

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Plays and Their Modern Relevance: Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*

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### **Abstract:**

*Society has become anaemic and paralysed due to the cancerous tumult of oddity that has been allowed to entrench. The consequence has become endemic and insidious that it lacks legitimacy and veracity for anyone to confront. However, the creative artist as a street journalist is capable of marshalling all available resources to create stories that relates, reflect its community, and even beyond. Femi Osofisan, a committed apostle or a social crusader for change, has skilfully utilised the medium of drama to expose and satirize the prevalent social vices that has become cancerous to the health of its society. The paper shows how theatre or drama could be used as one major significant medium that is relevant to modern societies irrespective of the period. Its source material has always been from life as it seeks to consciously appeal to the psychological, spiritual and physical needs of the society depending on the point of view of the writer. The paper explores the commitment of Femi Osofisan as an African playwright through his spectrum the concerns raised in his play *Midnight Hotel*. It shall also attempt to examine the text and juxtapose the concerns highlighted in relation to Africa and specifically the Ghanaian society.*

**Keywords:** *Modern, relevance, plays, themes, theatre, political*

### **1. Introduction**

The creative artist is a street journalist who is motivated by the daily occurrence in the society. The motivations may be political, social, and moral among many others that are perhaps prevalent or otherwise, but can spur out to either promote or destroy the fibre of society. Therefore, with his medium he or she creatively weaves a story to re-enact the activities of human in the society. This is because the premise of drama or theatre hinges around life. It will then be prudent to assert that drama in its real essence serves as the medium through which the links between the past, present and perhaps the future is given prominence as a way of facilitating a right approach of orientation towards finding solutions to societal challenges and also improving upon the positives. (Owonobi, 2014; Angmor, 2010, p.101.).

One of such plays is *Midnight Hotel* by Femi Osofisan who by dint of hard work has earned a reputation of being a social reformist through his craft. Femi Osofisan does not limit or restrict himself to writing of political plays such as *Who is Afraid of Solarin* (1978), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1982), *Morountodun* and Other Plays. He is a social crusader or perhaps a city hunter and a member of the society, he extends his creative abilities to explore, reflect and depict various social vices that are cancerous to the health and well-being of his society. He is that writer who in the midst of the plagues that his society is faced with is optimistic and hopeful that the prevailing changes can be surmounted.

This paper is aimed at examining Femi's *Midnight Hotel* in which corruption, deception, moral decadence, obsession with power and fame as well as religious hypocrisy in the society has been well established. Again, attention shall also be given to its relevance to Africa and specifically Ghana. The paper begins with an attempt to contextualize the relevance of plays as a social force.

### **2. Synopsis of the Play**

The play *Midnight Hotel* carefully outlines some of the intrinsic vices that have bedevilled the society. Osofisan in this play exposes the fundamental vices, which is evident in the dramatic personae of the play, vices such as corruption, deception, and moral decadence, obsession with power and fame, religious hypocrisy among many others. An honourable Member of Parliament, Mrs Asibong coincidentally checks into a hotel with a Pastor where her husband incidentally is lodging. She brings the pastor to the Hotel under the preference of awarding him a contract so as to also "sample" him. To their dismay, Alatisse the headmaster and a friend to the Asibong's also checks in to the same hotel room Mr. Asibong had lodged without the knowledge of the other receptionist.

### 3. About the Playwright

Babafemi Adegemi Osofisan (born June 1946), known as Femi Osofisan or F.O., is a Nigerian writer noted for his critique of societal problems and his use of African traditional performances and surrealism in some of his novels. A frequent theme that his novels explore is the conflict between good and evil. He is in fact a didactic writer whose works seek to correct his decadent society. Born in the village of Erunwon, Ogun State, Nigeria, Osofisan attended primary school at Ife and secondary school at Government College, Ibadan. He then attended the University of Ibadan (1966–69), majoring in French and as part of his degree course studying at the University of Dakar for a year, and going on to do post-graduate studies at the Paris. He subsequently held faculty positions at the University of Ibadan, where he retired as full professor in 2011. He is currently a Distinguished Professor of Theatre Arts, Kwara State University, Nigeria. Osofisan has written and produced more than 60 plays. He has also written four prose works: *Ma'ami*, *Abigail*, *Pirates of Hurt* and *Cordelia*, first produced in newspaper columns, in *The Daily Times* and then *The Guardian* (Nigeria). One of his prose works; *Ma'ami* was adapted into a film in 2011. Several of Osofisan's plays are adaptations of works by other writers: *Women of Owu* from Euripides' *The Trojan Women*; *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* from Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*; *No More the Wasted Breed* from Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*; *Another Raft* from J. P. Clark's *The Raft*; *Tegonni: An African Antigone* from Sophocles' *Antigone* and others.

Osofisan in his works also emphasizes gender: his representation of women as objects, objects of social division, due to shifting customs and long-lived traditions, and also as instruments for sexual exploitation; and his portrayal of women as subjects, individuals capable of cognition, endowed with consciousness and will, and capable of making decisions and effecting actions.

### 4. Plays as a Social Force

Theatre, drama or play is uniquely a potent force to foster change in almost all facets of human life. This is because the ideas or issues creatively expressed by or through characters can create an intensely emotional experience by the audience. Arnold (2004) posited that "a collective emotional response is a force of enormous energy and can function in different ways" (pp. 24-25). In this assertion, the theatre or play can evoke anger or outrage on some peculiar societal canker that has not been dealt with overtime. Again, it can appeal to the conscience of the audience to either change the status quo or contribute to the development and stability of the society. In the opening pages of his book on *Social Forces in German Literature*, Professor Kuno Francke asserts that "the fundamental conception which underlies the following account ... is that of a continued struggle between individualistic and collectivistic tendencies, between man and society, between personality and tradition, between liberty and unity, between cosmopolitanism and nationality, a struggle which may be said to be the prime motive power of all human progress". Undoubtedly, from such a conflict we are certain of obtaining a moving literature as well as a contemplative one. Through it, there is the dramatic impulse, the theatrical clash, the life force, on the one hand seeing intensely, on the other dreaming truly; and who knows but the time is now at hand in America when this social impulse shall again lead to our prophesying boldly? These assertions can also be bedrock of societal change in Africa as part of the world through the plays we sort to publish where *Midnight Hotel*, a unique quintessence of Femi Osofisan is a classic example.

Furthermore, the theatre is a platform for the discussion of every social issue imaginable. It could be bribery and corruption, public education, gender issues, racial prejudice, moral decadence, myths and belief systems, governance, etc. It is these and many more complex societal issues that the theatre seeks to consciously and creatively purport, in as it were to proffer solutions not as a dogma but as food for thought (Cohen, 2003). Therefore, the playwright is not necessarily wise than his audience or better informed, however, he picks up the pieces of societal challenges and focus on stimulating dialogue to trigger public attention. These then, evoke compassion towards social injustices, irregularities poor governance, moral decadence to mention but a few.

In effect, the playwright using his or her craft serves as the non-conformist and seeks to foster change, awareness creation and development among his people. Thus, the theatre as a social force, creatively weaves it way in confronting social issues to its audience. Indeed, it brings them into touch with its own thoughts and feelings about its society. From the ongoing discussion, it is clearly evident that the play *Midnight Hotel* is a classic metaphor of the Ghanaian society irrespective of the setting. It is also relevant because it transcends the social and political and confronts the hopes, exploitation, fantasy and compassion of its audience. Hence, plays enable us to see ourselves that generate to discover and evaluate our individual perplexities.

In *Midnight Hotel*, the playwright laments on the high rate of moral decadence in the society. The lowering of moral standards in the society has altered virtues that hitherto were held in high esteem. The once society, that frowns upon immorality, now embraces evil and deems it normal. Some activities of moral decadence in the society such as prostitution, and deception are highlighted in the play. The playwright humorously exposes this social vice in the opening scene where Bicycle runs to Jimoh shocked at what he saw at a call to room 9. To his utmost bewilderment, he saw a naked woman comparable to 'kerefish' as he calls it. He further describes the woman as 'nakedly naked'. This shows the level of decay that the society is in.

*Bicycle: A woman, chief Jimoh! A woman!*

*Jimoh: And what you idiot?*

*Bicycle: A woman! Jimoh ... er, chief, a woman! Naked! As naked as kere fish! ...*

*Jimoh: (Bursts out laughing) ... Haha! Is that all you saw, bush man?*

*Bicycle: ...de woman ... she was nakedly naked!*

*Jimoh: And so? Were we not all born naked?*

*Bicycle: And she no care one t'ing at all-at all!*

*Jimoh: ... Look here, Bicycle, how many times will I remind you that you are no longer in your village? Ehn? This is Lagos, man, and in Lagos, sex is business! Quater-naked women, half-naked women, fully naked women... all are money in this city! Big money!*

As a result, sex, which is sacred and very much respected, has now become secular. People, especially women who are perhaps in need or sheer slothfulness have chosen this act to walk about completely *naked* as Bicycle describes as 'kere fish' that everybody can have a feel and patronize it.

Similarly, Jimoh who has been a receptionist at the MidnightHotel only God knows how long, has perhaps, seen it all the ugly and the worse as he conjectures to Asibong of his taste.

*Jimoh: ... Can I help you sir!*

*Asibong: ... Are you the receptionist here?*

*Jimoh: A room sir? Something ... quiet, isn't it? I know your type sir, and I know just what will please you. Please bring your woman in, sir, don't leave her outside... In there, sir, your woman may scream all she likes without anyone trying to...*

*Asibong: Thank you, thank you! But you're mistaken. I'm from Easy-con Associates.*

*Jimoh: Which means it's a group thing, sir?... We have a suite which will do just fine, provided you're not more than five couples and...*

It can be seen that morals have been degraded to the point where every member of the society is an accomplice. In Jimoh's assertion, it appears that people we hold in high esteem are involved in this act of prostitution.

Again, with the mindset of rural folks, who perceive that milk and honey flow in the cities migrate to the cities just as the family of Alalise which represent any family in Nigeria, only to meet virtually nothing. However, their intention of making it in life turn out to be the supposedly the normal way that is prostitution. The fastest way of making it in life as Bose put it.

*Bose: Papa*

*Alalise: May God, Bose! What ... what happened to you?*

*Bose: The soldier he was so kind, Papa how easy it is to earn money in the city! We should have come long ago! (P. 78)*

It is therefore, clear that even the soldier who is to protect and administer checks on society to refrain from such vice, is a maggot contributing to the decay of the society. In effect, exposure to urban and city life pose a serious threat to the innocent and perhaps the poor. They are becoming victims of such social vices. Unluckily too, the oil boom is also a major factor to the wane of these vices. It is clearly depicted through the song of the Lagos woman as she knows where the oil boom goes.

*But she'll never tell, oh no,*

*That the price she paid, you know*

*For this her thriving trade*

*Was a little escapade*

*At Midnight Hotel*

*For that is where the oil boom goes*

The playwright ridicules those who are in the act of prostitution both the women and even their male accomplice to eschew this behaviour. It would be prudent for both parties especially the women to rather find descent work to do than this perverse way of making a living.

Bribery and corruption, at all levels of governance in Ghana today, has reached such a crescendo that it is difficult to determine its route cause. In Ghana presently, it is a potent weapon to amass wealth, victimize, suppress oppositions or even embarrass them. Bribery and corruption have eaten up into every aspect of the society and its activities. For instance, Bicycle had to be bribed before he check-in Alalise and his daughters into a room for a night. Considering the hospitable virtue of the African, Bicycle denies being an African:

*Bicycle: Na wetin? Na bite una wan bite me now?*

*Alalise: what did I tell you girls? ... But you are an African all the same, like us and you must know something about mercy ... Be an African. Have mercy. Find us something.*

*Bicycle: I swear to you we no get room again. And, Sir, this na hotel, no bi Africa*

*Alalise: (Giving him money). Take this.*

*Bicycle: (Taking it after some coaxing). Ah you bi good man, sir! ...*

*We get one room, one big room if you go fit manage ... (p. 41-42)*

The paper registers with dismay the spate of corruption that has engulfed the nation since we got our 'license'. 'License' a metonymy for our independence from the coloniser has rather opened the flood gate for embezzlement of hard-earned revenue designated for development. Osofisan ridicules politicians who appears to be 'saviours', rip off the state of its funds and save it in foreign accounts. Thus, it makes life unbearable for the populace who are poor. This assertion is made apparent in the song of the fairy mother:

*So said What's her name*

*And these fairies*

*They won the vote, and ...*

*They sit in Parliament ...*

*All our wealth these fairies*

*Impound ...*

*They stack our funds*

*In foreign accounts*

*They eat in our name ...*

*While we shrink, these fairies.*

Leaders have lost their morals and again, their fundamental responsibilities to serve the people that gave them the power. It appears they see leadership as a business venture for profit making. It is therefore not surprising to see these fairies go to every extent possible to make money in an inordinate manner. The playwright is consciously alerting us on the level of gravity leaders (fairies) are messing up the economic gains of the very society they lead. So, while we shrink they bloat all at our expense.

In recent times, the level of corruption that appears on the front pages of newspapers in the country is worrying. This development is not only rife among politicians and pastors alone but the judiciary too. Rev. AntwiTumfour on Saturday, October 3, 2015 lamented on the embarrassment that has struck the judiciary and the nation as he posited that "we need to admit that the alleged corruption in the judiciary, which has been documented by investigative journalist AnasAremeyawAnas is really disturbing and needs all hands on deck to get that enviable institution to redeem its image which, undoubtedly, has been seriously dented". The situation appears to be legitimized but this has been the worry of many artists and especially Osofisan who employs humour to call attention to this vice in the society.

Furthermore, Osofisan satirizes religious hypocrisy in the society. He exposes the hypocritical behaviour of Pastor Suuru. A model for society to follow however, with lies, pervert Christianity to acquire material worth as he indulges in smoking, alcoholism, adultery all in the name of contract. What is even disgusting is the inappropriate ways of his choice of venue in securing his supposedly contract; a place synonymously akin to rot, immorality clearly depicts the level of decadence in the society.

It also highlights the lower of standards even in the man of God. Indeed, Osofisan uncovers the shrouds of these charlatans who parade themselves as 'Christians' or men of God. Men of God indeed! Another hypocritical behaviour of some Pastors is the pretence of them luring especially their female congregants, to some obscure hideout for sex all in the name of some spiritual predicament. For example, this is prevalent in the society today. What is worrying is the inability of these women to discern the wolves in sheep clothing and not falling prey to these predators. Aside their sexual perversions, they also cunningly brainwash especially the well to do and rip them off their wealth and riches.

As the play progresses, Osofisan reveals yet another social cancer that has to do with abuse of power. Awero, a member of parliament throws herself about and with the slightest offends she rants that it will go to parliament for discussion. This is evident when Awero persistently insist on sampling the goods an act done before contracts are given. In page 29,

*Suuru: Honourable -*

*Awero: Come, stop that now. You can call me Awero*

*Suuru: ... You're sure I'll get that contract?*

*Awero: Why not? Once you cooperate and I sample ...*

These lines expose the bizarre ways some people are awarded contracts in the society thereby rubbishing competence as the yardstick in awarding such contracts. The play rightly exposes the abuse of power through Awero the only female member on the committee for projects. It seems most politicians especially the females are so much obsessed with power, hence looks down on the electorates. Considering her attitude towards Pastor Suuru it depicts her arrogance and perhaps pride. Hence, with this attitude, it runs through most people in government and those who occupy positions of trust turn to use their positions and office to molest those they work with. To buttress this point, Awero asserts that since she is a member of parliament, she said that '... I hold power even over your life! One simple bill in Parliament -It is very disgusting as the playwright frowns on this attitude of politicians and leaders alike who abuse their offices both for their selfish interest and for other ills corrupting the nation.

Contrastingly, in the event where she had disrespected Jimoh and Bicycle over the flimsy notion that their attitudes suck and that he will let it be debated in parliament, Evidently in page 21

*Jimoh: (Rudely). I am coming, MrsHonourable! (Goes away)*

*Awero: You hear that,Pastor? We'll have to do something about it in parliament! The state of our language is simply, appalling. I must move a motion about it at our next sitting.*

These lines influenced her inability to easily approach the receptionist because of her pride. Osofisan mocks politicians and leaders that being in power or at a position is not all. It is pertinent to note that humility and respect is very basic and a prerequisite. Had it not been that Awero, would not have found it difficult to approach Jimoh for his assistance. Thus, the maxim has it that the people you meet on your up are the same you meet when descending.

### 3. Conclusion

In addressing the relevance of plays in societal change and contributing to the movement of street journalism directly or indirectly Osofisan uniquely creates *Midnight hotel* including theatrical elements aesthetically. Theatre or play has been one major significant medium that is relevant to modern societies irrespective of the period that it was produced. Its source material has always been from life as it seeks to consciously appeal to the psychological, spiritual and physical needs of the society depending on the writer's point of view. The discussion so far, has established that indeed Femi Osofisan's '*Midnight Hotel*' is really relevant to modern society, especially the Ghanaian society. However, with the concerns raised by the playwright in a humorous way are a deferment, deprivation, and or stifling to the health of the people both individually and the society at large. Therefore, Ajidahun (2013) sees Femi Osofisan as he envisions in his plays as a creative artist, devoted indefatigably and dogged to using the platform of drama to fight graft and corruption in the society. By this assertion Osofisan and his play *Midnight Hotel*, is set to as it were to attack the ills of society so as to make the society a better place for all.

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