

## Interrogating Femi Osofisan's *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle* as a Philosophical Commentary on the Contemporary African Society

**AJIDAHUN, Clement Olujide, PhD**

Department of English Studies  
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko  
Ondo State, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

This paper is a critique of Femi Osofisan's *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle*, as a socio-cultural commentary on the contemporary African society. The paper countenances the political and the philosophical essence of the play using the dream and the quest motif. The paper examines the play's themes of power versus wisdom, peace versus war and the supremacy of the power of the pen above the might of the sword. The theoretical framework of the paper is postcolonial criticism. The paper also looks at the revolutionary disposition of the playwright to obstructive, disruptive and barbaric African deities and traditions that are inimical to human existence and to the development of the society without necessarily portraying the playwright as an iconoclast and a religious chauvinist. The paper also looks at Osofisan's diagnosis of the recurrent African's socio-political problems and his philosophical prognosis to the intractable problems bedeviling the African continent among which is the need to shun fables, superstition and fear and the readiness to fight in order to be free from oppression. The paper captures Osofisan's juxtaposition of the place of the military and the civilian in the play and their abilities or otherwise in creating an enabling democratic environment that is conducive for the survival for the masses. The paper concludes by recapturing Osofisan's view in the play on the power of wisdom as ennobling and the only humanistic and humane way to bring transformation, peace and development devoid of acrimony and bloodshed to our contemporary society rather than toeing the path of violence.

**Keywords:** Drama, Criticism, Femi Osofisan, *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle*, Philosophy, Postcolonial Criticism, African Society

## **Introduction**

Femi Osofisan is one of the most ferocious and distinguished African playwrights, a play producer, director, who has carved a niche for himself as a foremost literary artist who has deployed the theatre platform as a subversive weapon to arouse the consciousness of the masses to fight against oppression, injustice and all forms of ills confronting the society. As a literary icon, and a committed Marxist, his plays and drama productions have placed him comfortably among the league of modern dramatists devoted irrevocably to the course of the oppressed and the downtrodden.

Femi Osofisan belongs to the generation of writers following Wole Soyinka. His literary fecundity and dramaturgical profundity cannot be easily over-emphasised. His theatre has moved out of the established theatre into an alternative theatre that is more subversive and revolutionary. Osofisan interrogates social-economic issues such as corruption, unemployment, inflation, poverty, hunger, economic exploitation and others in plays like *Morountodun*, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, *Birthdays are not for Dying*, *Fires Burn and Die Hard*, *The Inspector and the Hero* and so on. Osofisan is passionately committed to the defence of the masses using the platform of the theatre.

The interrelationship between his plays and political issues are aptly demonstrated in his dramatic works such as *A Restless Run of Locusts*, *Midnight Hotel*, *Farewell to Cannibal Rage*, *The Inspector and the Hero*, *Album of the Midnight Blackout*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest*, *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, *Nkrumah ni! Africa ni!* and others. Such issues raised include political decadence, political violence, electoral fraud, dictatorship, imperialism, Pan-Africanism and reconciliation. The theatre of Femi Osofisan has also become a veritable medium for him to showcase the opulence and the magnificence of African culture by wielding African oral traditions into his dramaturgy. Such common elements of the African oral traditions utilised in his plays include myths, legends, folktales, parables, proverbs, ridicules, traditional festivals and so on. They thus help to enrich his works and make them accessible to a wider African audience. The import of this paper therefore is to examine the philosophical essence of *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle* to address political issues in the African continent using the dream and quest motif.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the paper is hinged on postcolonial criticism according to Habib (272) which aims, among other things and above all other objectives “to participate in the goals of political liberation, which includes equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination and the articulation of political and cultural identities.” Besides, postcolonial criticism embraces discourse that tackles what Habib

(272) calls “internal colonisation” experienced by the minority ethnic groups in the hands of other ethnic groups who have unusual and unrestrained access to power and weapons which they use indiscriminately and with impunity on the minority groups.

Internal colonisation, which is seen as a post-independence phenomenon, has continued to attract the attention of post-colonial critics and theorist such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Fredric Jameson. Postcolonial criticism is essentially concerned with the course of decolonisation since it is generally believed that bloody violence, wars, oppression, subjugation and all forms of imperialism and tyrannical tendencies in the colonised people are part of the colonial vestiges and legacies bequeathed by the colonising powers to their colonies. Tyson (418) calls that neo-colonialism. This is because the socio-political, cultural and economic space of the colonised people is inherently coloured by the colonial ideology that is imperialistic and expansionistic. That is well captured by Abrams and Harpham (307) who posit that postcolonial scholarship does not limit its discourse to Western imperialism, it also extends to all forms of domination and expansionism orchestrated by the colonised people. That is why Tyson (418) calls postcolonial criticism an anticolonial political movement or “anticolonial resistance.” The purpose of postcolonial criticism is to involve in critical engagement and dialogue that will lead to total decolonisation and liberation of the people that will be devoid of war, violence and acrimony and emplace peace, progress and development.

Critics are, therefore, interested in how much of this is captured in the text that is being critiqued from the postcolonial critical perspective. It is against this background that postcolonial theory is deployed to critique Osofisan's text with its emphasis on the campaign for the abolition of war, oppression of the masses and violence and enthrone dialogue to emplace development.

## **Textual Discussion**

Femi Osofisan's *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle*, which is structured into a Prologue, sixteen scenes and an Intermission is one of the most successful philosophical works of Osofisan. Using the dream motif and the quest phenomenon, Osofisan contrasts power with wisdom and war with peace. Through the discussion between Babalawo and Baba and Mama Ibeji, we learn that Taye and Kehinde, the twins of Baba and Mama Ibeji have embarked on a five-year journey. Naturally, Mama Ibeji is worried about the whereabouts of her twins. Through the oracle, the woman is able to see where the twins are. Taye and Kehinde have some disagreement on their journey over which of them is older and over who should cross the border first. Since the disagreement cannot be resolved, they part. Kehinde chooses to go along the seashore and Taye up the hill, into the forest promising to meet each other five years later. While Kehinde carries a bag of weapons, Taye takes with him a bag with herbs and musical instruments and Efundunke sings a farewell song for

them.

Kehinde finally arrives at Etido town. That town has been constantly under the harassment of a sea monster called Bilisi. In order to avert the wrath of this monster, the town has to sacrifice the blood of its prettiest virgin, a secret that is only known to the elders since the people cannot defeat the monster. Lawunmi, the princess and daughter of Oba Moluwe offers to go on the legendary errand since no one, including their men, offers to go. Lawunmi defies her father's appeal. She goes in company of Aanu, her attendant and promises to meet her father on the other side.

Meaning, Kehinde and Digbaro, his assistant, have arrived on the seashore. Unknown to them that is where the sea monster lives, it is on this seashore that both Kehinde and Lawunmi meet. Kehinde condemns the act of sacrificing the girl to a sea monster and says "Nonsense, it's barbaric. And I'm not going to let it happen' (23) Kehinde, therefore, offers to attack the monster. Through the assistance of Lawunmi and Digbaro, Kehinde stabs the monster that it dies, although Kehinde is wounded and Lawunmi and Aanu have to be revived. To compensate Kehinde for the feat, he is made the king of Etido as the king steps down for him. Besides, Kehinde marries Lawunmi, the princess. Oh, what a wonderful achievement for Kehinde!

However, a conflict arises between Kehinde, the new Olodo and the people of the town over the procession of a couple with a new born baby and their friends who have come to pay homage to the founder of Etido amidst a lot of dancing and singing very early in the morning. The tradition demands that a baby that is born in the town must be presented within seven days or else the baby cannot be given a name.

Oba Kehinde opposes such early morning dancing and vows to punish them for disobeying him. The king orders them to be in a single file and their jewellerys be seized. To Kehinde, dancing is a mark of idleness:

I can understand children dancing like this in the morning. But adults! That we have full grown adults in our kingdom who still have the time for such idleness! Indiscipline! I hate indiscipline, and I am determined to stamp it out! All this dancing and dancing. That is what undermines our powers! Kills our manhood! We dance too much, we black people. We are always dancing. And that is why we continue to be weak...Well, it must stop! I have come to put an end to the dancing. I have come to build a new society, a society of muscled men and women. The time of dancing has come to an end...When I arrived here, you lived in terror. A mere monster, a beast with no brain, held you in its power, and you fed him with your prettiest girls every New Year. But I arrived, and I changed all that. By that example, I meant to teach you the lesson that, if you wish to live in freedom, you must begin by unmasking the fable of superstition, conquering fear, and daring to

stand up and fight... We want no more dancers on our streets, only soldiers, only fighters (45, 47).

Kehinde, the new Oba of Etido outlaws dancing and prescribes war. He encourages the people to be ready to pay the price for freedom and do away with fear, fables and obsolete traditions. Osofisan uses Kehinde to portray his revolutionary philosophy. Osofisan is opposed to traditions of the society that merely enslave the people. He wonders why a whole town should continue to live under the torment and fear of an ordinary sea monster. Osofisan believes that it is very ridiculous for a whole town to think it right to offer yearly its prettiest girls to an ordinary sea monster with no brain.

Osofisan wants the people to think and consider spending their time on leisure more profitable than dancing early morning. Osofisan queries the dedication of a new born baby to the founder of the town early morning. He wonders why the naming should be done within seven days after which it will be invalid. Such is the tradition of the oppressors and it has to die.

To Osofisan, the only way to have liberty is first to overcome fables, superstition and fear and be prepared to fight, or else one will continue to suffer under oppression. The destiny of man is in his hands. You are what you are because you choose to remain in that position. It is similar to what Osofisan says in *Another Raft*, that man's destiny is in his hands. The drifting stops because the people resolve not to be drifted. And because of the determination of Biokun and Saluga in *No More the Wasted Breed* to fight and wage war against the wickedness of the gods, the gods bow and succumb to the will of man. Man, therefore becomes the architect of his fate.

In the second plot, Taye, accompanied by Efundunke arrives at Ereko, evidently exhausted. In the town, Elenon, the Oba of Ereko wants a husband chosen for Tinuade, heiress to the throne. He announces the rule of the competition for all the suitors. The suitors have been reduced and screened from seven to four. The Oba wants each of the suitors to come forward and fill one of the four calabash bowls with a boiling stew from the pot and drink it at a gulp, at once without taking it away from his mouth and without flinching even briefly. Whoever can do this will marry the princess and win half of the Oba's inheritance. All the four suitors, including a professor, compete but none of them passes the test. The Oba finally throws the contest open to all. This time, whoever succeeds will win the princess and the throne and whoever fails will lose his head.

Taye offers to participate in the contest because he is starving even though Efundunke sings the Stew-Drinking Song for Taye, Taye carries the bowl of the stew and goes round the elders asking for their blessings in turns, until the stew gets cold and later, he drinks it. With this success, Taye has won Tinu and the throne. Elenon, the king even begins to dance. He also says:

What the rich and the learned failed to do  
What the strong and the devoted could not

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accomplish, this unknown man,  
this young man untried in politics,  
he alone did it with great cunning! Yes,  
is it not our proverb that, while a  
toddler's hand cannot reach the rafter,  
the elders cannot enter into a gourd?  
Today a young man has brought all of us a  
Fine sample of what wisdom means. So, come  
forward, stranger and take your reward. (41)

Shocking enough, Taye refuses Tinuade as wife. Instead, he asks for food because the stew he takes during the contest only worsens his hunger. Elenon becomes very angry with Taye and therefore orders for his arrest: "So you, whom I thought a decent young man, so you only came to mock us! You... you dare refuse our own daughter! In such a rude manner too... you... you... arrest him!" (42). After a lot of intrigues and manoeuvres and manipulations, Taye wants peace instead. They call on Lawunmi to persuade her husband to call off war and opt for peace:

LEADER:           What we cannot bear, what tears our womb apart, is  
                          the death that comes prematurely.

WOMAN:           Tell him, Olori, that we are tired of these wars.

WOMAN:           Wars in which our sons perish in the noon of their  
                          lives.

WOMAN:           Wars from which we gain nothing, but in which the  
                          seeds so tenderly nurtured in our wombs are  
                          carelessly wasted.

LAWUNMI:        What do you want?

LEADER:           Peace, Olori, An immediate declaration of peace,  
                          today, now!... You are the ears of your husband,  
                          that's why we came to speak to you. You must talk to  
                          him quickly. We love him but we are tired of war (67-  
                          69).

Kehinde finally admits that he has all the while been wrong. In the following conversation, he admits taking the wrong step and therefore seeks to make a proposal to the people:

KEHINDE:        Digbaro, I know where we went wrong. And you

didn't correct me. These people, I have taught them the art of war, but you can see, it's not enough. For war to satisfy us as human beings, yes war must become a profitable career, it must be married with greed!

DIGBARO: Welcome, master! Welcome to political maturity! Your training is now complete!

KEHINDE: It is for profit, and not just for power, that men agree to slaughter other men. War may be our primary driving force, the engine that drives our lives, but its lubricant is greed. The strong survive, not just because of their irrepressible lust, their instinct to grab, and steal, and hoard. That has been my error. All our wars so far have been meaningless, because although I gave them glory, I made the men come home virtually empty-handed (73-74).

Yet, Kehinde seeks to fight just one more battle as a way of compensating and restoring the people's harvests. He wants to show them that war is just another manner of trading and that the battlefield is also a rich haven of profit. He wants the people, therefore, to follow him to sack the town of Ereko where his twin brother, Taye is and bring back to his homeland the plenteous fruits of its markets.

The people of Ereko, on hearing of the impending attack from the warriors of Etido decide to flee out of fear. But Taye addresses them and encourages them not to despair. He further tells them that the only way to defeat them is by feasting:

A man must stand for what he believes in, whatever the price. You see, once you begin to run, you'll never cease from running... There is no need to despair. You said I taught you to plant seeds. Why not pause also to ask if there is no means of protecting these seeds when danger appears? I tell you? By feasting!!...Return to your homes at once! Let each household prepare a large meal. Then everyone should wear his finest clothing. Women, put on your costliest jewellery, your most enticing make-up. Everything must be glittering, shinning, sparkling. Then call out the drummers, lineage. Bring pots, bring calabashes, bring all your eating and drinking instruments. Let the gourds be spilling with froth...Let there be no single sigh or frown or other sign of fear. In our very best spirits, let us welcome the warriors of Etido! (79-80).

As the warriors of Etido approach Ereko, the people of the land meet them amidst

singing, drumming and dancing. Taye, a comrade, leader and teacher of the people sues for peace and agrees to serve the people of Etido because he and the people of Ereko abhor war and bloodshed. Life to him is very precious. Taye agrees that the whole town will be their subjects and slaves. They promise to submit to their instant punishment, pay regular tribute to them, and send a dozen of their prettiest women every year among other terms.

The warriors from Etido are served and entertained with the food drugged by the Ereko people. The warriors consequently begin to droop. Taye immediately commands that their weapons be seized. Kehinde's crown is also removed and placed on Taye. All the enemies are tied. Taye becomes victorious as Kehinde loses the battle. Digbaro later wakes up Kehinde for their return journey home. The play ends on a debate as to whether it is better to live in Etido where men live by the power of their muscles or in Ereko where men live by wisdom.

The journey embarked upon by Taye and Kehinde is symbolic of man's trials, temptations, struggles, difficulties, successes and failures in life. Osofisan intends to teach that in addition to the power of the muscles, man still needs the power of knowledge and wisdom for him to dominate and control his fate and the world around him. Kehinde only has might; the power of the muscles; he does not have wisdom. His might makes him conquer a dreaded sea-monster and win the throne of Etido. But he loses all because he lacks wisdom. No wonder he regrets his losses at the end and cries to Digbaro: "My soldiers... What!... My kingdom... Lawunmi! (9)

On a wider perspective, the solution to the society's problems does not lie with the soldiers alone who have all the weapons to fight battles. Might alone cannot solve the country's problems. In addition, the soldiers need the wisdom of the civilians, and the intellectuals in order to succeed, and bring the desired changes into society. Both the sword and the pen are important for the growth and development of the country.

Osofisan further strengthens this notion in one of his articles entitled: "Find the Good and Praise it" published in *The Comet* of Sunday December 5, 1999. According to him,

Misfortune is so compelling, that it stays uppermost in our minds... So many bad habits take long to die. Several wounds will be impossible to heal at once, at least not as fast as the aggrieved want them... But there's no doubt about it, what we are witnessing today are the death throes of a doomed order. Definitely, we will see a new day, and our country will live again. So, let's not despair, as long as we see ourselves as part of the struggle... There will always be suffering, and grief, and lamentation. But we must not be defeated by them. Instead, we must try and look out beyond our veil of tears and we will catch the sunlight out there, beckoning to us (8).



## Conclusion

Osofisan's text supports the ancient discourse and the metonymic text that says pen is mightier than the sword. Pen here, according to Osofisan, symbolises knowledge and wisdom while the sword represents war, bloody violence, and all forms of irrationality, senselessness, that can lead to the decimation, dehumanisation and brutalisation of the masses in society. Osofisan in *Women of Owu*, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, and *Red is the Freedom Road* condemns war because of its devastating consequences on society whose victims are usually women and children with very high fatality rate.

According to Osofisan's dramaturgy, war is destructive and that is why he shuns Ogun as an archetype but rather he embraces Orunmila that Osofisan believes, according to the Yoruba cosmology, is the god of knowledge while Ogun is a belligerent deity which Soyinka calls his pantheon god. Soyinka in his poem "Now I will chant a salute to Ogun", Soyinka (56) calls Ogun

He who smartly accouters himself and goes to the fight. Some people said Ogun was a failure as a hunter, Ogun therefore killed a man and packed the corpse into a domestic fire. Ogun, don't fight against me. Don't play with me. You said you were playing with a boy, I saw much blood flowing from the boy's private parts.

In Awodiya (1993), Osofisan is of the view that an enlightened artist should encourage and promote the propitiation and the belief in Ogun, the belligerent war who must be demystified in order to deploy art to solve our contemporary societal problems. Although, war can temporarily lead a man to suppress his unethical behaviour, it is wisdom or the right knowledge that one acquires that teases out the full implications of such unscrupulous attitudes that are capable of bringing the desired changes in one's life.

War to Osofisan is destructive, while knowledge is constructive. War pulls down, while knowledge builds up. War inflicts mental, emotional and physical wounds and injuries with indelible scars, while wisdom has the ability both to prevent war and heal the abrasions and the deep cuts of war. War creates more problems, while knowledge is a problem solver. For instance, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* is Osofisan's brilliant attempt at condemning the Nigerian civil war and a call for reconciliation among the warring factions to create room for nation building.

The call for reconciliation is a display of knowledge and wisdom to solve national issues. The pen, the symbol of wisdom, is the strongest weapon that the society needs to forge unity and peace and create an enabling environment for development. In the text, Kehinde symbolises a society that has power but without wisdom, while Taye embodies the society that has wisdom and thus wins and conquers by it. This is in tandem with the axiom of Martin Luther King Jr that says "nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. It is weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields

it.” That is why the Holy Bible says, “Wisdom is the principal thing.” A Yoruba adage says “*Ogboń ju agbára*. (Wisdom surpasses might). Another one says “*Ogboń la fi gbele’ ayè ro’, ìmò, la fi so ilú pò*” (The world is held together by wisdom, and it is by wisdom that cities are united.” Another adage says “A powerful man who lacks wisdom or discretion is a fool.” All these illustrate Osofisan's world view that society can only be built through dialogue, wisdom, consultation, compromise and reconciliation. The deployment of war and brute force by the military, insurgents and the aggrieved members of society to solve societal issues will only aggravate them. This is Femi Osofisan's philosophical message to the rancorous, war-torn, pugnacious and cantankerous elements in society to shun war and embrace wisdom or else society will continue to twang, incurably, in twinge.

However, for the advocates of violence as a diplomatic strategy for engendering solutions to societal issues, John F. Kennedy's popular maxim given in his address on the First Anniversary of the Alliance for Progress on March 13, 1962 in Washington D.C. which says that “those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable” has become a galvanising revolutionary tool for activists and radicals in deploying violence to change the societal status quo especially when dialogical approach has failed. Wole Soyinka's statement now becomes apposite here when he said “the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.”

When political leaders resist and repress peaceful protests, they make violent protests inevitable. The militancy in the Niger Delta, Nigeria which eventually snowballed into armed confrontation, kidnapping, murder and pipeline vandalism began with peaceful protests against marginalisation, environmental degradation, and outright neglect of the welfare of the Niger Delta people. Unfortunately, government did not do enough to arrest the situation. Even when the people, including the late Ken Saro Wiwa who was voice to the voiceless, were prepared for dialogue, government was not ready. When the people went violent, and the situation became a national embarrassment to the chagrin of the international community, government was forced to dialogue with the Niger Delta militants. The maxim of Kennedy is therefore right. Unfortunately, the loss in any violent revolution is incalculable. Intolerance and resistance by political leaders constitute major obstacles to the efficacy of dialogue in resolving conflicts.

Writing on the limitations of dialogue in conflict resolution, Saffari (2012) identifies “hegemony and power asymmetries” (257) as potential hindrances to dialogical strategy in conflict resolution. To strengthen his thesis, he says that

In November 1998, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 53/22 naming the year 2001 as the The UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. The resolution also 'reaffirmed' the UN's commitment 'to strengthen friendly relations among nations, remove threats to peace and foster international cooperation in resolving international issues of an economic, social, cultural and

humanitarian character.' Within a month of the announcement, however, President Clinton had authorized a new round of serial attacks on Iraq, code named Operation Desert Fox. The appeals made by Amnesty International and other human rights groups expressing concern about civilian were simply ignored. By 2001, it seemed as though the call for dialogue as an alternative way of addressing global conflict had been all but forgotten (246).

Even though dialogical approach, as promoted by Femi Osofisan, is a potential strategy for tackling national and international conflicts, the approach may be impracticable and unworkable due to hegemonic, capitalistic and despotic tendencies inherent in leadership, irreconcilable doctrinal differences, class conflicts, the predatory and imperialistic nature of humans and unimaginable hostile matrices. To tackle all these appears unattainable unless there is a deliberate and genuine determination for reconciliation from all sides without primordial or chauvinistic considerations, or else resort to violence by the aggrieved and the marginalised will continue unabated.

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