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Osofisan's Kolera Kolej and the Subject of Literary Praxis

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I

Osofisan's writings are better understood within a framework of a peculiar literary as well as philosophical milieu. In referring to it as 'peculiar'. I have at the back of my mind, two distinctive issues; first is the generation and historical period of which he is a part, and second is the philosophical outlook bequeathed to the period and perhaps to his own individual artistry.

The first is fairly straightforward, and this is how I have referred to it in a recent writing:

The works of dramatists with which we are concerned are those of the second generation of intellectual dramatists in Nigeria ... as well as other university-based exponents of the tradition. In the main, they emerged from the experience of the early 1970s, at a time when the Nigerian nation prospered by the resources from oil wealth ... In the rather peculiar melee of the scramble for wealth, we find the rise of a middle class whose tastes and attitudes have not been fashioned by a definite historical culture or tradition.¹

This represents the background to some of the grotesque characterisation in Kolera Kolej. The second, however, is not altogether easy to portray on paper. This in the sense that any historical period is attended by a definite philosophical temper; usually notions which coalesce to give the attitude of such times its characteristic flavour.

To be more particular, it will probably be necessary to make the point that the first crop of written as opposed to oral literatures in foreign languages by school or university-trained elite began to emerge from about the mid-1950s. It will be found that a certain determination for cultural revival attended the writings (in the various genres) of the period. Along with the excitement of cultural revivalism, coupled with the euphoria of independence, came a certain predilection towards literary idealism. Such sensibilities are pronounced in the works of D. C. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka and even in the novels of Chinua Achebe.

It would appear that the worldview of the first generation of literary men in Nigeria tend to emphasise the nature of a 'national' identity. The new political independence is like a beginning in time as well as in history. These writers also tend to see phenomena as God, Nature or Fate in the affairs of men. There is always an overriding superstructure of force in human affairs, be it a tradition or a creative spirit. Even in the plays of Duro Ladipo or Kola Ogunmola, there is always an idealized aspiration in the likes of men, driving them and determining the pace of their lives. In the life of Sango,² it is supernatural of events tends to become mechanistic which nevertheless constitutes a way of viewing the world. It also, certainly, has implications for craft as well as for dramaturgy. I should therefore offer in the terms of Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez that for the philosophical consciousness of praxis to render itself historically, the ordinary man has to be conceived in a certain way in relation to this world:

The ordinary man regards himself as the authentic practical man, par excellence, living and acting in a practical way. In his world not only do things exist *in themselves*, but they exist primarily in terms of their practical significance, to the extent that they satisfy the immediate necessities of daily life. That practical significance, however, appears to him as an immanent quality of things, which occurs independently of the human actions that confer such a significance upon them. Things are not only known in themselves, irrespective of their relation to human activity of any kind, but they are the fact that because they have a practical significance practical acts and objects exist only *for* and *through* men.⁵

The point that Adolfo Vazquez makes at length here will be the starting point of Osofisan if we examine his works as a philosophy of the theatre. His representation of a rootless middle class is what we shall examine in his works as a philosophy of the theatre. His representation of a rootless middle class is what we shall examine in his novel as well as stage adaptation: *Kolera Kolej*.⁶ However, because the play as well as the novel portrays the situation of a plague (cholera epidemic mirrored as corruption), it begs an irresistible fascination for a comparative study with the novel of Albert Camus of the same name, *The Plague*.⁷ It is also an interesting coincidence that apart from the similarity of these in both Osofisan and Camus he is, like Camus, a man of the avant-garde theatre as well as a freelance journalist.

Kolera Kolej is an allegory about power struggle and corruption, and the university campus setting is representative of a republic, or even the African continent. The prose is slapstick parody, representative of the decay and corruption inherent in the setting:

The Prime Minister summoned his cabinet for an emergency meeting. It took only a week to assemble. The Finance Minister was flown in from Switzerland, where he has gone to hide some of the nation's money so it would not come to harm within the country. He did not relish this abrupt interruption of his patriotic mission. The Transport Minister was finally discovered by over-zealous Customs officers among some bales of smuggled lace cloth at the border. He was publicly commended for this detective genius, and the customs officers rebuked. The Culture Minister could not be present, being occupied at the time with cleaning up the brothels. But as soon as a quorum was formed the Prime Minister got up to address his men. "Gentlemen of the cabinet," he said "I'm sure you've all heard the news.

A serious situation has developed in one of our colleges. Cholera seems to have taken over power there. Now what shall we do?" [10-11]

After this announcement in cabinet, notice was given that the college campus be quarantined and that it be granted independence or autonomy. It could now choose its own leaders and hold its elections independent of the larger society. However, because this smaller society must, of necessity, be a miniature of the larger one, its politics could not be better. If anything, it will most likely be worse, especially as it will be teleguided from the central government. This is how the author describes a piece of the action:

A Day to the elections, Prof. Belejayan, a hot candidate for the post of VC, increased the salaries of his domestic staff by two percent and ordered them to have a wash. Then in the dead of the night, his personal *babalawo* went round the families to extract the requisite oaths of allegiance, whispering menacingly: "No sweat, no increase". Approximately nine hours afterwards the servants were carted in a truck borrowed from the Agric farm to the hall where the election was to take place.

As soon as they were seated, Prof. Belejayan himself got up to denounce his rivals. Some of them he charged, had brought along their servants and concubines to the meeting to vote for them, in an election meant strictly for the teaching staff. He wondered whether they were not ashamed of themselves? (p. 19]

Passages such as we have just quoted reveal the classification of *Kolera Kolej* as dramatic farce and the exaggerated and bizarre accounts of anomalies in what is meant to be a sophisticated society makes it ore of a drama than a piece of prose fiction. This is also coupled with the fact that all the personal names in the work are farcical pseudonyms incident on the moral quality and/or the physical appearance of the particular character concerned at any point in time. So where the often racy and intangible prose tends to move with the speed of lightening, the cinematographic events are hoisted on the ringing dictates of the names whence they derive meaning. This style works, as usual, for the stereotypical characters of Osofisan's comedies and tragicomedies.⁸ Professor *Belejayan*, true to his name, will forever tend the affairs of others, a mere time-server on the sea of life; 'a specialist in animal cohabitation'. The one named *Gedu* (African Mahogany), though ironically thin like a broomstick, is as impetuous and as crude as the African Mahogany. *Kukute* (a tree stump) is dwarfish in size as well as in character. The writer calls him 'a diminutive man, a pacifist by physique' (p. 21).

A certain Dr *Dekitan* is forever contracting marriages without offsprings, and a Professor *Agbonrin* (lit. antelope) is a nimble antelope of a man. Political scientist, Dr *Parmole*, true to his name, is a deadly adder – "A jungle of hair masked his lower jaw and the VC-elect did not recognise him". Comrade *Ijimere* (brown Monkey), a true monkey of a Students' Union leader went with *Gedu*' *nyaju* on a nocturnal visit to *Belejayan* as soon as he (Belejayan) was declared Vice-Chancellor to have a secret pact with him. Union leaders thus collaborate with institutional executives to rip off their own members.

This is a convenient point at which to emphasise the cultural as well as artistic correspondence with Camus. It is one of osofisan's theatrical features to keep a narrator, a kind of griot or diarist in the background of his epics. The devise; though not excellently deployed here as in say, *Once Upon four Robbers*,⁹ it is nevertheless present and noteworthy. This character which Osofisan called *A Man* here is named Tarrou in Camus' *The Plague*. The narrator in *The Plague* sometimes sees events through the eyes of Tarrou, and the diaries of Tarrou is seen almost as a sacrosanct historical witness to the deeds of men. Much as in Camus' book, Osofisan records on a correspondent page in *Kolera Kolej* the incident of a man fawning over a pet from a balcony.¹⁰ In Camus the pet is a cat, whereas in Osofisan, it is a dog.

The important issue however is that in an embattled polity, as represented in both texts, a curious, enigmatic character, unnamed, unidentified becomes the means of documenting a sensibility, and an uneasy anomaly. This is how the enigmatic *Man* appears in osofisan's book:

A man who had witnessed the whole scene from a balcony patted his dog and wrote in his notebook:

Those voices are forever monuments, which howl on still from stricken homes ...

As these also shall be here recorded, the high haggling of specialists:

For all are one, the dead and the decadent, the politicians of disease or discord:

We are prostitutes all, whether we bleed or crack: we are casualties of Eshu's fraud,

Because we cannot bear each other stink:

He called his dog and went for supper, even as the news was being broadcast of prof. Belejayan's victory. He had fish, hot melon stew and pounded yam. He washed the meal down with a beer, one of the commodities now unfortunately rare on the campus due to no fault of his. (pp. 24-5)

One last correspondence which I shall like to draw between Osofisan's and Camus' book is a certain comic skepticism of style and the way in which they sometimes present their characters in the images of animals or pets. Witness this passage from Tarrou's diary:

I find a family which has its meals in this hotel quite interesting. Paterfamilias is a tall, thin man, always dressed in black and wearing a starched collar. The top of his head is bald, with two tufts of grey hair on each side. His small beady eyes, narrow nose, and hard, straight mouth make him look like a well-brought-up owl. He is always first at the door of the restaurant, stands aside to let his wife – a tiny woman, like a black mouse – go in, and then comes in himself with a small boy and girl, dressed like performing poodles, at his heels. When they are at the table he remains standing till his wife is seated and only then the two "poodles" can perch themselves on their chairs. He uses no terms of endearment to his family, addresses politely spiteful remarks to his wife, and bluntly tells the kids what he thinks of them ... "Your father's right," approved the mouse. 'The two poodles buried their noses in their plates, and the owl acknowledged thanks by a curt, perfunctory nod.

Kolera Kolej presents a situation of extreme pessimism in which incompetent medical students were encouraged to carry out major surgical operations; adolescent school girls abandoned their studies for brothel homes; and corpses were left to rot in the streets. These were the wages that the college had to pay for getting independence from the metropolitan polities. There is no gainsaying the fact that the author meant to present an extreme parody of independent African states which had demanded and obtained political independence from colonial outposts. The independence ceremonies had taken the semblance of a carnival, yet the real outcome of it had been a monumental disaster. This theme which is not uncommon in African dramatic and fictional writings have often portrayed an awful truth in the lives of Africa's independent nations. The theme is portrayed with gory details in the novel of Yambo Onologuem, *Bound to Violence*,¹¹ and is a bit more mediated as drama in Wole Soyinka's play at Nigeria's independence celebrations, *A Dance of the Forests*.¹² What has saved Osofisan's *Kolera Kolej* from incurring the outright condemnation of critics is the fact of its Existentialist or Absurdist twist.

In a dream sequence, the Man, the omnipresent narrator found himself without his dog. The dog has strayed into a palace, and when the Man arrived there, he was feted on the flesh of his companion dog. When this fact was revealed to him, he threw up and rejected the world around him where men eat their own kinds. The king recommended that he must deaden his conscience and reconcile himself to a brutalising world:

I'll teach you, poetaster, how to chew hones that are broken, or force human eyes out of their sockets and polish them into marketable beads ... Who talks of guilt? You have written poems. You've slept with women. You've made all the gestures appropriate to an intellectual in a period of plague. Who can reproach you? You can do no more than your share, and you have done no more than your share, and you have done it well. And that was why I, king of Lasunwon, eternal spectator of human affairs, arranged this banquet in your honour. (pp. 99-100)

Quite apart from the recurrence of the title of Camus' book, there is an even greater resonance of the futility with which human affairs is plagued in the novel, *Kolera Kolej*. A symbolic succession of coups greeted the spurious independence of the doomed community and an autocracy of a vicious kind joined the objects of the plague. It was then that the most ironic clause came into the narrative account or the authorial interventions. It encapsulated the theme of Camus' book where it predicated human existence on the futile and barren repetitions that often accompanies it. That is what typifies the plague wherever it occurs in society. Here is the conversation from Camus:

'Oh come! That doesn't follow because they let you down last time.'

'So you haven't understood yet?' Rambert shrugged his shoulders almost scornfully.

'Understood what?'

'Ah!' Rieux exclaimed.

'No, you haven't understood that it means exactly that – *the same thing over and over again*.'¹³

In *Kolera Kolej*, Osofisan represents it thus after a tyrant assumes office:

Hope was rekindled in all the land. And with hope, the promise of a fresh beginning. And the people could begin to die again with renewed fervour.
(p. 105)

The novel ends on the note that the cycle of evil itself is upturned, but it could not be confirmed that it will be followed by a succession of good. There is an unending dialectic with the same refrain between epochs or terms of governance as mediated by art.

II

The domain of the dialectic is a fairly comprehensive one and my introduction of the concept in the foregoing paragraph necessitates an elaboration of it. Viewed as an integral theoretical framework, it is often discussed in the realm of praxis as a bifocal concept which has to do with the subjective as well as the objective aspect of social and material life. Some scholars like Adolfo Vazquez¹⁴ prefer to link it up with Marxian and Hegelian thought but others like Paulo Freire¹⁵ do not think it fashionable to do so. As I have used the model of Freire copiously elsewhere, I shall lean more towards Vazquez here. The distinction between the two theoreticians is, after all, a matter of degree. In identifying the levels of praxis, Vazquez writes thus:

Praxis can have either a reiterative character, in that it conforms to a previously elaborated law so that it is reproduced in various products with analogous characteristics, or an innovating, creative character to the extent that it is not totally obedient to existing laws, and in fact culminates in a new and unique product.¹⁶

We do know that the activity of the human subject or the human subject or the so-called concrete praxis leads to the creation of a new humanised reality as its product. This end product is a material of varying degree depending on the sophistication of the practical process as undertaken by the subject. There is then an opposition between the subject on the one hand, and the object on the other. From our earlier definition of the levels of praxis, there exists thereby a dialectical opposition between creative or reflective praxis on the one hand and imitative or spontaneous praxis on the other. It follows from our earlier elaboration that creative praxis explores or brings into being novel areas of experience whilst imitative praxis reiterates and affirms, perhaps in newer forms, modes of creation that have existed before. Even Aristotle himself says that an artist need not be original, he/she may derive inspiration from a previously existing art or archetype.¹⁷ The level of attainment or relevance is often determined by the degree

of consciousness with which the subject works upon the object available. This will, in effect, reflect on the quality of the object that emerges from the encounter. This level of interaction cannot be absolute or static, their elasticity will depend on the milieu or social context which nurtures it. This accounts for the various complexities which arise at any given point relative to practical events in history. The artist is continually at 'war' with his/her work as well as with the society that forms the basis of interactional practise. This is the totality of the conceptual framework of praxis Vazquez is extremely relevant here again:

From the standpoint of total human praxis, translated into production of self-creation of man himself, creative praxis is the determining factor insofar as it allows man to deal with new situations and the new needs to which they give rise. Man must constantly invent or discover new solutions; and once they have been put into action, he cannot simply go on repeating or imitating what previously had been the case, in the first place because he is constantly creating new needs which invalidate previous solutions, and in the second, because their inadequacy was revealed by the new exigencies of life itself.¹⁸

If we agree to the logic of the foregoing, within the context of praxis, artistic creation signals the founding of a new society, an epic quest and the building of new structures. Apart from the Utopian implications of this for the aesthetics of praxis, it might lead to a loose conjoint of episodes in a work of art. Depending on the theme or temper, this may, as a matter of fact, lead to a weakening in the structure or links of the plot of a narrative. It is relevant to add that it is precisely the exhibition of this concept that often leads to lone, disjointed episodes in *Kolera Kolej*. The 'Post script' could pass for the beginning of a new narrative, and when it comes to an end, it is so abrupt as to be almost unexpected. As Vazquez conceives of it:

Consciousness devises an end or project which is open and dynamic, and will remain so throughout the practical process. The function of consciousness is not only to conceive the project, and then return to itself; it must constantly transform the end at the level of ideals, not in response to intrinsic, ideal exigencies, but in terms of the external demands that arise as a result of the use of objective means and instruments, and of the objective activity itself.¹⁹

This is also the reason why such works in this category are often intensely political, dispensing with the other mythical and metaphorical dimensions of art. In this other category of art, the individual material process of praxis is often interpreted as a grand generic archetype, just in the sense in which Northrop Frye writes here:

The apocalyptic and demonic worlds, being structures of pure metaphorical identity, suggest the eternally unchanging, and lend themselves very readily to being projected existentially as heaven and hell, where there is continuous life but no process of life... Then again, in common with animals, man exhibits the ordinary cycle of life and death, in which there is generic but not individual rebirth.²⁰

It is not as if Praxis, as a materialist dialectic completely rules out the possibility of vision or a liberating ideal, dispensing with the other mythical and metaphorical dimensions of art. In this other category of art, the individual material process of praxis is often interpreted as a grand generic archetype, just in the sense in which Northrop Frye writes here:

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continuous life but no process of life ... Then again, in common with animals, man exhibits the ordinary cycle of life and death, in which there is generic but not individual rebirth.²⁰

It is not as if Praxis, as a materialist dialectic completely rules out the possibility or vision of a liberating ideal, yet it takes it, somewhat, for granted such that when it represents it, care must be taken that it not lapse into a proleptic vision.

Art, in any of its forms, is the one great domain where both praxis and mythos may be played out. That art is 'creative' as well as 'aesthetic' reveals the extent to which it embodies values from both parallel, complimentary schools of thought. In art both the external, objective features as well as the internal, subjective features coalesce. Content and form become aspects of one indivisible whole. Form is given to a particular ideal content, which in itself is further transformed beyond the artistic labour that gives it birth. This final point is well driven home by Vazquez:

The result of the process is that (a) the original form is materialised, losing its original ideal quality; (b) the content now has form; and (c) the material, its resistance overcome, has yielded to a form. All three, however, are indissolubly linked in the now finished product, which is the work of art ... The work of art is the product of an objective, practical art, which is also located in the subjective field; it is an object whose reality is independent of the experiences and ideas of the subject during its gestation, and its objective existence is the result of a process of materialisation or objectification of a series of subjective, psychic facts.²¹

The artist himself, under a pseudonym, almost completely captures that ramification of praxis in a little poem titled "Awakening". He writes:

Rise.
Take your dream to the end of the street.
Then stretch the street.
Take it on the end of your dream.²²

Need we emphasise anything more about that dialectical opposition between the idealized dream and the practise of stretching that dream? Here the subject relates to the object, and there is supposed to be a result which transforms beyond the artistic labour that gives it birth.

Conclusion

I have pointed out earlier that the temper described above is not that adopted by a lone artist. By and large, it would appear to be a dominant temper of a generation to which each individual artist gives expression or interpretation. The depth of the artist's or the writer's resolution depends on the ability or skill which he brings to bear on his craft and material. Much of what I have hazarded here will be true, not only for most of Femi Osofisan's plays, but also for those of his contemporaries. One fact that we must not ignore is that apart from creative writers, a number of literary critics were ruled by this dominant temper of the time and they often bring same to bear on their mediation of art, as well as on their theorizing.

The same dominate, but shortlived temper, will be seen in a modified form among non-literary artists. That is painters, sculptors and, perhaps, musicologists and musicians. It may, however, be that because of the peculiarities of their own art, a slightly modified analysis will be necessary to genuinely deal with those art forms of the same period and tendency.

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