

CONFRONTATION AS MEANS FOR SOCIETAL CHANGE: A MARXIAN APPROACH TO FEMI OSOFISAN'S *THE CHATTERING AND THE SONGS*.

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Abstract

The use of confrontation in tackling societal problems has been reviewed by writers who deemed it fit to put a stop to violence in tackling societal issues. Literature forms the major means of calling the attention of the masses to their problems and suggesting how to solve such problems without confrontation or violence. This research, therefore, focuses mainly on the revolutionary ideology of Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Songs*. A Marxian reading of the text is carried out to explain its revolutionary ideology which is the theory deployed for this research and which forms part of contributions to solving societal problems. It employs qualitative method for data collection which enables an understanding of concepts, opinions and textual applications to the research. The main reason for this research is to enlighten the masses and make them aware of their rights to demand a better, classless society. The playwright's level of radicalism is exhibited in using some of the characters to portray its roles. The search for the truth prompted Osofisan to put up such dramaturgy or story line that gives hope of revolution and depicting its aesthetics appropriately. The research, therefore, concludes by encouraging criticism for appropriate understanding of the inherent values in ideologies towards revolutionary development, especially in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Drama, Politics, Revolution, Development and Aesthetics*

Introduction

Revolution is a fundamental change in power or organizational structure that takes place in a relatively short period of time. Neitzel (1) postulates that revolution has been central to the formation of the modern world. He posits that:

The word itself refers to radical, transformative change and has many generic uses describing phenomena from the "industrial revolution" to the "sexual revolution" as a historical process. Revolution refers to a movement, often violent, to overthrow an old regime and effect complete change in the fundamental institutions of society.

The above statement could be observed even in the history of Nigeria. There are changes in power which led to violence, coup and so on. The civil war was also as a result of a tribe clamoring for changes in how the nation was being run or willing to opt out of the country simply because they feel cheated. Falode (120) opines that "the origin of civil war could be located in a complexity of factors ranging from the remote which includes the military coups d'état of January 15, and July 29, 1966". She further explains that;

the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation; and, most importantly, the asymmetrical distribution of power among the various ethnic and geopolitical groups, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu's declaration of the state of Biafra on May 30, 1967, was the immediate factor responsible for the civil war. (Falode, 120)

Mohamed (77) explains that “social dramatics like Olu Obafemi, Femi Osofisan, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ngugi wa Mirii, among others, use their works to liberate the people. They use their drama to prescribe a corruption, exploitation, and a deprivation free society”. Scholars have also prescribed or seen drama as a tool for social change in the society. It is obvious from the quotations above that drama is one major means through which the attention of the masses could be drawn to the exploitation, deprivation and social injustice happening in the society and how agitation could be conducted and a better society achieved.

Definition of Terms

According to Yunuiari (1), drama is “a composition in prose form that presents a story entirely told in dialogue and action and written with the intention of its eventual performance before an audience”. Drama, according to Abrams (69). In *A Glossary of Art Terms* is a composition designed for performance in the theatre, where actors take the role of the characters, who perform the indicated action and utter the written dialogue. Drama imitates life and reflects the society in its various ramifications. The term has evolved basically as a means of entertainment, education and correction of the social ills in the society. In view of this, this paper seeks to explore the dramatic elements used in the composition of Femi Osofisan’s *The Chattering and the Song*. Relying on this text, revolutionary tendencies shall be exemplified and a look at other plays with similar ideological configurations shall be carried out.

According to Stoker (7) posits that “politics do not only expresses the reality of disagreement and conflict in society but is also ‘one of the ways through which we address and patch up the disagreements that characterise our societies without recourse to illegitimate coercion or violence’”.

Development can be defined as bringing about social change that allows people to achieve their human potential. An important point to emphasise is that development is a political term: it has a range of meanings that depend on the context in which the term is used, and it may also be used to reflect a variety of different agenda held by different people or organisations.

Gizachew Tiruneh (4), defines revolution as a “popular uprising that transforms an existing socioeconomic and political order”. Laura Neitzel (1) also writes that revolution refers to “a movement, often violent, to overthrow an old regime and effect complete change in the fundamental institutions of society”. Hatice Nilüfer (1) defines Aesthetics as a discipline that studies the nature, content, value and origin of art. Also Thomas Munro (1) defines aesthetics as the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated.

Political Facts about Societal Violence

It is important to note that political revolt of some sort could be observed in some of the riots that took place in Nigeria aside the civil war. Aba women’s riot of 1929 and the Agbekoya uprising of 1968-1969 are classical examples of such revolts. To attest to this fact in history, Newman (2) explained that Aba women’s riot was a protest against the warrant chiefs and the inclusion of women in the tax policy of the British Colonial Administration in Southern Nigeria. Other remote causes of the uprising included increment in school fees, forced labour, corruption by local officers, and alteration of women’s position in government. According to the history of Aba women riot, the women saw this policy as a way of oppressing and exploiting them, and as such, they gathered to embark on a protest against these policies, and the aftermath of the protest prompted the British administration to stop the imposition of tax on the market women. It also led to the appointment of women as warrant chiefs in some parts of the region.

It could also be observed that it was nearly the same period of Aba women’s riot that the famous Agbekoya uprising took place in the western part of Nigeria which was as a result of the plan of regional government to increase tax revenue of the farmers and at the same time, large amount of harvested cocoa were discarded as unfit for sale. In the cause of agitating against these obnoxious policies, Agbekoya leaders gathered other farmers for a protest. In the course of the protest, some government officials were killed and some of the Agbekoya leaders were arrested. The protest was successful because it led to the removal of local government officials pillaging their villages, a reduction in the tax rate, an end to forced tax collection, an increase in the price of cocoa and an improvement of the roads leading to their villages. This act of public agitations which was aided by the social media against obnoxious policies of government has even risen during the democratic rule in Nigeria. For instance, the nation returned to democratic rule in 1999, and the people, particularly young Nigerians, have been the vanguard of

change. Olusegun Obasanjo's bill to amend the constitution to enable him rule the country for the third term met stiff oppositions from ordinary Nigerians. Recently, public outcry against the unlawful invasion of the National Assembly by the men of the State Security Service led to the sack of its Director General, Maman Daura by the Federal Government.

Furthermore, the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1964), also known as the Mau Mau Rebellion, the Kenya Emergency, and the Mau Mau Revolt, was a war in the British Kenya Colony. The Mau Mau comprised units of Kamba and Maasai peoples who fought against the white European colonist-settlers in Kenya, the British Army, and the local Kenya Regiment. The capture of the rebel leader, Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi, on 21st October 1956, signaled the defeat of the Mau Mau, however, the rebellion survived until after Kenya's independence from Britain, driven mainly by the Meru units led by Field Marshal Musa Mwariama and General Baimungi. This is adopted in Ngugi Wa Thiogo's play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

The recent popular 'END SARS' protest of 2020 in Nigeria also brings to memory the act of fighting against oppression from the military/paramilitary, especially the police. It is recorded that police brutality has become one of the major crimes committed against the masses across the country, Nigeria, which has led to the killing of innocent citizens. This was not only about the police but also covers different aspects of dehumanization from the political leaders.

However, these revolutionary inclinations have served as a pre-text to African dramatists who distilled the experiences in a fictive form. In reality, the revolutionary African drama is more often a protest against oppression, exploitation, poverty, deprivation of rights, injustice, dehumanisation and other practices devised by the practitioners of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Looking at the world and taking a country like Nigeria as an example, there are different vices around resulting in exploitation of the masses, deprivation of rights, social injustice, dehumanization and entrenched poverty. These have been the experience of the people under capitalist system. Inequality has been commonplace around the world, particularly in Nigeria where corruption has been the order of the day with few privileged controlling the wealth of the nation to the detriment of the poor masses.

The hegemonic class does not only control the wealth of the nation, it also has the law at its beck and call which legitimises their hold on citizens. Although the masses are not oblivious of this, they are unable to take actions. The writers, being the conscience of the society, are thereby saddled with the responsibility of awakening the masses from their slumber. It is in the light of this that the study seeks to examine Os ofisan's *The Chattering and the Songs*.

Theoretical Framework

Marxism, a theory that envisages a classless society, is the theoretical guide for this research. This theory is adopted because the playwright, Femi Osofisan, is regarded as a Marxist writer who agitates through his plays to actualize his vision against class struggle. His major plays are written to mirror the society and call the attention of the masses towards bad governance and clamour for a change. Talking about Marxism from its definition and explanation, it is clear that it explains the struggle against oppression.

Marxism, according to Marx and Engels (35), in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* is;

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle-Freeman and Slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journey man, in a word oppressor and the oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes).

Marxism is a theory of societal radicalism that deals with the struggle between the upper class (bourgeois) and the lower class (proletariat). Marxism is portrayed to be anti-bourgeois because it has zero tolerance for oppression, exploitation, and injustice. Marxists strictly believe in equity and egalitarianism, that is, everybody in the society should be granted equal access to means of production. This theory, therefore is the working tool for this research. The selected primary text, Femi Osofisan's *Chattering and the Song* is analysed relying on the Marxian praxis. It explains the social realities of class struggle in the society as portrayed in the text. From the perspective of the country to country revolution, Ronaldo Munck (13) opines that "a nation which enslaves another cannot itself be free". In relation to pre-revolutionary Russia, in correspondence with local activists, Marx began to rethink his historical schema of capitalist development. This is to show how Ukrainians are willing to break through the dominance of Russian and make themselves free from external control.

Revolutionary Development

Revolutionary development has always been the interest of most scholars, especially African writers. Different nations have in one way or the other experienced colonization and have also experienced discrimination in their society's administrations. Some scholars found out that only two countries in Africa have never been colonized which are Ethiopia and Liberia but some scholars further argue that the two countries experienced colonization but in a short period of time. Literary contribution of scholars have reflected different kinds of revolution that occurred in different societies like the works of Ngugi wa Thiongo, Femi Osofisan, Chinua Achebe, Olu Obafemi, to mention but few. The revolutionary development which has been in existence in most part of the world has also been made public to enable people know their right. According to Armah (497) in *African Literature*,

... there have been numerous revolutionary movements and countless insurrections in history, whether this be the history of Africa, Asia or the Western continents. Maji Maji, Hau Hau, Mau Mau are only the garbled names uncomprehending observers have given to some of Africa's recent insurrectionary movement.

Armah shows in the quote above that these movements have been in existence in almost every parts of the world. Literature reflects what is happening around us, as well as giving writers the opportunity to express their feelings about happenings in the society. According to Sangeeta (115) literature is the mirror of society. He argues that "literature is the mirror of the society. It indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view of making the society realize its mistakes and make amends" (Sangeeta, 115).

The above quotation obviously mentions that the function of literature is to mirror and reflect the society and its main aim is to make the society realize its follies and its implication on the society with a view to providing possible means of correcting them. In achieving this, it may employ a weapon of change usually made possible by revolution.

Revolutionary Aesthetics

Ahmad Hosni (2) postulated that:

Revolution is an aesthetic phenomenon in the sense that it is a phenomenon of appearance in essence: the appearance of a new political body that ruptures the sensorial fabric of the commonplace. It is, in other words, a partition of the sensible. But it is partition that is sudden and singular; a volcanic eruption on the sociopolitical landscape that leaves the topography reconfigured in an irreversible way.

Revolutionary aesthetics in African drama is as old as the vocation itself. The likes of Soyinka, Ngugi, Osofisan and others have deployed their works to revolutionary deeds. As employed in most of their works, they have consciously engaged the medium of drama to convey their important messages on the freedom of the people from their oppressors. One can therefore see that revolutionary aesthetics play a vital role in portraying the beauty inherent in revolution dramatically.

Revolutionary aesthetics therefore refers to the form of revolution advanced at the instance of a work of art. Many a times, African playwrights go to create aesthetics that recommends certain magnitude of revolution which might appear as their own resolution to peculiarise their ideology. These playwrights create such artistic scenario through a presentation of people's drive towards a forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favour of a new system in the desirous quest for total freedom from oppression.

Playwrights and Revolutionary Aesthetics

Nigerian playwrights have deemed it fit to bring out the beauty of revolution in the society by writing different plays that are related to happenings in Nigerian society and sometimes proffer possible solutions in such plays. These playwrights can also be referred to as dramatists whose plays are meant for production. Azunwo (8) explains

playwriting as “a profession, and as a body of imaginative literature composed creatively for the purpose of sanitizing the society”.

To some extent, playwrights have succeeded in affecting the lives of their audience through what they portray or reflect in their plays. Most of the time, their plays serve as a metaphor for societal lifestyle, therefore, they employ such plays to correct the social ills in the society and to recommend orderliness. It also enlightens the people to realise the need to stand for their right.

The Nigerian revolutionary writings emerged from the crisis of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The two are historical events that constitute a lot of socio-political, socio-psychological and socio-economic crisis in contemporary African society. In reference to this, the revolutionary playwrights are pre-occupied with providing a more sophisticated and audience thrilling drama that deals with the socio-political and economic disasters. In African society, writers reflect the various societal ills and at the same time suggest outright revolution against oppression. They often pitch their tent on the side of the people (masses) and see through their perspective to demand for equity and an egalitarian society by coming against the oppressors and the few people who occupy the upper class. Playwrights must also believe that they are part of the society and when they view the society, it should be from the perspective of the masses.

In support of this work, it will be important to look briefly into how some notable Nigerian revolutionary playwrights have been able to explore revolutionary ideologies in their plays. Notable playwrights in this bracket are the likes of Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi and Ola Rotimi. For example, Femi Osofisan in his play *Red is the Freedom Road*, exemplifies revolutionary praxis through the last speech of Akanji that,

.... I have set our men free. Look! they dance there, happy in their dancing. They are the rulers now. I will bring the message home: our men are no longer slaves, I have placed their bottoms on a throne... (p.137)

Akanji's speech shows the happiness people express through singing and dancing when they attain freedom. Their expressions show that they are happy to be free from suffering and slavery. Also, Ola Rotimi in his play *Hopes of the Living Dead* is able to portray the revolutionary ideology through the rebellious leper that later leads them to their freedom. This can be seen in the declaration of Harcourt White thus:

Harcourt White: No! No! Rejected. For long, we depended on people outside- yes, the whiteman, the missionaries, the black Givers-of-alms...(Mimicking) “beggars, here take... take...;” when suddenly they withdrew their help, confusion gripped us, ripping us apart. Well, we've since learnt our lesson. We must depend on ourselves. There is no going back on that! (p.110).

It is obvious from the above that all the wishes and agitations of the lepers were granted and they confirmed the fact that they have to depend on themselves without external interference. This serves as their evidence of attaining revolution. The address of Harcourt Whyte to the lepers saying “now we've won our freedom. But this is only the beginning of a new struggle...” (p.111), suggests their freedom but they must still be on the watch because things may be a little difficult, hence revolution comes with sacrifices.

Olu Obafemi as a revolutionary playwright also shows the element of revolutionary tendency in his play *Naira Has No Gender* with the joyous mood of Aina, Otunla, Dokun, Debby in the last scene where Debby reveals that; “Let us drink to the health of the new mating minds and be part of it”(56). They were able to achieve their aim that Otunla could get married without the payment of the exorbitant bride price and other payments he could not afford as a common man. The above instances show that Nigerian Playwrights have never rested on their oars.

Political Revolts and Revolutionary Tendency In Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and The Song*

The struggle of the two opposing classes, the lower and the upper class, formed the major thrust of Osofisan's writings. That is why we can classify his writings as revolutionary. *The Chattering and the Song* is one of his plays that treat this subject. *The Chattering and the Song* teaches the reader, especially the suffering masses that the resistance of the oppressed is the only way to achieving revolutionary change in society. The play is about the revolutionary struggle of a group of intellectuals like Sontri, Yajin, Leje and Funlola who unite against the forces of oppression, corruption and dictatorship. The situation of things in the play is as it is in our contemporary society;

where the government proves deaf and blind to the plights of the masses. The masses, represented by Leje, Yajin, Sontri, Funlola and the farmers are unable to cope with the oppressive laws, injustice and corruption of those at the helms of affairs.

In the play, a group of friends have gathered to celebrate the wedding of two of them, Sontri and Yajin. At the dress rehearsal of the play written by Yajin to be performed on the eve of the marriage, Mokan 'over-acts' his role in the play as a guard when he arrests the Alaafin played by Sontri. He afterwards declares himself a secret police officer as an avenue to avenge Yajin's disloyalty to him.

Osofisan presents Leje, as a calm strategist and a cunning socialist who organizes and recruits quietly for the revolutionary group. He carries out his activities under false identity of 'Osangangan', which makes it difficult for the Secret Police to suspect him. Sontri, on the other hand, is a restless and noisy socialist of high temperament. He is a songwriter, and he is able to project this ability through his composition of the Farmers' Anthem. But, as the action progresses in the play, Sontri turns out to be a noisy activist and a visionless one just as we have them in the present day Nigeria. Such activists make empty slogans, banners, placards, and write on the pages of the newspaper, but they cannot withstand the forces of intimidation from the government. More so, they are motivated into activities because of their selfish interest; just as we observe in Sontri's proposal to Yajin in the prologue of the play.

The play-within-a-play which Yajin writes and directs carries the message of revolution. The play is centered on the Oyo Empire during the reign of Alaafin Abiodun. It is relevant to observe here that Osofisan experiments in this play the ability of man to challenge authority. Historically, the Oyo Empire during the reign of Alaafin Abiodun witnessed a change to peace, security and happiness which were as a result of executing the tyrant, Bashorun. Bashorun Gaa, the head of the Oyomesi (king makers) rules the empire as if he were the Alaafin. He killed different Alaafins and prince. Honour and homage due to the Alaafin were directed to him. But things changed when Alaafin Abiodun staged a revolution with the help of the Are-Ona-Kankanfo (Commander of the Army). Bashorun Gaa's household including himself was destroyed. But, Osofisan in this play preserves Latoye, Gaa who later turns an activist. Osofisan experiments with the notion that distinguishes arts from history. His story is recreated refined and retold in a more dynamic way.

The friends; Leje, Mokan, Sontri and Yajin are old school mates while Funlola has just returned from overseas to join them. They are all angry at the socio-economic and political situations in their country. They initiate a move to fight against the social order where the masses are exploited by the government. The plan of the young activists is to seize power in order to install a new social order that will engender freedom, justice and equity for all. According to their plan, Sontri is to be made the new president. About a day to the revolution, Mokan breaks the whole plan by arresting Sontri and Yajin on the eve of their wedding. Mokan gives his reason for their arrest:

Mokan: I gave my trust, faith and everything. And what happened to the woman who took it all? Ha! Ha! How've waited for this moment...
(p. 9)

Mokan's claim here is that of selfishness and quest for vengeance. He betrays his friends and also the revolution. He believes that he can carry out this act of vengeance by arresting Sontri and Yajin, and in turn put off the fire of the planned revolution. People like Mokan's character in the play are many in the society who betray the trust of the society just because of their personal interest or gain. This could be observed in the ENDSARS protest by the Nigerian youths, the hoodlums that disrupt the protest were youths who have collected bribe from the so called people whom the youths were protesting against.

In the play, Sontri's arrest is a blessing in disguise to the farmers' movement. Sontri affirms that:

Sontri: There's nothing you can do to stop the birds from singing. Mokan, the revolution is already on, using, you cannot halt it! (p.47).

The Chattering and the Song proposes the mobilization of the underprivileged members of the society represented by the farmers to revolt against the unjust social order. This work of mobilization, according to Osofisan, can only be achieved when intellectuals and other elites in the society join the vanguard for the much needed change.

We are no longer surprised when Leje woes Funlola who has been less concerned about the fight for freedom. Though she reflects the suffering of the masses in her paintings, she has not come out openly to support the movement for a change. Leje acknowledges this fact:

Leje: I was shown some of your works on your canvas, suffering ceases to be an abstract thing. It screams. Those gnarled limbs, the hollow eyes, the sunken, furrowed faces of the poor... (p.72).

Funlola's paintings are exactly the opinion of people who sit everyday debating the ugly trends of events and happenings in the country and fail to offer solutions just like youths in Nigeria whose job is to comment on social

media but when it is time for election, they leave everything to the older citizens. Even when they do, they will not join openly in the project of reconstruction.

This play is a call to action by the intellectual class in the society for confrontation. They are to orientate and organize the masses who believe that their plights are predestined. Femi Osofisan, just like a Prophet, writes in relation to the happenings in the present day society, it could be observed that the influence of some Arts and Stars in bringing changes to the country led to the END SARS protest across Nigeria in 2020.

The role of writers and the intellectuals in the society is to bring to fore of the suffering of the masses. Sontri, as used by Osofisan, is an angry writer. He writes poems as a means of criticizing the unjust social order. He is also a songwriter. In fact, he composes the Farmers' Anthem and "The Song of the Crawling Things". There are replicas of Sontri in present day Nigerian. Writers like: Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and Ken Saro Wiwa and musicians like Fela Anikulapo Kuti were at one time or the other arrested for mobilizing the masses against tyrannical governments.

To Osofisan, man has the ability to change history. That is why he had the story of the Oyo Empire re-written in the play-within-play. Humans have the ability to influence our environments and things that happen around us. "The Song of the Crawling Things", as composed by Sontri is the actual representation of things in the country, which we must look into "One haughty thing, he walks the street. He walks the street on myriad feet and struts as if he owns the sun..." (p.14).

The selfish, greedy, dictatorial and callous leaders are the "one haughty thing" that "walks the street" as if they own it.

Also, Osofisan has proved that the oppressed class can never be emancipated unless they come to the realization of the fact that sitting or standing on a spot debating and lamenting all day cannot save them. According to Marx (7):

It is the economic arrangement which shaped the consciousness of men in the open leading to an epoch of social revolution of change in economic production and the transformation of the entire super-structure.

Remarkably, the societal atmosphere depicted by Femi Osofisan's *Chattering and the Song* lends credence to this Marxian dialectics, for conflict in economic relations is everywhere and it is rapidly developing to a point where revolution and transformation will take place. Through the conflict and resolution in these plays, it is only the proletariats of the society or the masses that are capable of bringing revolution in the society.

CONCLUSION

This research, so far, has helped us to define different revolutionary aesthetics and ideologies. Revolution can be referred to as agitation of the masses towards changing the society. Different people have created this by showing the beauty of revolution in different ways which is expressed in this work.

Through the African writers' pen, they have been able to sensitize the masses on how to fight against the evil caused by the colonialists and even more of the bourgeois who are the sources of African problems and have contributed to the backwardness of the continent. African writers like Dele Charley, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Olu Obafemi, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, to mention a few have in many ways through their works and critiques exposed the effect of a class-based society as brought about by the capitalist government.

It could be observed that capitalism is a system that breeds inequality in the society and it divides the society into two, that is, the few bourgeois and the majority proletariats. Capitalism is the system which Marxism in this research, seeks to fight. With this, many scholars have come up with writing revolutionary plays to create awareness and sensitize the masses to enable them see reasons to fight for their rights because as soon as their eyes are opened to the reality of all social injustice, poverty, exploitation, slavery, killing and severe oppressions pervading the land, they want to come to terms with change.

This could be seen in the text examined, *The Chattering and The Song* by Femi Osofisan. The playwright presents or showcases societal problems through the play. Different styles and techniques are deployed to bring out the beauty of revolution. It is the interest of the author to use drama as a means of creating awareness of the decadence in the society and to emancipate the oppressed masses and to rebuild the society in his visionary view and make the society take a new look.

In this research, efforts have been made to show what revolution is in various play texts examined by different playwrights and critiques. In the text, it could be observed how the author has used the happenings in the Yoruba environment to depict the ills of the society. Osofisan uses the Yoruba post-modern society to gear up the spirit of resistance in every ill-structured African society. In such a society that is full of corruption, deprivation of rights, oppression and killing, the only instrument to be employed to agitate for the rights and freedom from such mess is the collective rise for revolution.

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