

## **Femi Osofisan: The Making of a Revolutionary Dramatist**

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### ***Introduction***

Most of Femi Osofisan's interviews have focused on his drama, his Marxian ideology and how this has played out in his drama; his twin indebtedness to the Brechtian tradition of the epic and the alienation technique on the one hand and the African performance modes on the other hand, and the specificities of his plays. There has been very little of the personal. The literary world has simply taken the playwright and his revolutionary plays for granted! Although the sociology of the writer has always been considered a key to the understanding of her/his works – even after structuralism pronounced the death of the author – very little attention had been paid to the specific details of the man behind the mask, the human before and behind the playwright and ideologue. In this interview, Femi Osofisan fielded specific questions about his origins as a playwright and revolutionary writer. How did it all begin, where, and what have been the drawbacks down the line? The interview is laced with humour and earthy revelations about the man Femi Osofisan and his making as a revolutionary writer. Some details emerge that had not been much talked about in discussions of the playwright.

For example, there was the issue of Osofisan's early upbringing in sparse and Spartan circumstances, possibly the original source of the affinity he feels for poor and downtrodden; his loneliness and consequent immersion in intellectual engagements; his rebelliousness as an undergraduate and as a teacher, and how, in his own words, "I am always having problems;" and "it was [always] fighting and fighting." In addition, there was his "baptism of fire," in a West African prison...! Osofisan also sheds light on a couple of "folk stories" in Nigerian literary lore. One of these, frequently told in literary reminiscences and creative writing classes and groups, is how the famed poet Christopher Okigbo stayed up writing all night and ended up shredding everything he had written. Only four lines survived his grueling, perfectionist editing. However, who was there at the time; who witnessed the ordeal; who did Okigbo tell? Well, Osofisan knows! The interview also covers details of Osofisan's guiding philosophy and his attitude to the art of creative writing in general; his own beginnings as a creative writer; his early love for Engineering as a career, and how the tide turned; his concerns for the African culture; his advice to budding writers, when he plans to retire from writing, etc.

### **Who Is Femi Osofisan and How Did It All Start?**

*O.T.:* Let us begin with a basic question: Who is Femi Osofisan?

#### ***Osofisan***

What precisely would you like to know? When I was born? (Laughter) I was born in 1946. My parents, I have a mother, my father is dead; he died long ago, when I was three months old. Ehm, so as it happens to such people, I grew up with all kinds of relatives; which means that I grew up on many arms, with various people.

And I came to Government College, Ibadan in 1959 from there to here, University of Ibadan, and from Ibadan to Senegal then to France, then back here.

*O.T.:* We had heard a bit about your sojourn in France, but what really happened there?

**Osofisan**

I studied French here. I then went on to do my post graduate at Senegal. I came back here [to Ibadan]; unfortunately, I did not finish there, had some big quarrel with my supervisor, I decided to check out, came back and finished here.

*O.T.: Was that how the French stopped and the theatre began ... ?*

**Osofisan**

When you asked that question again it looks like if you studied French, you must [not study theatre] er, see, French is a language like any language; so if somebody studies English you don't go asking why the person is in theatre arts. French, Yoruba or Arabic, is just a language. You use that language for whatever you want. I still speak French but I just don't teach it. For many years I was in the French Department but I decided that drama was more important. Drama Department wanted to take me; each department wanted to. Actually when I started teaching here I was teaching in three departments, teaching also in English language and [Modern] Languages Department. I just decided that ...well, after a while, actually I had problems with French department; I am always having problems, I don't like the orientation of the French department, I decided to leave.

*O.T.: Something is missing so far – the creativity – when and how did that come to be?*

**Osofisan**

I really don't know. ... I believe that anybody at all can do creative writing. It's just that circumstances may make some people develop and others not develop. Everybody tells stories ... everybody enjoys stories and I happened to have grown up as a very lonely person.<sup>1</sup> And when I went to school, books became a kind of refuge. I was very very tiny and I didn't have any friends as such. If you come from a poor background very soon, you find yourself in the minority. Not that anybody deliberately makes you so. It's just that, you know, people who come from a rich background have certain attitudes and target habits which you, coming from a poor village, which you don't share, so you can't eh, it's as if you don't belong. You know, you will be by yourself. So, and then that school being a village school had a very good library; which meant that there were books, and one of the things you want to do eventually do is to write one. If you like reading then the next thing is to write one.

So you know, if you are like that reading books and reading books, sooner or later, you will want to write, want to create and then so you know people like me get to end up editing magazines, the library, theatre department and so on. Those days student life was, I don't know, maybe richer. I consider it richer than what it is now because we didn't have to do exams every year as you are doing now every semester, you know. [It was] at the end of the year. The environment of books kind of stimulates that. And when I was in France was the period of a lot of political agitation and theatre was very much part of it, that kind of impression. I was very much impressed. That kind of dictated the direction for me to write. So from the French experience I became like being more conscious as a writer.

*O.T.: What about the generally held view that creativity is an innate ability rather than something that is cultivated?*

**Osofisan**

It is innate to everybody. That is, everybody has it but not everybody develops it. Because of circumstances. We carry quite a number of events and in the end we don't use many of them because the circumstances are not there. We just lose those factors.

*O.T.: Some specificity regarding your own circumstance would be appreciated here; for example, can you remember when you discovered you had a creative ability?*

**Osofisan**

As I said, you could grow up with the thing [creativity] just as a hobby. You tell stories, you take part in plays. I have been taking part in plays since I was in primary school. That didn't mean that I intended to be a writer.

It was just a part of the activities you needed. I was the editor in the school magazine in school. I had no intention whatsoever of becoming a writer; in fact, I was going to be an Engineer. My school, Government College, Ibadan, was normally oriented towards the sciences, one of the schools that have produced Doctors and Engineers. I was going to be an Engineer anyway, so you just did all these things as a pastime. There were many plays and there are many of us who are professionals but have not studied the Arts; you get more and more drawn to literature. But as I said, it was the experience of living in France and at a particular radical and political time that finally gave me that conscious desire to be a writer – to use my writing for a conscious purpose. So that, instead of writing for fun, then I became committed to using my writing primarily to achieve goals.

*O.T.: What this amounts to is a certain de-individualizing and de-mythologizing of talent?*

### ***Osofisan***

There were a lot of things going on and I was a part of them, but it was not so much what I did or didn't do. It was that there was a big ferment - things going on all over the place, not just theatre. The politics, the student politics; 1968 was a big revolution in France which spilled out to the French African countries. I was in Dakar, I was one of those in jail. In France we had the movement and particularly we freed prisoners and so on. By the time I got to France I was wiser and I knew how to avoid jail but it was the same thing. A lot of politics, if you like, being conscious of the inequality of the society, of the injustice of society and so being determined to do something about it. A lot of people are conscious of the injustice of the society but they end up throwing up their hands or leaving it to God. This is what is happening in Nigeria today. A lot of prayers and fellowships, you leave it to God, God will do it. But at that time in France, there was no question of leaving it to God. They believed that they could change their society and so there were a lot of movements, students and so on and they actually changed the society, changed the politics through demonstrations, through agitations.

There was a lot of that so that society can be changed by the action of men not that you pray and wait for God to come and do it for you but that yourself can do it. That society will not change by itself but it can be changed if men are determined to lead. Now "determined" means action; that you've got to be active. You've got to do something and if you do it, you'll get some results. So theatre of course is part of that whole action that you have to keep people writing novels, writing poetry, plays and so on but theatre of course being more immediately effective, there is an audience, unlike a novel somebody has to read and so on. So this is what I mean. So that gave me ... at least I can change my orientation as to what to do with my writing.

*O.T.: Your encounter with your Supervisor in France, his being so inhuman, may also have had a radicalizing effect...*

### ***Osofisan***

It looks like we are going to get into some misunderstanding. My supervisor was not inhuman at all. In any case, if he was it didn't really bother me, he wasn't paying my fees or anything. He had no direct impact on me that way. The quarrel with my supervisor was totally different. It's just that my supervisor was a conservative and he wasn't interested. I think I told him that he was racist. He wasn't interested in anything African. So if I was prepared to do French for instance we would have got on marvelously, but I wanted my studies to be oriented towards Africa and he hadn't the slightest interest in that. That was a period of social agitation, social and political agitation all over the place. So it was a society in ferment. A society that was bubbling. You can't have a calm situation like this in the faculty there; there was no day when you wouldn't find people handing out pamphlets, talking about one thing or another which you have to go and agitate for; maybe some political thing which could be in a foreign land. For example about Nigeria, you would have had movements about Nigeria. They would have had movements about Nigeria.

They would go and actually picket the Nigerian Embassy. We did part of that. There were other actions which we took. For example, I told you about workers from African who were being badly treated. When we started the agitation, the embassies were the first to denounce us. It wasn't an easy thing and I became highly impressed by many things. When I was in Dakar it was fighting and fighting. I got to France and saw a difference because our leader who was Senegalese taught me another phase of rebellion. So we can agitate and all that. Probably, it will take months before anything happens. You agitate, they suppress it in the press. It doesn't get anywhere because they know what it means to their industries. They suppress it, but the other thing we did was to actually go there

and teach those people. So we organized adult classes, teach them how to count money. Such little things; how to read road signs; how to take buses.

That is not normally what you regard as radical action but in fact that was what was concrete and useful to these people. This is what I have been trying to teach our own radicals. There are things which you can do, any kind of basis for agitation. France is very racist. Europe is very racist. Even when you have friends, there are people who will ambush you, beat you up thoroughly.

*O.T.: You are established in the literary world as a playwright; no doubt about that, but has it always been drama from the start?*

### **Osofisan**

This question of being a playwright... It just happens that I write more plays than perhaps I write other things. My first published work was in fact a novel, *Kolera College*. Then I have published plays and so, but then my first work to win an award was also a book of poems, *Minted Coins*. So it always depends on the feeling at the moment. I just tend to feel that plays, when you are writing political issues, plays are more capable of expressing views and impact on audience and I tend to feel that poetry is more retrospective. When you are meditating you look at poetry.<sup>2</sup> Novels take more time to reflect on. Yes, I'm playwright but I also write poetry, so it depends.

*O.T.: Some aspects of your drama remain unique, like leaving the masses to judge and determine the outcome of events. Why do you decide to do that?*

### **Osofisan**

That is interesting because when you are dealing with people [the question is] what is the right approach to the problem of the society which you are writing about. What is the best way to treat it? Obviously, I have my own ideas, you have your own but what is the best way to actually reach people. I don't believe in forcing my ideas down the throat of people. I think we should leave that to the priests. When you get to church there is a sermon and you are told to do this, do that; that is what God wants. May be that is what God wants, may be that is not what God wants; how do we know? In any case that is for the church. But when you are talking to people, it is better to let people make up their own minds because if you decide on your own that something is bad then you are not likely to do it because it is your decision. If somebody tells you it is bad, don't do it, it may or may not convince you. So that's his opinion, you may still do it and not feel guilty.

My aim is to bring you to that point where you take that decision yourself but I know at the end of the play you may not take the decision I want but it doesn't matter. But the essential thing is that your freedom is respected; your own freedom to reflect and to come to your own conclusion. What I don't want is for you to just accept that; well these things my mother said are bad, so, fine, I shouldn't do it; this is how it has always been done and we must keep it that way. The thing is you must think about it. My aim is to provoke you. Take another look at it and ask yourself if that is right or wrong and argue it out and then come to a conclusion. When you come to that conclusion it is a much stronger thing than merely being told that it is wrong. Plays like that in the end leave people unaltered and then you go home and forget about it; that makes you complacent. What I want to do is to provoke you to may be to even anger and argue with somebody. When I wrote *Once upon Four Robbers*; some [audience members] say kill the robbers; others say don't kill the robbers and you argue it out and then you take a decision. When you are going [away from the theatre] you are still thinking about it. Is this right? So you are made to think and therefore to take position.

Therefore, it is not that I [the playwright] say that this is wrong but that you [audience member] have thought about it and now you come to that conclusion that it is wrong. So this is why I do this. So people say that is evasion, that you are avoiding making a decision. Fine, I'm avoiding but I know what I want to do. It is left to you to decide. I want you to take responsibility for your own life; not me but you to assume responsibility for your own life, which is what many people don't do. Many people are content to be told that the Bible has said it is wrong, the Koran has said don't do this and that's all. You don't really think for the fact that what the book said is it really good for the people? Think about it yourself and if you then come to the same conclusion, fine. But feel free to oppose it and say no I don't agree with it.

*O.T.: There is also this general view about writers that they are prophets or seers...*

**Osofisan**

I can say that if you remain true to yourself about what is going on instead of telling lies about it; if you write the truth, then that is probably what you will arrive at.

Certainly, I never set out to write prophecy, otherwise I would be making money out of it. I don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. I don't know what is going to happen this evening. But I am concerned with what is happening at the moment. I take a look at it and say we can't go on like this. Should we go on like this, this is exactly what is going to happen. You have a society with so much injustice, that society cannot be a settled society and in our society where there is so much corruption nobody is happy with that. You can accumulate as much money as you want and you build your castle but you have to drive to that castle and you are going to pass through slums and the people around you have to pass through. How would those people feel when you accumulate so much money and suddenly there is a riot and they destroy all your houses; so what safety is there? So it is better to build a society where everybody is happy than trying to make yourself alone happy in the whole multitude of poverty. It doesn't work. You have the poor man, he is not happy; you have the rich man he is not happy. You see people hire house-helpers and they pay them very well and then you see the house-helpers corner them one day and twist their neck. They don't feel happy because they feel they are being treated like slaves. No matter how much you pay him, they don't feel happy. So you can read the society if you are concerned with the truth; this is what you get.

*O.T.: There is also this constant bent towards African tradition and aesthetics in your writing.*

**Osofisan**

We are now going into the aspects of technique. There are many reasons for this [African] orientation. For instance, I am concerned about the way our culture seems to be dying. I'm concerned how American culture is taking over the world. I am not the only one concerned. If you go to France or Europe generally you will see how concerned they themselves are that their own culture is dying because everybody is watching American films, films that are made in Hollywood. CNN comes from America, so we are all watching how Africans [are supposed to] behave and that's how we are all [supposed to be] living and they are watching us. They are selling us their goods. Because they say this is designers, then you want to buy it because they say so. If this Adire gets on CNN tomorrow, everybody must buy it. But since I am wearing it here, it is communalized. The western culture is absorbing us. I did a play sometime ago and I had Yoruba girls that did not know how to tie wrapper not to talk of the head-tie. They are in jeans all made from abroad. In a deeper sense, it is affecting our ways. We are aping Americans and there is no way an Ape can become the authentic thing; and we do have our own rich culture. Everything is dying. One of the aspects is story telling.

Moonlight was the time when everybody was out and some elder would assemble all the kids and begin to tell stories and we would be clapping and singing. That is where people [children] would fall asleep and they will carry them to the bed. One of the things that I am doing in my plays is to use some of the themes to recall some of our dying culture, because story telling is about the easiest ways by which you can learn things. When you are singing, laughing, the lesson is being made and its not just lessons about morals. You learn about the trees, the environment, you learn about the animals. They tell you that tortoise is this, elephant is this. They tell you how to behave. You learn about the sociology of your place without having to write an exam. So, I like bringing all these aspects into play. I enjoy having story tellers because I enjoy telling and hearing stories. I sort of work this into my plays and besides it keeps the audience happy. The audience likes to participate. You make them participate instead of just sitting down and watching. It's a very good theatrical device in itself. So this is one of the devices I like to use on stage.

*O.T.: However, the term "African" itself may be misleading, or even "Nigerian". For example, you use Yoruba setting and culture in your works. Is this not rather restrictive?*

**Osofisan**

It all depends on what I am writing. Have you read my play about Nkrumah [*Nkrumah ni! Africa ni!*], which in fact is situated in Conakry? But really, I write best about what I know. I don't think that I know everything. Some of these things I have to actually research. That I use Yoruba culture is because that is what I am closest to. In fact it doesn't mean that when I start writing I know everything; I have to do research to use some of it. As I said, these things are dying and particularly nowadays. Young people are growing up without the knowledge of their

own culture. I write about the Yoruba culture but I always insist that if the play is done in an Igbo context, they should use Igbo songs, just translate into Igbo. For instance, *Once upon Four Robbers* has been done both in Igbo and Hausa. Wherever you go, use the local dialects. Any writer has to use what he knows best otherwise the learning of the writing is going to be artificial.

**O.T.:** *One can almost guess your answer to this next question because writers generally do express a paternal/maternal relationship to their works; however, just for the records, which of your works would you consider the most important?*

**Osofisan**

All of them. (Joint laughter)

**O.T.:** *Even in terms of creative or aesthetic input? There must be standard valuation, in terms of degree of input. For example, defining what constitutes creative writing...*

**Osofisan**

Everything is creative. I don't know, I just write. I can't start defining creative writing for you.

**O.T.:** *For example, in terms of aesthetics, degree of metaphoric embellishment, etc?*

**Osofisan**

If you write and nobody takes interest in it, that is bad writing. But I take it that you can read the works of Physics for instance and be thoroughly engrossed in it because of the way it is written. You have a person who is writing about space engineering who is a good writer. You can enjoy it as much as you enjoy any work of fiction and you can take a work that declares itself fiction and after the first page you don't want to continue because it is so badly written. It doesn't flow, so you give up.

**O.T.:** *Does the artist have to first to all have a kind of talent which is nurtured?*

**Osofisan**

We are kind of going back to the original question you asked whether a writer is born or made. I repeat myself; I think everybody is born with the talent but circumstances, condition of the upbringing will make you to either develop it or lose it. You may want to be a writer and you have no possibility of going to school to acquire writing as a skill, how will you write? That talent will never blossom but it doesn't mean that you can't develop as an oral artist. You can become a very good story teller or dramatist even without going to school but the conditions of your upbringing are obviously in question and when it comes to good writing, you need to have some kind of training, either training formally or an informal training. Good writing as I always tell my students is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. If you want to write well, it is not sufficient to just have the inspiration; you have to work at it. A poem for instance is not just the feeling. It's the feeling and the craftsmanship. That craftsmanship can be taught and it can be learnt. The story I tell is part of my experience with [the poet] Christopher Okigbo. We were quite close and one of the reasons was that when I read his poems I didn't understand his poetry at all. One day I summoned courage and asked him what he was writing, if he actually wanted us to understand it or not.

He was so amused and we became friends. I would give him so much work to read for me and he would read it and tell me to keep it for now. I would write another one and he would say not good enough, and I began to feel that this famous man did not want others to be famous. Then one day he said can you come along, stay around and watch me work. I said fine. We started at 9p.m, I was working, he was working, till I fell asleep. In the morning he gave me what he had written, four lines of poetry throughout the night and scraps of the ones which he had discarded. He said what do you think of it and I said this is beautiful and he took it and tore it to bits. After that, I became very humble. Logistics; that is what poetry is. What he is saying is like deploying truth. When you write one word, he says why that word and I take another look at it. He tells you to think about the sound because his poetry is rather thorough because the sound is worth talking about. It's not going to come just like that but after you have re-worked the poem. One thing about any creative writing is that you must leave something for the reader to fill in. You must leave something to the imagination of that reader to put in. putting everything is no use

because poetry is collaboration between writer and reader. It is an unconscious thing. When I read it, there is something I'm adding; when you read it there is something that you are adding and we may not be adding the same things at all but there is always that silence, that absence which the poet must leave and then the sense of rhythm, of musicality that you really have to work and work. Creativity is work. Before any of my plays gets to the stage, that is probably the seventh version of it. At every stage we are correcting.

That is why I need very versatile actors because in your mind, it may look clear what you want to do but the audience doesn't get it. So you have to look at it again. That's why it is work. The inspiration must be there but that is just a slender half of it. It's the sweat that makes it.

*O.T.: And the intelligence! As well as the experience; some people may be confused how all of these blend.*

### ***Osofisan***

I don't see what is good in this world that doesn't need intelligence. If it is something as complex as creativity, then you need intelligence. Experience also plays a vast role in creative writing. But that does not mean it has to be direct experience. It may be other people's experience. That why there are books. You can consult books. If you have direct experience you know what to talk about. If you try to write without any experience, the thing won't be convincing. Writing involves a lot of research.

*O.T.: Many young writers complain about environmental factors. For example, the condition in which the creative writer finds himself or herself in the country today does not appear to optimally allow for excellence.*

### ***Osofisan***

The artist suffers in this kind of society. Most writers today grew up in the age of terror and have never seen an alternative, and that is the danger ahead. That we are going to have young politicians who don't know anything else, other than the military method. They will be so impatient with criticism. You criticize them, they get mad. Dialogue is not the issue and of course government is meant to line up your pocket. The creative writer is of course an endangered species, like any other Nigerian.

*O.T.: What advice would be appropriate then, for aspiring creative writers?*

### ***Osofisan***

Just to write! Read as much as you can and write as much as you can. Write about what you believe in.

*O.T.: When do you plan to retire from writing?*

### ***Osofisan***

When I die! Writing is what I do. It is not a profession in the sense of teaching, for example. You can retire from teaching, you can retire from working in a factory, but [writing] is expressing yourself, what you think. Maybe there would be a time when you stop thinking or when you stop feeling, then maybe that time you stop writing.

### ***Conclusion***

Femi Osofisan has published over fifty plays; an achievement that may not be paralleled in Nigerian playwriting in a long time to come. The interview in the foregoing highlights some of the hitherto unknown or unpublicized steps in the moulding of the giant. It is a befitting complement to some of his other recorded statements on his works and on the art of writing in general.

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> This statement compels a comparison here with the lonely Imaro in Osofisan's *Oriki of a Grasshopper*, who talks of "my loneliness that you knew how to share so well."

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, the poet Niyi Osundare, Osofisan's compatriot and fellow writer is basically a poet though he has written a couple of plays. Osundare has often explained that he prefers to write poems because the medium serves the cause of immediacy, whereas plays take a long time to write and produce.