

Contemporary African Literature and the Concern Over Bad Governance in Nigeria: A Study of Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender* and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*

Mohammed Attai Yakubu

Department of English and Literary Studies

Kogi State University

Anyigba

Abstract

*This article begins by throwing light on the function of literature in Africa. African literature is proactive and it is used to change a bad situation. African writers such as Olu Obafemi and Femi Osofisan are not alone in the fight against bad governance, as scholars in other areas of human endeavour are also in this crusade. Corruption is a manifestation of bad governance and this has been identified as the bane of our society, Nigeria. Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender* is about corruption, rigging of election, and ineptitude of those in government. All these bring about economic hardship that has sterilised the hope of many Nigerian youths. Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* on the other hand, is about corruption, exploitation, deprivation, oppression, and infrastructural decay. Both plays are concerned with the socio-economic and political situations in Nigeria with the hope of changing these situations.*

Introduction

African literature is generally protest bound. This is why its analysis could not be properly done under art for art's sake philosophy. African writers are social crusaders. They have used their literary works to express their concern over bad governance in their various societies. In Africa, literature is a major agent of change. It has been observed that: 'nowadays, drama, apart from being didactic has now become a tool for social advocate' (Odion, 2009:56). Social dramatists like Olu Obafemi, Femi Osofisan, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ngugi wa Mirii, among others use their works to liberate the people. They use their drama to prescribe a corruption, exploitation, and a deprivation free society. African literature from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial (contemporary) period is used as a weapon of change. The pre-colonial period of folktales, myth, legend, proverb, etc. was characterized by didacticism and criticism of bad and unapproved behaviour in society. The colonial period of African literature criticized subjugation of African cultural values as well as western hegemony, colonial administration, corruption, deprivation and exploitation. The period also projected cultural nationalism. It was a time of cultural assertion in Africa with literature as a tool. The post-colonial (contemporary) period criticizes oppression, deprivation, exploitation, rigging of election, suffering, poverty, prostitution, armed robbery and other social maladies caused by bad leadership and myopia in leadership. In Africa, literature is a medium employed by writers to reform their societies. In Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender* and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, we see the concern of these playwrights over bad governance in Nigeria. They have portrayed the social, political, and economic situation of the contemporary Nigeria to conscientise the leaders and the led off the inevitability of change in the scheme of things in the country.

The Concern over Bad Governance in Nigeria

In Africa, and Nigeria in particular, the concern over bad governance has been expressed by various scholars in the form of paper presentation in various fora and disciplines especially in arts and social sciences. This concern tells us of patriotism of these scholars who want Nigeria to be a good place to live in. (Eregha, 2006:79) for example is of the opinion that: Nigeria became self-governing since October, 1960. This is about 44 years ago. Since that time, the state has failed to provide good governance. This is reflected in the poverty situation and hopelessness in the state. Although the state is very rich, the abundant wealth has not been properly managed to the benefit of all.

The basic reasons that account for this is bad governance that is the inability of the leaders to synthesize the various parts of a government machinery (resources) to perform meaningfully, creditably and acceptably. The reasons for poor governance are: election frauds, corruption, the issues raised by Eregba have become the crux of attention of many African writers because they are cogs in the wheel of progress of many African nations. Many African dramatists including Olu Obafemi and Femi Osofisan have condemned and lambasted their perpetrators in their dramatic works. Corruption is a manifestation of bad governance; and it is the main thematic preoccupation of the contemporary African literature. As the cankerworm that has eaten the fabric of Nigerian society, it attracts the attention of scholars in both literary and non-literary domains. In a contribution, (Akubo, 2009: 42-43) says that:

The 2nd Republic president of Nigeria, Alhaji Shehu Shagari joined others in the lamentation against corruption in Nigeria'. He further says, 'what worries me more than anything among our problems is that of moral decadence in our country. There is (sic) the problem of bribery, corruption, lack of dedication to duty, dishonesty and all such vices.

All these occur as a result of bad governance and they are the bane of Nigerian society. An ex-president of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo is also quoted to have said that:

As we all know, corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten into the fabric of our society at every level. It has caused decay and dereliction within the infrastructure of government and the society in physical, social and human terms. Corruption has been responsible for the instability of successive governments since the first Republic. Every coup since then has been in the name of stamping out the disease called corruption. Unfortunately, the cure often turned out to be worse than the disease. And Nigeria has been the worse off. Nigeria's external image took a serious bashing as our beloved country began to feature on top of every corruption index (Usman, 2006:237-238).

Many Nigerian leaders have failed in their administrative responsibility, thus, every change of government is welcomed with euphoria which dies shortly due to the vicious circle experienced. All these ugly experiences generate the theme of disillusionment in contemporary African literature. Different forms of protests, such as riot, strike, etc. witnessed in Nigeria are due to bad governance. The military that gives itself the sobriquet, 'corrective regime' has proved to be worse than the civilian administration as 'under each subsequent military administration, corruption and ineptitude became worse and was done not only with impunity, but also with reckless abandon'. (Edo, 2011:111). The African writer has a social responsibility to carry out for his society. African literary works are not primarily to entertain. Functionalism in African literature has a long pedigree. commitment in African literature is about the social role of literature, and every serious literature plays this role. This is what contemporary African literature does. It is the researcher's interest in investigating the social role of Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender* and *Morountodun* that informs his choice of these plays. Bad governance and myopia in leadership in Nigeria are everyday words. Achebe, (1985:2) a literary icon has observed that: The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with Nigerian land or climate or water. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to their responsibility to the challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of leadership.

Truly, Nigerian leadership is a failure and Chinua Achebe is not alone in his observation. Other prominent Nigerians have expressed a similar view. Below is the view of an eminent Nigerian: ‘

I strongly hold that Africa's ongoing underdevelopment is to a very large measure caused by Africans themselves and not necessarily by Europe. While in the developed economies fraudsters, are apprehended and clamped within the jaws of the law, in Africa, BIG fraudsters, MEGA thieves are decorated with accolades or spangled with confetti. Then the BIG chieftaincy titles, all in celebration of big, thieving. (David-West, 10 December, 2003, 3).

In Africa, and Nigeria in particular, corruption is seen as something that is normal.

Many people do not see anything wrong with it; therefore, it is on the increase and practised with impunity.

In the words of (Ayoola, 12 May, 2008, 7),

Public office serves some Nigerians as opportunity to loot the treasury and accumulate massive wealth which are (sic) then laundered. Some Nigerians who have served as Councilors, Local Government Chairmen, Commissioners, Governors, Ministers, Senators and Representatives, etc. have acquired huge and immeasurable wealth not in any way commensurate with their positions and legitimate income. All these are an indictment of bad governance in Nigeria. Committed African writers x-ray their various societies to portray the societal ills that retard the development of those societies. Nigeria has all it requires in both human and material resources to advance scientifically and technologically like the Asian tigers but the bane is bad governance leading to perverse attitude which has plunged the country into a morass.

Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender* and Osofisan's *Morountodun* are a satire of the socio-political and economic situation in Nigeria. They ridicule those in government that cause poverty and suffering in Nigeria.

Socio-Economic and Political Issues in Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender*

Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender* is an enactment of bad governance in Nigeria occasioned by corruption, rigging of election, mediocrity of those in government, etc. resulting in economic hardship. Bad leadership and obnoxious government policies give room for oppression, exploitation, and deprivation with their dire consequences. In the author's note, he states that: 'I have chosen an ostensibly trivial part-domestic, part-social issues in this play to examine how conscious (socially and politically) individuals confront the reality of daily existence in a bankrupt, cynical and dysfunctional social order. Fulfillment of human aspirations (as simple as the 'socially intricate' case of getting married) has become a far cry for the ordinary man-almost as luxurious as obtaining daily meals' (Obafemi, 1993:5). In the play, the world of the less privileged class is turned upside down by the activities of the monied class. Members of the monied class are the power brokers that provide the leadership of the country. They direct the wealth of the country and they also control the means of production. They have betrayed the confidence reposed in them. The people's mandate to the ruling class has not been utilized for the well-being, progress, and growth of the country; instead, we witness a dysfunctional social order. The masses are badly battered and shattered.

The scenario that is presented above calls for the intervention of African writers, because 'literature seeks to improve the society it projects by bringing it to public view and exposing it and thereby eliciting reforms' (*Nigeria Certificate in Education Course Book on English Language Cycle I, Module 13, 2000: 166*). The play, *Naira Has No Gender* is a condemnation of Nigerian political leaders over bad governance. It is expected to correct the anomalies that are exposed in order to improve the situation in Nigeria. Olu Obafemi's vision in the play is revolutionary. According to (Bamikunle, 2000:103), revolutionary vision in theatrical practice is a perception of life which aims at changing that life and which organizes the artistic medium it is using for the purpose of achieving the changes envisioned by the artist. The idea of revolutionary vision presumes a life situation that needs changes in the context of which vision means.

Olu Obafemi is in the front line in the crusade against corruption, exploitation, deprivation, oppression, ineptitude, and other anomies that have destroyed life at its foundation in Nigeria. In *Naira Has No Gender*, economic hardship is enacted through the love affair between Otunla and Aina. The society is contaminated with the craze for white wedding and elaborate wedding reception that gulp huge amount of money. All this is happening amidst poverty and hunger. This is why Otunla sees it as useless, unnecessary, hopeless, undesirable, and an invitation to armed robbery. Listen to him:

OTUNLA... Oh yes. And what will happen after the marriage ceremony? We open our mouths to the wind
After wedlock?

OTUNLA: I say will the couple eat after the honeymoon? I am talking of semovita, essential commodities, staple
Food items like rice, yams, garri. Or is the wedding reception the same thing as the feast of the Passover,
the eternal menu of the spirit?

OTUNLA: Believe me, I am dead serious. Have you forgotten the forbidden price of a kilo of beef, even pork
and frozen fish, *Oku Eko?* (Obafemi, 1993:12-13).

Within this short space, we have seen the poor economic situation of the country. Inflation is the order of the day. Three square meals a day become a luxury that only the rich can afford. All these coupled with unemployment have made life a hell for many Nigerians. Nigeria is a country where island of affluence thrives in the ocean of poverty. Through corrupt practices and nepotism, the wealth of the nation is wrongly channeled.

So, while some, especially the members of the less privileged class are suffering, growing thinner and thinner, those at the upper echelon of society are bloating with wealth and abundance. Let us listen to Aina:

AINA: ... But I know some millionaires (sic) with less than my qualifications. Yes, very many millionaires who can't write their names or sign their signatures Yes, it is true, millionaires who can't read their names. Connections that's all their qualifications. Connection is their certificate. Connections to win fat contracts to supply equipment which they know nothing about. Connections to build bridges and roads and become millionaires (Obafemi 1991:16)

Nigerian government is surrounded by mediocrities. Government functionaries are in the rat race for wealth. Personal aggrandizement gives room for bad governance in Nigeria. Educational qualification does not matter much in Nigeria. The political terrain is taken as an arena for gladiators, so thugs and school drop outs are the most suitable candidates, not the intellectuals. What this usually results in is bad governance. (Idakwoji, 2006:51) throws more light on this that: 'The political leadership class in Nigeria is dominated by what Alatas calls "Babalisma'. 'Babalisma' according to Alatas, is an attitude composed of several traits and whose end manifestation includes ignorance, persistence stubbornness instead of persistent effort, indolence and indifference. As "Babalians' they have no power of anticipation, they usually react to an event only after it has happened. They will open their umbrellas only after the rain has started pouring down on them'.

This corroborates the point that Nigerian political leaders have little to offer, and less dividends of democracy to deliver. Politics in Nigeria is not a game for gentlemen. It is characterized by so many ugly activities openly and secretly. In the play, all sorts of societal maladies are portrayed through Chief Awadanu, an illiterate politician and businessman. He sets up the machinery for the rigging of election. Listen to his wife, Abeke:

ABEKE:... Our people, yes. You worked hard on them and won the election with a landslide. Oh yes. My bedroom was a sole witness to it. Overthrown by ballot boxes. All for the sake of landslide.

ABEKE: Yes, the will of the people. Wheeled away with wheelbarrows and trucks... You won and many of the people got temporary pregnancies of ballot papers.

ABEKE: Yes through thuggery and house burning, all to achieve bandwagon effect. Victory via rigging (Obafemi, 1993:23).

So, we can see how Chief Awadanu's party comes to power – through electoral malpractices: thuggery and rigging. Thus, square pegs are put in round holes. This is the fate of Nigeria since independence. The few opportunists that come to power squander the wealth of the nation and the result is poverty and underdevelopment. This is what Olu Obafemi is waging war against in this play. He has made the youth represented by Otunla, Aina and Dokun as the hope of the nation. The marriage between Otunla and Aina is symbolic; it will herald in a new dawn. Chief Awadanu represents the old generation: the gerontocratic class which has no conscience. It is greedy and corrupt and it is the cause of poverty and misery in the land. This is the situation that Obafemi wants the new generation to change. Listen To Dokun:

DOKUN: All right. Thank you papa. You can call Otunla and others who are bringing light to the darkness which Your party covers the land with any names you want. Papa, you are making a mistake. They are the hope of our future, those men with conscience. And that is why you people are afraid. And dad, I have begun to see the light. If you are afraid of your past of poverty, what about all our people who are condemned to it? Why single me out? (Obafemi, 1993:29).

The new generation is the hope of the nation because the old generation has failed. The new generation is the hope for good governance which the old generation cannot provide. The reform which is anticipated will be realized through revolutionary change. This may not be realized through bloody social revolution as implied in Osofisan's *Morountodun*. The gerontocratic class that provides the leadership of the country through Chief Awadanu's political party is visionless and missions less. As a bunch of illiterates, the party members are squandermannia. They spend money lavishly. As spend thrifts, they have set the country down the slope of bankruptcy and underdevelopment. They have no inkling of what governance entails, therefore, public funds are to be lavished and misappropriated. Let us listen to Abeke:

ABEKE:...Millions of naira just to clear the building site for an industry which you have not thought out? Millions of naira cash down, just like that? (Obafemi, 1993:24).

The result of financial irresponsibility of those at the helm of affairs is misery, poverty, and suffering of the masses. This is the situation in Nigeria over the years. The development witnessed since independence in 1960 does not commensurate with the wealth generated in the country. Furthermore, Obafemi goes on to portray the insensitivity of the government through its obnoxious policy of beautifying the town that in the process has thrown many people out of business.

MAMA: Night after night. They paraded the market, and helped themselves to some of our goods at the close of every market. Then suddenly, they came with their guns, Baba. Not the sha-ka-bu-la you used to discharge on the fleshly breast of the antelope.

No, not the Etu gunpowder which you fire to bring sleek looking rodents to fill our soup pots every evening. They came in jeeps and trucks with their machine guns; battle ready. It was a brutal raid-operation. They came to up root us from the only source of our livelihood; our stalls. Like armed robbers and marauders they looted what they didn't want to destroy. All our valuable wares gone to beautify the city (Obafemi, 1993:41).

This is an instance of bad governance manifested in the form of oppression and deprivation. This is being experienced in Nigeria all the time. There are many government policies in Nigeria that are implemented without minding the consequences on the people. Some of these have resulted in loss of lives of some Nigerian citizens like the mechanic in the play whose shed is set ablaze and he commits suicide by roasting himself to death in the inferno. From the story enacted in the play, good governance is a far cry in Nigeria. The welfare of the people is supposed to be the centre of attention of every government. This, we are yet to see in Nigeria.

The optimism that marks the marriage between Otunla and Aina at the end of the play,

AINA: ... Otunla that's your name. Let us search for it so that we can hear the hopeful cry of rebirth.
Our unborn tomorrow. Let us celebrate the birth of hope.

OTUNLA: Let this mating

ALL: Bring the birth of a new dream for the land... (Obafemi, 1993:56).

is our hope of better tomorrow. When the society is purged of all the societal ills as this marriage symbolizes, there will not be corruption, exploitation, deprivation, rigging of election, mediocrity, ineptitude, myopia in leadership, inflation, armed robbery, poverty, suffering, and a host of other social maladies. Then, the society will be a god place to live in. This is the kind of society that is the dream of many contemporary African authors and which we expect to be achieved through contemporary Africans literature.

Socio-Political and Economic Issues in Femi Osofisan's Morountodun

Drama is an agent of change and a tool for societal reform. Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* is an indictment of the government over bad governance. The playwright uses the play to pass a judgement. This is similar to what Hubert Ogunde does in *Yoruba Ronu*. In an analysis carried out by (Aiyejina, 1993:65), he points out that, Dramatists have proved useful to the society through their art/plays, they have helped in effecting changes in the society. In Nigeria, Hubert Ogunde's play *Yoruba Rou* (1964) is a reflection of the political crisis in the old Western Nigeria. The play satirized the conflict between two politicians, the late Obafemi Awolowo and Chief Akintola, the power tussle and the subsequent split in their party. The Action Group was enacted on stage for the Yoruba audience who knew about the topic of the satire. As they play unfolded, it became clear where the root of the crisis was and what the real nature was. This revelation generated riots in the Western Region in that particular year. Drama has proved a virile weapon in effecting social change.

Similarly, the play, *Morountodun* is capable of rousing consciousness. On reading or watching the action on the stage, we expect the audience to be conscientised and a sense of discipline to be inculcated in those in government. In *Morountodun*, Osofisan expresses his concern over social, economic, and political situations in Nigeria. The play reveals Osofisan's anger over the level of corruption, deprivation, exploitation, poverty, and so on in the contemporary Nigerian society. The play enacts the popular events in the defunct Western State of Nigeria: the Agbekoya uprising of 1969, and Moremi myth. Osofisan draws inspiration from history and Yoruba myth. These provide the raw materials for his dramatic works. Osofisan is not dogmatic and conservative; he belongs to the second generation of revolutionary playwrights. So, 'in Osofisan's hands, myth and legend become elastic, transmuted and completely recreated to suit contemporary events. Through a dialectical twist, he squeezes myth, legend and history to extract only the tangible aspects as can sauce his own vision of society'.

(Gbilekaa, 1997: 77). Osofisan transposes myth or history for contemporary significance. This is what he has done in *Morountodun* and *No More the Wasted Breed*.

Titubi in *Morountodun* is a remoulded figure of Moremi to portray the socio-economic realities in the contemporary Nigeria. On Osofisan's use of history (Gbilekaa, 1997:78) observes that, 'he bends history to serve his artistic and social vision'. He uses myth in the play for the same purpose. The second event enacted in the play, which is Agbekoya uprising gives, Osofisan's criticism of socio-political situation in Nigeria. The uprising is a reaction against certain policies of the government.

When the play opens, Director says:

DIRECTOR: I'll try and give you a rapid summary of our play tonight. The play, as you will soon see, starts in the year 1969, the month of September. That year, if you remember, the civil war was raging in the east of our country, but this play has nothing to do with that. It deals with another war, the one that was later to be popularly known as the Agbekoya uprising, in which ordinary farmers, in the west of the country, rose up and confronted the state. May be you remember? Illiterate farmers, whom we had all along thought to be docile, peace-loving, if not even stupid, suddenly took to arms and began to fight against the government (Osofisan, 1982:5-6).

The enactment of Agbekoya uprising is a portrayal of bad governance. The play ridicules the government that makes promises that are never fulfilled. They exploit and oppress the people but when they protest, they employ all sorts of punitive measures against them. The government uses the law enforcement agents to torture and coerce people into obedience. Listen to Baba:

BABA: We said we didn't want the council any more. That its agents fleeced us, that inspectors smashed into our homes to remove whatever they wanted. That's what we told you to help us expose at the inquiry. We said you should demand that all the officials be probed and made to declare their assets. And what happened? They merely reshuffled the Council, and made you, Alhaji Buraimoh, its new Chairman. You came here, demanding our cooperation, and when we refused, you brought the police back (Osofisan, 1982:52).

We can see the farmers' reasons for protest. The government functionaries are insensitive and corrupt. They oppress and intimidate the people thereby making the government unpopular with the people. Furthermore, there is ineptitude and mediocrity within the government circle. All these lead to mass discontent and protest. The plight of farmers' as portrayed in the play represents the plight of over 100 million Nigerians who are denied access to good roads, electricity, good drinking water, good schools, health care facilities, etc. Let us listen to Mama Kayode's narrative:

MAMA KAYODE: And then Baba stepped forward. He bowed. Like this, very low. He said: "Your Excellency, my son, we have listened carefully to your fatherly appeal. Our roads have been so bad for years now that we can no longer reach the markets to sell our crops. Even your Excellency had to make your trip here by helicopter. Your council officials and the akodas harass us minute to minute and collect bribes from us. Then they go and build mansions in the city. Sanitary inspectors like Mister Bamson are bloodsuckers. Your Marketing Board seizes our Cocoa, and pays us only one third of what it sells it (sic) to the Oyinbo. We have no electric, and we still drink tanwiji from the stream. Many of our children are in jail for what you people call smuggling. We protested and your police mounted expeditions to maim us and reduce our houses to ashes. But all these do not matter anymore. Now that we have listened to your kind fatherly appeal, we shall forget all our sufferings and pay our taxes. I promise we shall now send in the money promptly, through the same route your appeal has come to us by helicopter! (Osofisan, 1982:65).

Osofisan is exposing the atrocities committed by those in government so that there can be a change. Furthermore, their hypocrisy is exposed in the passage. In Nigeria, when leaders are voted into power, they are alienated from the people, the electorate. They neglect their responsibility and barricade themselves within the fence of government house. They harass people with their siren and mobile police escort. In a society where some have more than enough others cannot afford a meal a day. This is the situation that the transmutation of Moremi Myth in the play is expected to reveal through the character of Titubi who is exposed to the plight of farmers in her espionage mission as she lives with them. The plight of the masses as we see in the play; their impoverishment is caused by the oppression and exploitation by the ruling class. This is the situation that Osofisan wants to change.

Conclusion

Both Olu Obafemi and Femi Osofisan have used their plays to suggest the need for a change in the socio-economic and political system in Nigeria. The two dramatists have the vision of transforming Nigeria from its present state as portrayed in *Naira Has No Gender* and *Morountodun* respectively to a corruption, oppression, and exploitation free society. They desire to see Nigeria as a place where the institutions of governance can guarantee good health, housing, food, quality education, fairness, justice and security. They want to see Nigeria as a place where there are proofs of good governance such as social and economic development as well as political stability; a country that can boast of bright opportunities for its citizens.

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