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**COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA: A  
STUDY OF FEMI OSOFISAN'S ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS AND RED IS THE  
FREEDOM ROAD**

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**ABSTRACT**

Literature is one of the most potent forces for attaining a desirable and enviable society when all other ways have terminated. It exposes, reflects and indeed magnifies the decadent under belly of any given society. The artist as a moral eye of his society applies all form of strategies to denounce economic and socio-political vices and prescribes an alternative to the anomalous solution. This paper examines Femi Osofisan's "Once Upon Four Robbers" and "Red is the freedom Road" as the potent tool for building a better and humane society in this new era of "Re-branding" in Nigeria. It concludes that the task of re-building a nation is a collective responsibility which every well-meaning Nigerian should be ready to shoulder in order for the country to be a better place for everybody.

**KEYWORDS:** Collective-strategy, nation-building, socio-political vices, collective-responsibility, change.

**INTRODUCTION**

The major focus of this paper is to explicate collective strategy as an alternative for a successful reform and reveal the potentials in this strategy towards building a desirable society.

Nigeria as a country has suffered pervasive obstacles and challenges in terms of change towards a sustainable development. The country has refused to grow inspite of the huge human and capital resources at its disposal. Osofisan notes that; "corruption has become ingrained that the masses don't see the true solution ..." (a5) He further asserts that:

It is an unfortunate thing but that is the kind of leadership we have developed, the one that has become a pest, a disease, a cancer, ... on the flesh of our people. (83)

Several attempts have been made over the years by different regimes to remedy the lingering socio-political ills in Nigeria but most of these remedies have failed as they end up as mere political propaganda. The Nigerian government is still searching for a means of social regeneration and this is what basically provokes this paper. An actual change can never be attained by lone voices or through the smokescreen of democracy. Osofisan notes that:

... We have all these individuals who are working alone. They are all lone voices ... and they have not been able to bring any change because they never try to come together, to plan a collective strategy to work out together warp of defeating the wrongs they have been talking about. (116)

The above observation has shown one of the reasons why numerous campaigns for change in Nigeria have failed. This obviously means Nigerians lack the potentials of collective innovation towards rebuilding the Nigerian society to an enviable one.

It is against this backdrop that this paper espouses Osofisan's Once Upon Four Robber and Red is the Freedom Road especially to reveal the potential of "collective strategy" as the potent force for rebuilding the society.

Osofisan as a true concerned Nigerian does not shy away from presenting, poignantly, his incisive vision of an ideal society. His works are preoccupied with collective action. They portray man as a victim of history especially within the frame-work of the Nigeria's socio-political structures that subject him to all kinds of social vices. Then, for one to understand Osofisan's political ideology, one must first of all take a rapid tour through the history of Nigeria right from independence to date. He advises that:

In order to understand the turmoils in which I construct my plays and against which my plays are constructed, one must first take a rapid tour through the history of my country Nigeria. (51)

An upward-looking society needs Osofisan's alternative to enable it recreates her social world in terms of man's relation with his family, with politics, with state of economy, politics or religion towards having a better society. Richard Hoggart, a cultural critic proclaims that: without literary mirror, the society would be blind to the fullness of activities around it, as literary forms reveals a lot about the society and the people. (5)

In the same vein, Wa Thiongo states that; "Literature and Society are reflected in one another and do act on one another" (71). Umukoro also observes that; "... although Literature entertains, it is a serious vocation" (9). This depicts that the alternative in literature provides an avenue of entertainment aimed at challenging the people to re-examine themselves, their values and general attitude in relations to the pervasive obstacles to sustainable development in their society.

Osofisan sees Literature as an active catalyst of social change and a vehicle for articulating dynamic process of evolution. Although he notes that: "Literature itself cannot practically change the society but the kind of awareness which may lead to change can be cultivated only through medium of art." (24). He also observes that one of the problems with Nigeria is lack of awareness, without which the process of social changes is unrealistic: "Development begins from consciousness if you don't really know what is happening, how can you do anything about it?" (111) This does not suggest that literature is a mere political speech to hoodwink the people but as Frantz Fanon says "... to try relentlessly and passionately teach the masses that everything depends on them, that if we stagnate, it is their responsibilities and if we go forward, it is due to them too" (159).

Osofisan's works primarily delineate the Nigerian society in order to speculate what is, what ought to be and what might be. And like he proclaims, he is the kind of writer who is always spontaneously drawn to social injustice and its victims. Once Upon Four Robbers exposes the irrationality of using death as "a weapon of policy". The phenomenon of armed robbery in the play is an apt metaphor that depicts a respected circle of leadership failure in Nigeria. In the play, Angola, one of the armed robbers says: "like a ram, they slaughtered our leader, like a Ramadan lamb (5).

The above sounds inhuman, numbs people's sensitivity and erodes their sense of human's worth. Osofisan in decrying this in the production notes of the play, notes:

I believe that it is true we take a second look. They legalized slaughtering of the erring members of our society for whatever offering this will certainly not bring the restoration of our society to its primordial sanity ... (viii)

This is a fact about the Nigerian situation today. Menace such as indiscriminate award of contracts, altering of accounts, bribery, drug trafficking, electoral fraud, militancy, advance fee fraud (419), sales of fake drugs, contraband goods, smuggling, swearing of fake affidavits have grown more sophisticated over the years in Nigeria as a result of large scale of social injustice in the society. Hassan one of the robbers in the play reveals that:

... what excuse do you think I owe you? Everyone has a dream, everyone has a point at which the dream cracks up. I have sworn not be a slave in my father's land. All I wanted was the right work but everywhere they only wanted slaves ... (Robbers: 90)

Angola another robber asks "... too many people ride their posh cars along the same ridden backs of the poor, is there no other way?" (29). This contradiction stems from rapid pseudo-development in Nigeria which manifests in availability of many cars, boutiques, supermarkets coupled with other side effects of unplanned economy which features, amongst, others, are: congested hospitals, crowded public schools, slums and other infrastructural deficiencies. Consequently, the society is juxtaposed between extreme wealth (in the hands of few individuals) and poverty (amongst the masses) – a situation that has turned some of the dissatisfied members of Nigerian society to criminals.

The argument posed in this play therefore, is grounded in the fact that if armed robbery is morally unjustifiable in Nigeria, so should hunger, exploitation, unemployment, deprivations. In the play, the fight for survival becomes the order of the day because of the harsh realities that embattle the people. Mama Alice, one of the market women asks, ... "but we have to feed our families, haven't we?" Another market woman, Bintu, also asks; "where shall we turn to if not our stalls?". Hassan one of the robbers says: "the world is a market; we come to slaughter one another ..." (91-92)

Osofisan sees the robbers and market profiteers as Nigerians who have been afflicted by corruption. For him, Nigerians are not doomed to be prone to all sorts of social vices but these thrive as a result of the way Nigeria is economically and socio-politically structured.

Red is the Freedom Road is a reformist play which paints a pathetic picture of the misery of the down-trodden Nigerians amidst opulence and affluence of a few. The play portrays ordinary Nigerians as slaves, dehumanized, and short-changed by the ruling class because of the economic and political configuration of the country which favours only the elite: Ibidun Akanji's wife in the play, reveals:

Our masters have become more cruel with us. Each day their whip cut deeper into our skins. They harness our women to their chariots, feed out children to their ... (117)

Ibidun represents the Nigerian masses that are impoverished, fleeced, bruised and dehumanized while "our masters" represent the leaders that Osofisan describes as cancer on the flesh of his people. Maier in his This House Has Fallen, compares such leaders to African war lords, " ... they sell their resources-oil instead of human beings"

The leadership in the play is presented as cruel and callous. The situation in the play depicts hunger, horror, disaster, unemployment, chaos, hopelessness and death in Nigerian society.

The two plays harp on Nigerian leadership style and its impact on Nigerians. The plays show how Nigerian leaders continue to pursue policies and interests that are injurious to Nigeria's sustainable growth and development. Chinua Achebe's comment throws more light on the points in these plays clearly enough. He says: "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership ... the unwillingness or inability of its leadership to rise to responsibility ... (1)

Osofisan equally posits in the plays, that lone and individual struggles always fail when it comes to effecting a change for good in the society. He says:

Social changes can be achieved through the unity and collaboration of everyone, especially the masses, who are the victims of social injustice. Therefore the struggle for freedom, justice and progress in the society is a collective one (14)

This idea of collectivism he further demonstrates in the two plays. In Once upon Four Robbers, Alhaja, in the play, mobilized the robbers in the search for change and re-organization of the society. Similarly in Red is the Freedom Road, Ibidun, the wife of Akanji, stirs up the rebellious instinct in her husband.

In Once upon Four Robbers, Sergeant, a soldier, represents the government agents and is responsible for the execution of the robbers. Having discovered the true picture of things in the country, he affirms that:

We had a choice. You and your friend my soldiers and traders we could have stuck together and rebuilt our lives. But each went his own way and ... (93)

Hassan, one of the robbers that represents the brutalized Nigerians also affirms that:

We are doomed, my brother and only our solidarity would save us from the cutting of the cord, earth to earth. You know the myths... it is a history of repeated defeat, oppression, of nothing changing ... (80)

Similarly in Red is the Freedom Road, Akanji having seen the people's plight promises to set them free from their captivity:

Warriors, the road is hard but straight we shall fight our way to freedom ... I shall lead you into war! But it shall be war of freedom (131)

In the two plays, Osofisan emphasizes on the first person plural pronoun "We". This is to foreground his idea of unity and collaboration of everyone in the struggle to denounce all the decadent mannerisms that have clogged up the will of holistic change in Nigeria.

Characters like Alhaja and the Robbers in Red is the Freedom Road are worthy of emulation by Nigerians in any just struggle for transformation of Nigerian.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nigerian Society is bedeviled by numerous problems. No doubt these problem are traceable to various anomalous situations, but it is a fact that with the right kind of alternative strategy towards actual change almost all, if not all of these problems would be affectively handled. As Osofisan asserts:

Society is man made, what we have is what we have ourselves created; it is not a divine order that some people should suffer forever, some people enjoy forever ... we ourselves are responsible for what our society is and we are also responsible for whoever it may become ... (112).

This means as a people we are responsible for whatever the Nigerian society is and whatever it becomes as everything depends on us. Social ills like, insecurity, hunger, strife, want, nursery unemployment, robbery, bribery and all forms of perversion are all products of unjust society and they could be reduced to the barest minimum, on our country by the right collective will. This is particularly pertinent to the present campaign of 're-branding Nigeria'. Nigerians as a people need to imbibe this spirit of 'collective will' to actualize changes, because it would be fatal for upward looking nation like Nigeria to over look the urgent need for this potent strategy as other means have yielded little or no result.

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