-21)

By subverting the royal and divine function of the Yemosa, Osofisan tries to link it with the contemporary issue of the futility in relying on government to change people's condition for the better.

Chants as an element of myth is explored here in the play text. Osofisan does not only adapt the form and exploit the artistic function of mythic culture; he also succeeds in the demystification of gods and goddesses - through subversion.

Mythological materials in *Another Raft*

Osofisan also makes use of incantation as a traditional mythological material in *Another Raft* to disseminate his message; in scene of the play actions reflect employment of mytho-ritual and the playwright's use of incantation drives home his points. Ekuroola's "...chants the incantations..." in the play as follow in this excerpt.

Excerpt: 4

Atankorobiti-korobiti! Atankorobiti-korobiti! Atankorobiti-korobiti!
korobiti! Atankorobiti-korobiti! Ewe aje re (Here, the leaf of
wealth) ... (pp. 78-79)

It is at the end of the incantations that the teams succeed and are able to control their destiny again, as stated by Waje in the play. The use of incantations in the performance of the ritual is a potent tool adopted by Osofisan to recast traditional mythological material to treat contemporary modern issues. The employment of this device by Osofisan is to unfold the importance of Yoruba beliefs in their culture

and to re-echo its superlative sophistication as being largely practiced in the ancient world. On the Raft when it begins to turn slowly from the current though shouting with joy it stops and as harder as they try to push, there is no result. This leads to Orousi conjuring the unseen but spiritual hand to bail them out of their predicament through incantations as seen in the next excerpt.

Excerpt: 5

Oroosi: Iwaju okuu, okun The front of ocean is ocean
 Ehin okun, okun The back of ocean is ocean ...
 (p.97)

Though, Reore is discouraged and exhibited loss of hope in their effort not to be swallowed by the whirlwind. But he is adamant and convinced that the goddess will help as he applies harder.

Songs, Music and dance as mythological materials in *Another Raft*

Songs are important and dominant to most African traditional settings. There can rarely be any performance without the touch of songs and music. Osofisan uses mythological elements laced with songs and music as bases for action in most of his plays and this is obvious in *Another Raft*. At the opening of the play Osofisan for instance brings his audience in contact with songs from the river goddesses (Yemosa one and two) who come singing to the audience what they are about to encounter. Spiritual songs are used to set the 'story's' ball rolling. Songs pervade the play throughout, Yemosa sing and Chorus is sung from time to time as the action of the play demands as can be seen in the excerpt below.

Excerpt: 6

Yemosa One: Let it come, let it go. Row the story like a boat:
Chorus: Je ko lo, je k obo. Enu robo dun o!
Yemosa Two: Move it up, move it down. Words are paddles
 on tongue:
Chorus: Kor' oke o, kor' ole Ahon l'aje oro o! (p.45).

The songs and music are employed to awake and arouse an undivided attention of the audience, because they are as important as the intending message is, not a single line is least crucial to their existence.

The power of dance to communicate in human existence is purposefully used in Osofisan *Another Raft* to achieve the socio-economic and political reforms he proposes in his dramaturgy. Thus, he uses this traditional concept to communicate to the local audience in a foreign language. This allows the playwright to even bring invisible creatures to join in the dance and to proffer solution to problem on ground. Just as “A number of sea-spirites dance and paddle in, looking, at first, like drifting hyacinths as they emerge from the water. As they get nearer however, we see that they are half-female, half-fish figures,…” (p.45).

Legendary Figure in *Another Raft*

Osofisan in *Another Raft* acknowledges that the faiths of the Yoruba people vary significantly from one part of the Yoruba area to another. However, despite these variants, myths permeate cultural activities of the people which passed from one generation to generation and from one area to another, and mixed with the doctrinal value of the imported religions. By and large, Osofisan is able to bring all and sundry to concur that there exist legends as *Another Raft* epitomizes cultural importance in the quest to finding solutions to issues, clearing the grey hairs on unclear issues and so on as it unfolds in the following excerpt.

Excerpt: 7

Orousi: The prince is right, chief. We’ve had such trouble times! Accidents on the highway. Fire in the market. A cholera outbreak, followed by yellow fever! And now, even before we have fully recovered from those disasters, the flood. Ah, the goddess, how her stomach rumbles!

Ekuroola: And that’s why we are here now, isn’t it? To Calm that raging stomach of your goddess?

Lanusen: You' hear! Our goddess!

Orousi: So that we can have peace at least. So, the fruit trees can shed the cramp in their waist... (p.20).

It can be observed that Osofisan exhumes his play out of the ancient tradition that when in dire need you run to the legends; river goddess, Ogun, ifa, Obatala and Esu in the ancient time. Osofisan infers with the above excerpts that when things abnormally go wrong, the legend should be consulted, thereby stressing the importance, that people and legend have history. The use of myth in *Another Raft* is to make it relevant to the contemporary situation by linking the past with the present as a continuity of the past oppression and marginalization in the present day. The play emphasizes collective survival with women playing prominent role in spite of patriarchal domination which women should strive to dismantle and get involved in revolutionary action. The message in *Another Raft* is that instead of placing responsibility for redemptive action with men women's ritual involvement produces, not only a new order but the old restored with little contributions from women.

Conclusion

As a playwright Osofisan puts mythological material particularly myth at the fore front of his dramaturgy. His play *Another Raft* is a step towards the promotion and modernization of oral performance aesthetics in which myth, ritual, song, dance, story-telling and history are used as artistic ingredients and literary devices to reinforce the themes of collective action in man's struggle in life. To achieve this, Osofisan brings audience involvement and participation into performance as seen in *Another Raft* using myths and mythological figures they are familiar with for easy understanding of the play. Critically looking at the play text, this paper reveals Osofisan's strong persuasion about the potency of myth in addressing contemporary African problems. The playtext intends to invoke a revolt against oppressive state structure envisioned by traditional mythological

materials; he uses art purely as a subversion weapon to bring sanity into the decadent and chaotic society with his counter text approach.

Osofian's contribution to the use of myth in his play texts with primary focus on *Another Raft* as a play used to achieve socio-political change has explored story-telling and historical reconstruction to demystify the goddess, Yemosá, and makes it relevant to the contemporary issues in Nigeria thereby linking the past with the present with the purpose of achieving a better society now and in the future. This makes Osofisan a social crusader who believes in self-liberation and collective emancipation rather than rescinding to fate and spiritual intervention for liberation.

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