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The Theme of Democratic Subjugation in the Select Plays of Femi Osofisan

Prin. (Dr.) Y. B. Gonde

Abstract:

The present paper deals with the plays of Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan in order to reveal a political fact of the nation that how even after the independence the Nigerian people were facing the democratic subjugation. Apparently, 'Democracy' and 'subjugation' are the opposite words as first world stands for equality, however later world stands for oppression. But unfortunately, it revealed in these plays that democracy appears as a tool that helps to subjugate. The plays explored in the paper depicts that they were critical commentary on the contemporary history of the nation.

Key words: Democracy, Subjugation, politics, violence, poor, etc.

Democracy means equality, freedom, sovereignty etc. Even after independence we find the principles of democracy were missing in Nigeria. In fact, democracy lived for a very short time in Nigeria and military violence had continued for a long time. The politicians in Nigeria oppressed the poor. They entered politics not out of their desire to serve people but out of their lust for power, money and revenge. Here only they forgot democracy and started to rule in an unjust way. They didn't allow the common man to breathe freely the air of freedom and equality. We come across this aspect of neo colonialism in a number of plays of Femi Osofisan, these include the plays like *A Restless Run of Locusts*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*, *Once upon the Four Robbers*, *Red Is the Freedom Road*, and *Morountodun*. In the present article an attempt has been made to highlight the reflection of the theme of democratic subjugation in these plays of Osofisan. In many neo colonial countries people were deprived of their fundamental rights. In this regard a great thinker, Ngugi throws light on the surface level deceptive picture of democracy as follows:

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A neo colonial regime is , by its very characters, a repressive machine..., Its real powerbase resides not in the people but in imperialism and in the police and the army. To maintain itself it shuts off venues of democratic expression. (Ngugi 100)

In the play, *A Restless Run of Locusts* we come across a good number of examples showing the subjugation and repression of democracy. Osofisan wants free and fair elections in Nigeria. He doesn't want any violence. However, he points out that Michael Kuti, the leader of the ruling class tries to murder his political opponent Adeniyi who leads the underprivileged. Kuti forgets democratic ideals and walks on the path of violence. The dialogue between Sanda, the brother of Adeniyi and his beloved Lyabo shows the rule of violence:

Lyabo : So that can't be true !

Sanda :And now my brother's missing. They've kidnapped him. But if they kill him, if they hurt a single hair on his head I swear that I..... (3)

Here, we find that old generation politicians in Nigeria don't believe in fair elections. They avail of cheap means for defeating opponents. They threaten to nationalists' try to assassinate them simply because they want power. Sanda, a new young politician is brutally attacked because his chances of winning are more than those of chief Kuti.

Osofisan criticizes the impotent rulers of the country who plunge into politics not for serving society but for satisfying their lust for power, money or revenge. For winning election they resort to corruption. For example, Chief Kuti is corruptive and fraudulent. His intention of winning elections is to raise huge money, for this he spends all his savings for bribing voters and thugs. Secondly, Sanda enters politics for avenging for the death of his brother Adeniyi. In order to avenge for the death of his brother, Sanda even forgets the promises and tries to break up the tie with his beloved Lyabo. His following dialogue represents it:

Sanda : That promise is gone. My brother's blood has washed it away. He shall be avenged ! Tunde shall be avenged ! Go away, you are nothing to me now but my enemy's daughter. (5)

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Osofisan raises the moral question of the process of fair elections where he expects that all parties should avoid mean ways for winning election and prevent the country from being neocolonial.

The play, *The Chattering and the Song* was first performed at the University of Ibadan in 1976 under the direction of Femi Osofisan. At that time Femi Osofisan returned to Nigeria from his graduate studies in France. The theme of the play is a clamour for a new social order based on justice and equality. It records the anger against a wicked ruler and his activities. It throws light on the inability of the government to grant fair rights to the citizens of the country. Each new ruler tries to subjugate democracy according to his own will. The masses were kept away from their real share. They are forced to live in miserable condition. They are plundered. It is but a sort of democratic subjugation. For example, Latoye reminds the guards in the play within the play about their pathetic condition full of "poverty, hunger, squalor and disease" (62). He tells them that the soil on which they nourished a tree and "tended until it over laden with fruits, and yet, when stretch out your hands, there are no fruits for you" (62).

In the next incident Sontri symbolically points out how the right to live is repudiated by the rulers. In this incident there is a bitter criticism on corruption in judicial field. In fact, it is the duty of the judicial system to protect the rights of the citizens conferred upon them by the constitution. Sontri is angry because for the reason of commotion the weavers are released from Funlola. He holds weaverbirds guilty for various reasons. Sontri shows his anger towards the corrupt social hierarchy in which the survival of the masses is impossible. It is also a good example of the rejection of democratic rights to live and speak. The weaverbird represents the common man who is denied the right to live and speak. The playwright is not happy with the government because it is busy with its own individual progress by leaving the masses in their own miserable condition. The farmers' movement and the rebel of Latoye against increasing tariffs on salt are good examples of democratic repression and loss of national planning.

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In the play *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* published in 1978 Femi Osofisan points out how corrupt political activities facilitate social disintegration that gives rise to unemployment, political instability, inequitable application of law etc. The officials are corruptive and they entrench the citizens, the poor because they are in power. They don't allow them to breathe the free air of democracy. They deny the citizens the rights to speak, justice, health or to live. The priest Ifa and the pastor agree to exchange their offices for commercial and materialistic purposes. They don't work for the good for all. They run their own selfish business for amassing wealth only. The Ifa priest, Baba Fawomi, even plunders his own colleague, the pastor for having the stolen church fund. The following dialogue reveals it:

Baba Fawomi: Well, I hope you realize this exercise is going to cost you a lot.

Pastor: Any price, I told you (52)

No officer is carrying out his duties seriously. According to Osofisan it is but a democratic subjugation where the common man is outside the periphery of progress and not at the centre or on the borderline of the progress. For example, Polycap, the houseboy of the Chairman shows injustice done by the officers to the public commissioner of complaints and invites strict action against them. Osofisan criticises harshly such bureaucrats who bring disillusionment in the society.

Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon the Four Robbers* is written between 1976 and 1978. The premier show of this play was staged at the Arts Theatre, University of Zbadan in March 1979. The play is based on Yoruba culture and the political situation in Nigeria. The theme of the play is contemporary social problem of armed robbery and the failure of the government to offer a good solution.

The sovereignty of newly independent country is continuously threatened by the departing colonialists. In fact, the practice of new-colonialism, according to Nkrumah, is a threat to sovereignty. There we come across democratic repression in two ways: first from former colonial superpowers and second from the indigenous rulers. In this play the government disapproves the rights of the masses and makes autocratic decisions against their will. Osofisan

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exposes injustice done to people due to the erosion of the moral environment in society and the acceptance of dictatorial government. These aspects have made the common man to love their freedom and justice.

In Nigeria, the robbers are made due to the civil war. They were ex-soldiers. In fact, the decree of executing these ex-soldiers as robbers was unreasonable because the robbers were left with no other business except robbery for maintaining their livelihood. Osofisan points out that during military regime in Nigeria people suffered from economic exploitation, social deprivation, social inequality, poverty and ignorance. The robbers are but the outcome of this social set up. The robbers want honourable source of livelihood. However, the law in Nigeria is framed in such a way that the rich are always at the centre of the progress and the poor, the robbers i.e. the ex-soldiers are underprivileged, neglected. They are made to work only as slaves. It is but an after repression or subjugation of the democratic structure. Osofisan wants people to think about the democratic government where people will have decision making power and they will vote for the just. In the play the following dialogue of Hasan a robber, shows how crime is prevalent in the society : in school, church and at home and how the government makes people subordinate them :

Hasan : Teacher flogged as at the writing desk reverend and logged us with divine curses at the pulpit... and poor Mama,, she laid it into us routinely behind the locked door, her work, hardened palm, stringing even sharper then whips..... so that afterwards the grown man can crawl the street from month to month on his belly, begging for work, for a decent pay, for a roof, for a shelter from the pursuit of 'sirens' ? (90-91)

In short, the above remark of Hasan reveals how the new-colonial state forbids citizens to acquire knowledge, power and food and enables them to revolt against the system.

The play 'Red is the Freedom Road' was first published under the title 'You Have Lost Your Fine Face' at the University of Ibadan in 1969. The play is written during the period of internal turmoil in Nigeria and the civil war and the

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revolt in 1966. It throws light on the sixteen years of war from 1877 to 1866 among western Yoruba and Eastern Yoruba. Akanji is the protagonist and a war soldier captured with his wife, mother and fellow warriors by the powerful enemy and they all are made slaves. Akanji is a powerful leader and he is suggested to show his loyalty towards the King and his new master. He is appointed as a Commander. However, here he is alienated from his own people.

Democratic repression is one of the major characteristics of neocolonialism reflected in the play *Red Is the Freedom Road* (1982). In the opinion of a thinker, Udengwu 'true democracy' is "A form of government in which people are allowed to take decisions on issues that affect their lives (and) decide who should lead them.... It is a situation where diverse views and opinions are treasured, and the right of the individual is respected irrespective of age, sex, religion or ethnicity". (Udengwu)

Yet many third world countries do not enjoy the fruits of independence. They face a number of upheavals in their countries. These include civil wars, religious tensions, tribal conflicts, national uncertainty, poverty, unemployment, political instability etc. When there is atmosphere of democracy people naturally anticipate freedom. However, the rulers in the government turn their hopes into ashes through horrible political ideology. In this play the speech between two soldiers about the coups and countercoups which destroy the rule of the people and keep people away from freedom and speech shows the subjugation of democracy. The following talk represents it:

1st SOLDIER: First you have the resolution, the revolt or the coup dictate. The killing to end all killing, oppression to punish oppressors. Detention to banish detention. And everyone prepares for peace

2nd SOLDIER: But peace never comes. For peace never comes.

1st SOLDIER: Neither peace nor prosperity. Not even freedom. For new tyrant mount again

2nd SOLDIER: Rapidly, Rapidly". (P.116)

The play *Morountodun* includes many neo colonial themes. Its main theme is armed resistance is the final solution to the problem of oppression. In the opinion of Osofisan the indigenous Nigerian rulers or dictators are responsible for the post-independence neo-colonial situation in Nigeria. The dictators maintained a predatory economic relationship for their own welfare. Here, they exploited the poor and the common economically. Due to advent of technology, as a source of economy the military rulers preferred oil sources to agriculture. The lucrative business of oil revenues fascinated many military and civilian leaders and they started to interfere in the government. In a due course of time, they became corruptive rulers who neglected the basic facilities like health and quality education to the masses. The adverse effect of it was that the ruling class went on becoming more prosperous and the masses stumbled in shameful poverty. Thus, at the economic and business level the masses were repressed at the hands of the rich and the dictators. Secondly, the oppressor's group which included the police superintendent, Alhaji Kabirat, lawyer Issac and Alhaji Buraimoh exploited the oppressed like Baba Marshal, Bogunde, Wura, Mosun and Kokondi. The masses, especially the farmers were harassed a lot by the dictators in Nigeria. The Civil War in 1969 created miserable condition of the masses. In this regard Osofisan remarks through the dialogue of the Director:

The play ... starts in the year 1969. ... as the Agbekoya uprising, in which ordinary farmers ... rose up and confronted with the state. ... Two, three, four. ... seven months! And the war was still hot and bitter. (5-6).

Even during the post-independent period, the masses have to face the warlike situation and despotism is continued in Nigeria. Titubi's mother, Alhaja Kabirat, and Salami, the superintendent of police are always against the farmers' revolution. They resort to every possible means in order to curb the revolution. The lawyers Isaac and Alhaji are outwardly with the farmers. They are unfaithful to the farmers. Thus the rise of dictatorship in Nigeria ultimately gave rise to democratic repression.

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Thus, in all the above discussed plays of Femi Osofisan we observe that the citizens of Nigeria were far away from democracy. In a sense, they were thoroughly repressed under the clutches of different military rulers.

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