

## **The Reinvention of the “Legend of Robinhood” in Femi Osofisan’s *Once Upon Four Robbers***

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**Peter O. Aihevba**

*Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin, Benin City*

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### **Abstract**

This paper takes a close look at one outstanding theatrical technique that Femi Osofisan has frequently leveraged upon to drive home his socialist ideology. In many of his plays, Osofisan has consistently employed the adaptation/revisioning technique in his drama. This paper carefully examines how this technique is effectively employed in *Once Upon Four Robbers* to elevate poor robbers to social reformers in close consonance with the legend of Robin Hood in Sherwood of London. He places the robbers in the shadow and pedestal of the celebrated Robin Hood thereby giving them a noble image. In carrying out this research, the analytical methodology was adopted in gathering useful materials from the library and the internet. The paper concluded by applauding this Osofisan’s adaptation technique, and recommended that the style be widely embraced by other Nigerian dramatists.

**Keywords:** Drama, Adaptation, Robbers, Robinhood, Social.

### **Introduction**

Drama is one form of arts that possesses the quality and capacity to bring about social change. As a result, you cannot divorce drama from the society, the age and the milieu that produce it. Drama emanates from society by society for society. Drama is a product as well as a vehicle of culture. In both form and content drama, is influenced by prevailing attitudes, practices and conventions in a particular society within a specific historical period. Whereas the subject and aims of the Nigerian traditional drama (festival) are mainly religious and ceremonial and the Folk. Theatre of Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and others mainly entertaining, and lavish, the dominant drama tradition of Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clarke and others highlights conflict of cultures between the western

and indigenous, the spiritual and the physical. All these are as a result of the prevailing mood and temper of the various times and periods that influenced their production.

Similarly, the emergent drama tradition of Nigeria of young vibrant radical dramatist at the time consisted of dramatist like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande and others. Their drama sought to highlight societal problems in the light of real historical occurrences. Their ideology is materialist in description and perception and dialectical in approach (Aihevba: 37). They proffer solutions to societal problems by advocating a restructuring of society through a radical revolutionary change from a capitalist to an egalitarian socialist structure. The most notable of these group of dramatists is Femi Osofisan.

### **Osofisan's Dramaturgy**

As a result of the subject and aim of Femi Osofisan's drama, ideologues like Karl Marx, Paulo Freire, Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal have significantly influenced Femi Osofisan's drama. Their ideologies demands truthful and realist solution to societal problems by any means necessary even violence and revolution. They advocate praxis and pragmatism. Their voices echo throughout Femi Osofisan's dramaturgical corpus (Aihevba et al 2018). Osofisan's dramaturgy is socialist, focusing on the elevation of the poor masses and giving them a voice in an unjust society.

Commenting on the drama of Femi Osofisan, Gbemisola Adeoti avers that:

Osofisan believes that the African is confronted daily with realities of war, farming, colonialism, and neo-colonialism (re-invented as globalization). It can witness a rebirth through the enthronement of the principles of justice, equity, freedom and popular sovereignty. He sees drama as a useful cultural tool in achieving these goals (40)

On their part Aihevba and Odia posit that:

Femi Osofisan believes in the socialist cause. As far as he is concerned, Man's problems originated from man

and not from any metaphysical or spiritual realm. Therefore only man can solve his own problems. To Osofisan..., art is a relevant and a potent instrument of social mobilization. Drama must be functional in terms of arousing the consciousness of the masses in order to affect a change for a better society through collective action... drama is a patent ideological tool for liberating the oppressed masses. (7)

In his ideological creed and consistent focus on the socialist course, Osofisan has yielded to an array of styles, techniques and forms. One notable one is the technique of re-visioning

### **Revisionism in Osofisan's Dramaturgy**

Osofisan's aesthetics of adaption has elicited a lot of attention from critics. In a lot of his works, Osofisan is busy trying to revision or use his plays to offer new interpretation of earlier plays. This craft of dramatic revisionism in some Osofisan's plays knows no bounds. He borrows far and near from other plays of both African and Western descent. He also travels across time and milieu in his quest for dramatic adaption. He has borrowed from plays of the Greek classical era; modern Western Europeans works and contemporary African plays. His restless quest for new aesthetics in his struggle for human rights to say the least is outstanding. Commenting on his adaptation aesthetics Gibbs posits that:

He (Osofisan) feels that he has the right to 'steal' ideas and plots and demonstrates the ability to transform what he purloins. Relationships between him and his 'sources' have some times been quite simple, but on occasions the assured creative artist has shown great originality in manipulating materials (79).

Over the decades Osofisan has borrowed ideas from the theatres of different ages and continents. The list of those he has purloined includes Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector* as seen in *Who is Afraid of Solarin?*; Georges Faydeau's *Hotel Paradisco* on which he erects *Midnight Hotel*; Euripides *The Trojan Women* revised in *Women of*

*Owu*; *Sophocles Antigone* is recast as *Tegonni, An African Antigone*. He also re-interprets Wole Soyinka's *The strong Breed* as *No more the Wasted Breed* and revisions J.P Clark's *The Raft* as *Another Raft*. These and many more examples subsist.

In interrogating class relations in the two plays, Osofisan consciously subverts the social order that upholds inequality and that uses the underprivileged as a sacrificial lamb to sustain their oppression by the ruling class. The tragic and pessimistic ambience in Soyinka and Clark's plays yields space to a revolution in Osofisan's experiments. Human beings are no longer hapless and helpless victims of ineluctable fate decreed by the gods or some supernatural forces outside their control. Rather Osofisan privileges a Cartesian social order in which "Man is the measure of all things and the architect of his own (Mis) fortune. (50)

Sandra Richards believes that the adaptation technique employed by Osofisan in these plays is to achieve a populist, satirical and comic effect, while cordially involving the audience. She argues that:

In order to fashion a theatre that is both popular and subversive of the dominant order in *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* the performance style seems to result in a theatre in which critical objectivity risk being subsumed in a comic mode that ultimately accommodates the status quo. In *Midnight Hotel* the structure of farce versus song establishes a comic dialectic that encourages audience, to script their own resolution to the problem of an exploitative social order. (70)

Osofisan is clearly in touch with the audience he foreknows. The Nigerian popular audience of the day is an audience already accustomed to a mix of African and European tradition and to some extent they define themselves as Nigerians with origins of colonialism (Richard 1996). This hybridization of the African is what Osofisan has exploited to give impetus to such ambitious Euro-African dramatic experiment. In an

attempt to be populist, to be close to the audience and to achieve a global mix Osofisan explores the option of inter-continental adaptation resulting in a comical satirical and operatic Mesh that is both foreign but yet immediate to the Nigerian audience.

Speaking on the significance of Osofisan's adaptation technique in the *Women of Owu Adeoti* canvasses that:

The sack of troy in history is a classical demonstration of this truism. That this kind of treatment has not abated in inter community and international affairs justifies the continuous relevance of Euripides' play in the contemporary era illustrated in Osofisan's adaptation. From Iraq to many other sore points of the modern world such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Gaza, Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Ivory, Coast Sierra Leone and Nigeria among other theatres of war...(49)

Women of Owu like all women in history are the major victims of war. Whether in Troy, or Iraq or Nigeria, women's rights are the most violated. In this adaptation, Osofisan registers their fate and consequently gives women the voice to abate in lament the sardonic consequences of war.

In *Tegonni, An African Antigone* Osofisan pays tribute to the classical literati Sophocles who used his play *Antigone* to denounce male dominance and give women a space in a macho manipulated world. Antigone is pitted against the king Creone and because of her love for blood, she withstands the bully of a king that totally disregards women. In *Tegonni, An African Antigone* However, Osofisan amplifies the thematic concerns to include the political tussle for the state. Adeoti believer that:

... Osofisan unreels the sprint of Antigone and reincarnates her. Her appearance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century African adaptation underscores the adapter's belief in the universal appeal and taintlessness of myth ... a trope with infinite manifestation (46).

James Gibbs views Osofisan's adaptation technology from a totally different perspective. He believes that Osofisan wants to be mysterious in order to provoke and engage his audience. He unsettles and confuses his audience thereby prompting intellectual engagement to challenge, test and demand a requisite response from his target audience. In his essay "Antigone and after Antigone, he argues that:

Osofisan's approach to the stage incorporates the sense of an ambush that lies in wait for his audience sense of security, sets traps, springs surprises, takes unawares (84).

Gibbs points out that the complex setting in *Tegonni*; the double barrel names; the symbolic naming of the protagonist; references to Christianity and deistic worship in the same breath all add up to make the play insidious.

While attempting a critical reading of *Tegonni, An African Antigone*, Babara Goff points out that such creative adaptation between the Greek/Roman classics is only natural and possible because of the similarity of both cultures. "It also reminds us of the destruction of African history by decades of colonial exploitation" (Goff III).

The Adaptation techniques employed by Osofisan is very fruitful and seminal for the kind of alternative and experimental theatre Osofisan is known for. It is evident that we can claim western traditions in the wake of colonialism and create out of them uniquely African visions. His adaptation aesthetics is worthy of salute

### **The Four Robbers as Social Reformers**

*Once Upon Four Robbers* is a contemporary play that X- rays a common and contemporary trend – armed robbery. The play comments on the public execution of criminals and questions the social definition of robbers in an unjust society. The robbers presented in this play are a group of poor peasants committed to reforming the society through the instrument of robbery. Like Robin Hood and the merry men, they take from the rich and give to the poor.

The protagonists presented in this play are somewhat a very controversial poor. Garbed in the social robes of thieves and criminals, it

becomes uncertain, to believe that they have good intentions not to talk about the lofty ideal of reforming society. The stark reality of their social deficiency smacks us with rude shock with the rendition of the first song; song of the story teller. This song situates the robbers as “ dangerous highway men”, “freebooters”, “ dispatchers of lives to heaven” our sense of morality is insidiously ambushed by these ideas. But we are shocked into a new awareness as the play gathers momentum.

In the first place, by articulate presentation of facts the robbers make us have a re-think of who really are the robbers in the society:

AAFA. Allah akbar! Grey hair is not sold in the market.  
When fools mistake a beard for the  
mistake of impertinence, then they must  
pay the penalty

MAJOR. Forgive us. Its hunger that drives us

AAFA. As it drives other people. But not into crime

ALHAJA.... you mean not publicly (14)

This statement by Alhajaunderscores the fact that robbery is an all comers game. Everyone in one way or the other is a robber. Some rob publicly, others privately; some with their guns others with their pens, and yet others with deceit. The instrument used therefore does not make one less of a robber. This point is further energized by Angola and others:

ANGOLA. Right, Aafa, so the journey ends. At the  
bar beach, in some market place, at the  
outskirts of town. What does it matter?  
For those not in the privileged position  
to steal government files, award  
contracts –

HASAN. Alter accounts-

ANGOLA. Swear affidavits-

ALHAJA. Grant sick leaves -

HASAN. Sell contraband -

MAJOR. Collude with aliens-

ANGOLA. And buy chieftaincy titles as life  
insurance! No, let our obituaries litter  
the public places and one day (17)

The soldiers who are supposed to be the protectors of the people, the executors of justice and the standard of lawfulness and orderliness are champions in the maddening circle of robbery. They loot the looters and make victims of the common man:

SERGEANT. (*knocking him down*) Shut up, you fool! Can't you restrain yourself? (*looks round rapidly*) couple take care of the money. And listen, you dogs may have been cursed to eternal poverty! As far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money! Is that clear? We found nothing. Okay? Let us meet later tonight, at my brother's house. And if I catch anybody with a running mouth...(41)

The soldiers who are entrusted with the keeping and execution of justice have demonstrated they are no better. They are common criminals.

The contractors who are supposed to construct the effigies on which the guilty robbers are to be hanged are even more guilty than the robbers they are hanging:

SOLDIER 2. It was the contractor who failed to complete the job

SOLDIER 3. Contractor? To build a platform for execution?

SOLDIER 2. Yes, I heard the sergeant mention it.

SOLDIER 2. Contractor now he went and bought Obokun.....

SOLDIER 2. And took a new wife.

SOLDIER 1. With government money?

SOLDIER 1. I see, so that's why we are suffering in the cold like this (45).



This conversation by the soldier also discloses the kick back culture operational in Nigeria. The society depicted in this play is a society that has gone maggoty with the stench of corruption. Even the market women are not left out of this tradition:

HASAN. No? Ask these women. They'll chop each other to bits at the jingle of coins.

MAMA ALICE. (*Angry*) it's all right for you to talk. You stalk the street drunken, and idle, and strike at night. But we have to go feed our families haven't we?

MAMA ALICE. So who will pay the bill if the market doesn't

BINTA. Where shall we turn if not our stalls?

MAMA ALICE. How shall we survive if the price control officer refuses to be bribed?

SERGEANT. You hear that? You've been robbing from victims!

MAMA ALICE. The market is our sanctuary... a slaughter house. Each hacking off the other's limbs. Kill quick or be eaten.

It's a dog eat dog that obtains in the above market .Inundated by the vagaries of life, the market women become cannibals and suck on the blood of the over drained masses. As much as they try to repudiate it, the market women are also robbers just like everyone else. They have made victims of the poor.

The society portrayed in this play is one in serious need of reformation. The rich have created the disequilibrium in the society because of their own greed. So rather than reform it, they must do everything to keep it locked in the present predicament:

SOLDIER 1. Sit down there. I won't tell you what I am going to do first after the promotion

SOLDIER 2. The worst you can do is to try and overthrow the government. And as for that-

SOLDIER 1. Fool how can I overthrow the government when I'll be part of it? let me tell you: all the fine places on Victoria Island and Ikoyi, all the better lands at Ibadan, Kaduna, Pitakwa, and so on. I will declare them for government...

SOLDIER 3. Meaning for yourself

SOLDIER 1. With immediate effect!

SOLDIER 2. Thief man!...(47)

From the soldiers meditations, it is clear that their minds are polluted, vile and debased. Hope can never arise from the quarters of the rich and their collaborators. Their controlling impulse is greed and avarice. The robbers, common bandits, therefore undertook to transform society by unconventional means.

It is instructive to establish at this point that the robbers took up the profession for two cardinal reasons: First to alleviate their abject poverty and more importantly to bring about justice and reformation in the society. The robbers lived in a society that created the unjust system to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. The robbers' economic and social condition was that of wretchedness, neediness and abysmal penury. They are miserable and hopeless. They could best be described as walking corpses. Angola paints an apt and graphic picture:

ANGOLA. Listen to him, it's disgusting! What are you if not a corpse? Tell me. You were born in this slum and you didn't know you were a corpse? Since you burst out from the womb, all covered in shame, you've always been a corpse. You fed on worms in the government mortuary, elbowing your way among other corpses. And the stink is all over you like a flooded cemetery in Lagos...(4)

Even when they attempt to look for jobs, their shattered humanity is further crushed because they are reduced to servants, slaves and dogs who lap up the excrement of the rich:

HASAN. I have sworn never to be a slave in my own father's land. All I wanted was the right to work, but everywhere they only wanted slaves..... (67)

Living with no identity, no dignity and no humanity the only option left to the robbers is to perish or arise and instigate a change by any means necessary. The designated means here becomes armed robbery. Because an old cliché states that “any society that cannot provide for the poor cannot guarantee the security of the rich”. Lending his voice to this complexity Osofisan posits that:

...take a look at the squalid spending habits of our egregious contractors' land speculator, middle men of all sorts, importers, exporters etc. or take a look at our sprawling slums and ghettos and congested hospitals and crowded schools... it is obvious that as long as a single, daring nocturnal trip with a gun or a machete can yield the equivalent of one man's annual income, we shall continue to manufacture our own potential assassins. For armed robbers on the scale we are witnessing are the products of our corrupt society... The Bar Beach means death and disgrace, but so also does hunger, with a lingering certainty. (viii)

Faced with this precarious situation, the robbers must face death by “the legalized slaughtering of erring members of the society” or the painful pangs of starvation. The robbers here accepted the former fate: “Forgive us. Its hunger that drives us” (14).

Armed with audacity and the gun, the robbers choose to do more than satisfy their hunger pangs or get involved in egotistic amassment of wealth for self. They choose justice, they choose equitable distribution of wealth and reformation of a putrefied society. They choose to be honest robbers who take from the rich and give to the poor: “we don't steal from

men of God we steal only from the rich" (14). 'rob the rich, feed the poor'(38). Throughout this play, the robbers demonstrate the desire to cleanse society, to rid it of its filth. They take it upon themselves to bring evil men to book:

ANGOLA. No Aafa, too many objections. First one Sergeant owes us a debt. then there are many citizens who must be made to account for their wealth, and the poverty of their workers. Such accounts can be settled only one way (20)

They choose to be the voice of the poor masses who have muted by the obnoxious traditions of the squalid rich oppressors:

ANGOLA. Aafa, too many people ride their cars along the sore ridden backs of the poor. Is there no other way? (21)

Their actions were guided not by the egotistic amassment of wealth, but the creed of justice and the voice of reformation. When faced with the temptation of deviating from their guiding principle, Alhaja tries to restore the sanity of Major when he got beguiled by the deceitfulness of wealth:

ALHAJA. (*Angry*) My husband brought you out of the slum. From the cold, he put clothes on your back. From the rain, he found you shelter. He put your scattered life together, raised you into a man. He put the first gun in your hand, thought you to stand and fight for justice. He gave your life a purpose..... (37)

The purpose here is to abate from wallowing in the faith and slum of poverty, but stand up and be "honest robbers" who rob the rich to feed the poor depraved souls. They appeal to major to change his mind and stay with the group so that collectively they can end the scourge of "nothing changing":

HASAN. We're doomed, my brothers and only our solidarity saves us. From the cutting of the cord, earth to earth. You know the myths! What elsedo they recount but unending tales of the powerless against the strong. And its history of repeated defeat oppression of nothing changing...(60)

The robbers are touched and moved by compassion, that is why they are standing up to change the order of things:

HASAN. I said you have eyes, you can see, you know what is going on everywhere, what is happening to people like us. So how can you remain unmoved (66)

In spite of major's betrayal and treachery, Alhaja appealed for compassion and mercy because of the requirement of justice for the greater good of society:

ALHAJA. Angola, I know how you feel, but we must learn to forgive. Those who fight for justice must first start in love and generosity. (61)

It is important to x-ray closely Alhaja's statements and what it portends in the struggle for reformation. As a result of the fight for justice for the good of the entire society, self must be diminished, ego must be buried. Only an egotistic and selfabsolved man can consider personal offence a weighty matter and abandon the struggle for justice. The one looking at the sun cannot see shadows. The eyes of the poor (robbers) is set on the higher prize of a reformed society so that self becomes an insignificant material, shrouded in the cloak of compassion. If compassion has no central role in any revolution, the struggle becomes simply another meaningless bloodletting and exploitation for personal aggrandizement. It is worthy of note here that the reason why the other members of the group upbraided major was simply because the man crossed the boundary of living and struggling for others and instead embraced grabbing for

personal enrichment, materialism and glorification of self which was directly contrapuntal to the essence of the revolution:

ANGOLA. He foamed at the mouth! You saw it he was going to shoot us! His eyes burned like embers. He had caught a mirage, but he leaned on it as one leans on something valuable. On this very spot. You heard his cry of exultation, his song of lust! And for material things, cars, houses, neon lights. A companion! He was no longer with us, he had crossed to the other side of the street. (58)

### **The Invocation of the Legend of Robin Hood in *Once Upon Four Robbers***

The reformatory mission of the four robbers in this play can be reinforced if we can conceive it as a type of the legend of Robin Hood of the Sherwood Forest. The adventures of Robin Hood have captivated many writers and film makers over the century. He is celebrated as a legendary hero of the medieval England between the 1100s and 1400s. Legend has it that Robin Hood was a simple highway robber who fought corrupt authority and robbed the rich to give to the poor. He was celebrated for his courage, generosity and intelligence. He always showered compassion on the poor, protected women and children and offered assistance to men of honour.

Interestingly, members of his gang were called the Merry Men. The Merry Men consisted of little John, Friar Tuck and Will scarlet. So the story of Robin hood is a story of a gang of four robbers headed by Robin Hood who took upon themselves the duty of reforming Shear Wood, a city near England. In Robin Hood's time, peasant masses in medieval England struggled to make a meager living while a relatively small group of nobles and government officials wallowed in wealth. Robin Hood and his three accomplices strove to reform that society by the equitable distribution of wealth. ( Microsoft Encarta Premium)

The Robin Hood story only gives credence to the mission and self imposed duty the four robbers in *Once Upon Four Robbers* embark

upon to reform society. Like the Robin Hood story, they should be celebrated and distinguished as poor men who seek to change an unjust, oppressive and draconian society where the rich stand on the neck of the poor and suck their blood like the ogre on the man in Ngugi's *The Devil on the Cross*. Somebody had to alter the distasteful state of things and the four Robbers like Robin Hood and his Merry Men answered the noble call. They do not only preach reformation, they act it out by robbing the rich to feed the poor and defenseless just as Osofisans four robbers.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

*Once Upon Four Robbers* is an idiom that questions the rationale behind killing of robbers and the yardstick for judging evil in society. The story is based on the routine slaughtering of robbers tied to the stake at the Lagos bar beach in previous administration in Nigeria. The play underscores the injustice, disequilibrium and inequity in the Nigerian society as index to such crimes as armed robbery. It is a call to take a closer look at the society and identify who the true robbers are. In this play Osofisan parades a group of four armed robbers who are obsessed with the desire to reform society and return equity and justice to the poor. He invokes the Legend of robin Hood to pass this message across aptly and succinctly. In the typical Robin Hood style, the robbers steal from the rich and give to the poor. They are also unrelentless in assiduously propagating the gospel of reformation and liberty for a society asphyxiated by corruption and bogus capitalism. The robbers demonstrate the urgency to preach about and bring about social reformation. To this end they are models of social reformation in close consonance with Robin Hood and his merry men.

Osofisan has accurately been described as an intellectually versatile artists. This is as a result of the rich emotional, political aesthetic quality of his dramaturgy. His prolificacy and versatility are founded on his fertility of form and his consistency of purpose. His evocative and provocative manipulation of techniques and forms makes his art a masterpiece and a delight to behold. Other Nigerian dramatists should borrow a leaf from Osofisan's rich aesthetic techniques.

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