

## African Onomastics and Politics: A Demystification of Àbíkú Names in Femi Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*

Ayokunmi O. Ojebode (PhD),  
Redeemer's University, Ede, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: Ayokunmi Ojebode, E-mail: [ojebodea@run.edu.ng](mailto:ojebodea@run.edu.ng)

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### ABSTRACT

Àbíkú names in Femi Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin* require reconsideration, given their onomastic (literary) significance which provides a foray into the cyclic trend of Nigerian politics. In this respect, the Yoruba myth is exploited as an instrument of blending sociocultural, literary, and political contexts through naming. To achieve this objective, this study, therefore, explores two (2) charactonyms in the selected text using Onomastic Semiosis. Besides, an oral interview was conducted with an expert in the Yoruba culture to buttress the character analysis through a cross-disciplinary approach to name, orature, culture, politics, and religion from a Nigerian context. The thrust of the work is to establish that underdevelopment in Nigeria is an outcome of recycling of political leaders.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Femi Osofisan is one of the few authors whose works have not enjoyed criticisms from literary-onomastic researchers. This study will thus break the silence of Onomastic (study and science of names) research on Femi Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* To achieve this, Onomastic Semiosis was employed as the study's theoretical construct. The reason for its selection is because the underlining themes of the text resonate politically as well as culturally. It will be discovered from the analysis of characters' names in the selected text that names are prophetic, given the authorial foresight of the playwright into Nigeria's politics which has remained unchanged since fifty-two (52) years of military interception.

### A. A Synopsis of the Text

Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* is a dramatic text written to honour the memory of Dr. Tai Solarin, who was the Public Complaints Commissioner for some states in Nigeria, namely Oyo, Ogun, and Ondo during Obasanjo-Muhammed led military regime from 29th July, 1975 to 1st October, 1979. The text was adapted from the play *The Inspector General* by the Russian playwright, Nikolay Gogol. Osofisan presents a caricature of a council of corrupt local government officials who nervously anticipate Solarin, the Public Complaints Commissioner, in their constituency. As the story unfolds, the insignificant rogue, Ìṣòlá, who has jumped bail in Lagos, is mistaken for Solarin. Ìṣòlá is bribed and feted and finally betrothed to the daughter of a greedy and corrupt Christian cleric who wears charms around his waist. After he has duped and exploited the officials, the mis-identification is discovered, and the arrival of the 'real' Public Complaints Commissioner is announced.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *African Onomastics: Àbíkú Names*

Àbíkú in the Yorùbá cultural milieu is a child (male/female) that often experiences recurrent death so that s/he can reunite with his/her companions at a fixed time in the spiritual realm. Most importantly, an Àbíkú child is "predestined to a continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth" (Akinnaso 55).

Soyinka, on the one hand, creates an imagery of a mischievous Àbíkú child, while Clark, on the other hand, describes a persona (relative) of an Àbíkú child supplicating its stay. Notwithstanding, both poets complement on the prevention of the Àbíkú children by lacerating their bodies after they have been discovered (Clark 61, Soyinka, 1967: 62-63). In contrast to Soyinka's poem in which the Àbíkú child defies all attempts to force his stay, Clark appeals to the spirit of an Àbíkú child to stay among the living so that the mother can enjoy some rest. They "are believed to belong to a group of demons that reside in the woods around "Iroko" trees (Odebode and Atunde 126; Moruwawon 209).

Significantly, Clark's poem corroborates Odebode and Atunde, and Moruwawon's assertion on the meeting point for Àbíkú spirits in the baobab tree.

In some cases, the child may suffer consistent illnesses to depart the earthly realm. But once *Ifa* is consulted, there are stringent measures that are taken to sever the bond of the child with his/her spirit mates for longevity (I. Elebuibon personal interview, November 5, 2018). Culturally, once an Àbíkú child is discovered, it is given a name to force its stay (I. Elebuibon personal interview, November 5, 2018). The names are *Máìlò* (do not leave), *Máìlómó* (do not depart anymore), *Dúrójayé* (wait and enjoy life), *Dúrósiní* (wait to bury me), *Ìgbékòyí* (the forest rejects this child), *Kalèjayé* (settle to enjoy life), *Kòsókó* (no more hoes/for burial), *Kúmúyì* (death has a hold on this one), *Ikúmápàyì* (death, spare this). Other names are *Mamuadesunkun* (do not cause royalty to weep/cry), *Mamukuyomi* (do not mock me for [the] death [in the family]), or *Mamulo* ([death] do not take [this child] away) [Akinyemi 9]. The above names are few among several Àbíkú names to 'expose,' 'thwart the plans,' 'appease' or 'provoke' the spirit children to stay alive.

Elebuibon corroborates the above by stating that, Àbíkú names are given at birth to such children to supplicate and appease their stay in the terrestrial realm (I. Elebuibon personal interview, November 5, 2018). He explains further that, often, when they hear such names, they may feel pity for their parents (I. Elebuibon personal interview, November 5, 2018). Furthermore, to sustain their lives, parents of such children perform drastic sacrifices as instructed by an herbalist to sever the bond of the spirit child with his/her companions in the spirit realm which would hinder their return. The exposure is "traditionally one of the ways of forcing an Àbíkú to stay and grow like a normal child" (Clark 185).

Badejo affirms to the therapeutic power of the water of River Osun as prevention for the death of an Àbíkú child. He notes *Àròmitútù soògùn àgàn, àròmitútù soògùn àbíkú*, "The one whose cool water is used (as a medicine) to cure infertility and to prevent infant mortality" (Badejo's Translation, 138-139). Elebuibon further explains that there are often when the child would be seeing or hearing spiritual conversations, which may be inaudible to those present (I. Elebuibon personal interview, November 5, 2018). Abraham expatiates on Badejo's statement as he shares radical measures to prevent the death of an Àbíkú child, he posits:

"The corpse of a dead Àbíkú child is maltreated, and wounds and blows are inflicted to make permanent scarifications. Sometimes, the body is hacked up and in every case, must be thrown into the "bush": the idea is that thereby, the Àbíkú-spirit suffers and becomes incapable of entering a human body" (7).

On this premise, the present study seeks to explore Àbíkú names in *WAS* to bridge the gap between the past and contemporary realities and also to critique the Nigerian politics. This is the reason for George's postulation that the oral storytelling tradition and fictive imagination can be combined to (re)construct past and contemporary social experiences in Nigeria (George 107).

Coker's research is close but different from the present study; in that, the critic merely explores the Àbíkú myth as a title of a text rather than as a phenomenon. He does not progress beyond the creativity and political significance of the myth in Debo Kotun's *Àbíkú*. Notwithstanding, he demonstrates through his study that the Nigerian prosaic genre is a platform to harness myth and history (Coker 87-93). Contrastingly, the present research is centred on Osofisan's dramatic text and aims at blending creativity, socio-historicity and political significance of Àbíkú names in the selected text from a literary onomastic standpoint.

Odebode and Onadipe deploy linguistic and anthropological approaches to the study of Àbíkú names among the Yorùbá. They employ pragmatics and face act theory as their study's theoretical construct for an extensive study of politeness acts in the generation of names of Àbíkú children (127-132). Their study and the present are similar due to discussions on the Àbíkú phenomenon; however, our data differ. The critics generally focus on Àbíkú names; however, the present study is on characters with Àbíkú names in Osofisan's literary text.

Ilechukwu examines clinical psychiatric case studies and descriptive fieldwork on outpatients who claimed to be *Ogbanje* or Àbíkú at Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), Nigeria (239-255). The evaluative research is stringently medical. Notwithstanding, it aligns with the present study in the area of demystifying cultural beliefs for a

contemporarily related purpose. In this stead, our aim is to draw a parallel between the transitory nature of an *Àbíkú* child and the Nigerian politics through names.

Can Taner takes a monologicistic approach to Western historiography in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. He appraise the *Àbíkú* myth in Okri as a paradox of Postmodernist writing. He opines that the magical realist text is a decolonised history of Nigeria (265-276). Meanwhile, his study and the present differ in analysis and theoretical approaches. Can Taner does a textual analysis on Okri whereas, a literary onomastic analysis of *Àbíkú* names is carried out using Onomastic Semiosis and includes unearthing relevant socio-political themes in Osofisan's *WAS*.

The reviews in this section thus, suggest that *Àbíkú* names as it would be revealed later in the analysis of Osofisan's *WAS* are a blend of both textual and extra-textual contexts.

## 2.2 Onomastic Semiosis

Characters' names were analysed in this study using Onomastic Semiosis within a contextual framework that related the names to economic and political processes in the Nigerian society, its cultures and literature. Furthermore, concepts derived from Culture, Postcolonialism and Semiotics were introduced where applicable to enhance the analysis of names in Femi Osofisan's *WAS*. As regards the concept of postcolonialism adopted into this study, the political climate in a 'Third-world' nation like Nigeria informs the literary context. Most importantly, names, when studied from a postcolonial context, do not constitute a total departure, but rather, a slight deviation from the past. Therefore, the term 'post' in postcolonial theory is more or less a continuum and reconstruction of history, however, within the framework of contemporary or neo-colonial realities.

Naming as a pre-colonial art thus is the motivation behind aesthetics in Osofisan's works that is, character naming. In addition, it is deployed by the playwright as a cultural instrument to reflect current issues in the Nigerian society and politics. Neo-colonial realities such as bribery, embezzlement, abuse of public office, among others, fundamentally, unveil the need for national liberty and transformation of the Nigerian society, economy and politics. Some theorists share this view, including Spivak (1988); Bhabha (1994) and Ashcroft et al. (1989). Our argument in this study is that the Postcolonial theory is a construct to reconcile history with contemporary realities particularly, Nigeria's naming tradition with modern politics. The fact is, the socio-cultural context in which Osofisan deploys the names of the characters in the selected texts is postcolonial/neo-colonial. Specifically, he exploits the names as a mirror of contemporary socio-political realities in Nigeria.

Michael Halliday's Social Semiotics entails contexts of culture and situations. The context of culture is the cultural milieu of a language employed in the process of interpreting a text, while the context of situation implies "the environment of a text" or circumstances that gave rise to a perceived significance of a text (Halliday and Hassan 46). With regard to this study, the Nigerian culture and conditions surrounding the ascription of a name is our concern. According to Olauson, names in the Yoruba semiotic universe...are densed with meaning potentials when deployed within the Nigerian literary context (57). He further emphasise that names are determined by some aspects of the broader situation, which include events, happenings, and conditions.

## 2.3 Literary Onomastics

Onomastics is derived from a Greek word *onomastikós* 'onomastics,' an offshoot of *ónoma*, 'name.' It is the study of the meanings and origins of names (Hajdú7). Literary onomastics is the concern of this study and has been the interest of some critics because it bridges linguistics and literary criticisms. Tóth conceptualises "literary onomastics" as a study between literature and proper names (2) while, Allagbé perceives the term to be the "semantic import of proper names in a literary text" (21). Alvarez-Altman, on the other hand, considers the onomastic (literary) field as:

"a specialised literary criticism in which scholars are concerned with the levels of significance of names in drama, poetry, fiction, and folklore. These include names of places and characters as they relate to theme, structure and other literary considerations" (220-230).

In this study, the term is defined as the cultural and postcolonial significance of names within a literary text as conditioned by context. Literary onomastics is pivotal to the understanding of the playwright's artistic manoeuvre, intent, framework and literary superstructure. Literary onomastics is a relatively new field in West Africa, mainly,

Nigeria and as such, it has not been applied to the works of Femi Osofisan, a Nigerian literary giant who has over fifty plays to his credit. This study thus intends to unveil the (literary) onomastic import of the playwright's work.

#### 2.4 Satire

Femi Osofisan in the league of other Nigerian artists adopts satire as a critical tool to depict the absurdities in the economic, political and religious sectors of Nigeria. The playwright employs satire in *WAS* to ridicule and criticise, especially Nigerian political and religious leaders through his characters' names. Bloom opines that a satirical piece is aimed at depravities, immoralities, and corruption of men and individuals, social class and institutions, civilisations and societies (49).

#### 2.5 Demystification, Demythologisation and Decolonisation in Osofisan's *WAS*

The deployment of *Àbíkú* names in Osofisan's *WAS* is merely a compendium for demystification or transference of cultural significances to address contemporary issues. His play reflects naming as pre-colonial art and act, as well as an artistic instrument to reflect modern patterns in society and politics.

Oloruntoba-Oju submits that the theoretical basis of Femi Osofisan's theatre fosters a socialist/collectivist approach to societal problems and rejects animist/metaphysical answers to human predicament as opposed to the ideology of his contemporaries especially, Wole Soyinka (Akinyemi and Falola 10).

Thus, through his demystification technique, he proves that religious or extra-human explanation is inconsequential to human challenges; instead with the use of the Brechtian style of demystifying *Àbíkú* names, he is saying that human destiny is man's responsibility: "He is essentially interested in the liberation of the downtrodden from the shackles of exploitation, plunder, greed and avarice of the elite class in Nigeria" (Obafemi 132).

The playwright pursues, almost with passion, his attempt to "desecrate the divine" associated with indigenous African beliefs and, in their place, erect new mythic structures meant to perform new and relevant roles (Dasylyva 259). His use of myth, legends, etc., is a means to definite ends (Dasylyva 269). From a clear indication, Osofisan demystifies the *Àbíkú* myth in the characters' names in favour of their bourgeois status and greedy personalities.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Postcolonial Theory and Halliday's Social Semiotic Theory were fused as Onomastic Semiosis to serve as the study's theoretical framework. Significantly, the theory is deployed within the Yoruba naming tradition to interpret two (2) characters' names in Femi Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin*. Our analysis will build on Izevbaye's naming contexts - literary and sociocultural - to foreground the neo-colonial significance of the characters' names in contemporary Nigeria. Henceforth, *WAS* would serve as a working abbreviation for the selected title.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a patriotic African and culture enthusiast, Femi Osofisan, turns *Àbíkú* names in *WAS* into literary aesthetics. For instance, *Àbẹ̀ní* Mailo and *Fúnsọ́* Fowólù are caricatures of corrupt politicians in Nigeria. The two charactonyms can be classified into personal names and surnames based on the Yoruba socio-cultural context. *Àbẹ̀ní* and *Fúnsọ́* are thus, personal names, the first denotes "She Who is Begged to Stay/ She Whom We Begged to Have." while the second alternatively implies "I am given (the child) to watch over." As *Àbíkú* name(s), *Máìlọ́* indicates "You stay or Do not go yet." This character, therefore, possesses the attributes of being over-pampered to wait and have (money). The last name 'Fowólù' may have diverse connotations. *Fi owo'lu*, 'with the money of the town', or 'beat with money', or 'beat with hands' or 'beat with a broom', or 'fly into town,' have a hole in one's hand as a result of injury' or 'beat honourably/respectfully' or 'wash the hands and beat.' The above interpretations match the traits of the character in the play; especially the action 'beat' is common to the interpretations. The first interpretation 'someone that beat with money' mirrors his act of mismanaging public fund as the Councillor for Education/Works who should watch over the education fund but misappropriates the fund of the ward. He thus lives up to his name but, as an irony.

Furthermore, a Yoruba proverb elucidates on the full rendering of *Fúnsọ́*'s name (as *Afolórúnşọ́*), *Èni tí a fún Ọ̀lórún şọ́ kù fí okùn ọ̀gèdẹ́ gun ọ̀pẹ*, which implies, someone who is kept in the protective hands of God (or Supreme Deity) should not attempt dangerous acts. The proverb is a demystification of the original connotation of someone being protected. However, that a name bearer enjoys divine covering does not immune the person from flaws and errors. In the text, *Fúnsọ́* is suggested by Chief Gbonmiaiyelobiojo to lead the delegate of council members to (Solarin) Isola's

presence. The chairman says, “If you can’t go, Ayo (Chief Magistrate), then Force-is-Force will lead the way. His rank is important, as the councilor in charge of the town’s enlightenment” (WAS 67). This move is disapproved by Fúnsó because as he claims, “he had an unfortunate education” (WAS 67). Thus, he is in the danger of not just losing his life but office if ‘Solarin’ detects he is corrupt.

Most importantly, the designations of the characters within the text inform their names, the former is the Price Control Officer and the latter Councillor for Education and Works. Àbẹ̀nì promises Ayokanmi, the Chief Magistrate, that she would give him “the first choice over any goods seized this month from hoarders” (WAS 16). This excerpt reinforces the attribute of the Price Control Officer as an extortionist. Fúnsó, on the one hand, embezzles/misappropriates the education fund of the ward, Miss Kaokudi Animasaun relates his name to his trait not only as being corrupt but also vehement, “It’s the man you went and put in charge of Education. God pity our children. They call him “Force is Force” (WAS 2). This appellation is contrastive to his role as the Councillor for Education who should be caring, but is oppressive and lacks sympathy for the children under his watch. Also, he destroys instead of preserving the quality of education of the community by embezzling public fund like his fellow officials. Also, he is seen in the play as a proud individual who brags about his assets. Also, in one of the interpretations, he is indicted as a ‘bully’ as indicated in his alias ‘Force is Force.’ Miss Kaokudi’s response affirms this, “he proves his nickname by bullying a lady” (WAS 2), and beyond this, he also has an intent to destroy some market stalls that have been marked down (WAS 29).

Nevertheless, knowing well that Àbíkú children are ruthless and always attempting to impoverish or put in misery any family in which they are born, it can, therefore, be established that have both fulfilled an aspect of their character traits, which is wasting public resources. Similarly, in *The Famished Road*, Okri explores the Àbíkú myth to unravel the themes of poverty and political oppression. This myth also helps to expose the socio-economic conditions in which Azaro’s family and other families live in the compound. Okri and Osofisan, therefore, share perfect commentaries on social and political problems prevalent in Nigeria. The playwright demystifies the Àbíkú name as a means of achieving his satirical intent, which is to criticise the mismanagement of public funds, corruption, poor leadership, and social stratification created by bourgeoisies in Nigeria. Either male or female political leaders, there is no saint in Nigeria’s political sphere. Putting Nigeria into perspective as an Àbíkú-ish nation, both military and civilian leaders have plunged Nigeria into an economic wreck that is still evident today.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It was concluded that the endless cycle of birth, death, and re-birth obtained in Àbíkú children is similar to the Nigerian political scene. This is demonstrated in the Àbíkú names analysed in WAS to expose the theme of political instability in Nigeria. This study has thus proved that Nigerian politics is purely a system that recycles leaders, and fosters poor leadership and political instability. Furthermore, naming in the selected text was an artistic device that served purposes of characterisation, demystification and social criticism of the Nigerian postcolonial condition to achieve its transformation and national liberation. Names and roles of characters in his dramatic text are complementary and indissoluble; and their study could be conceptualised as charactonomastics.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ayokunmi Ojebode** has a doctoral degree in Literature-in-English from the Redemer’s University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. He can be contacted via email at [ojebodea@run.edu.ng](mailto:ojebodea@run.edu.ng)

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