Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 307

Volume 307

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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Contents

Femi Osofisan
1946-

(Full name Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan; also wrote under the pseudonym Okinba Launko) Nigerian playwright, essayist, and novelist.

The following entry presents criticism on Osofisan's career through 2009.

INTRODUCTION

One of Nigeria's most renowned playwrights, Osofisan is lauded for his persistent concern with political, religious, and cultural liberty within a formerly colonial society torn by strife and corruption. His works generally fall into three categories: realistic protest plays, satiric adaptations of European works, and distinctively African drama. Because they are written in English, Osofisan's plays bring a sense of the indigenous African performance aesthetic to a wider audience. Although Nigerian critics have viewed him as a radical intent upon destroying the past, his activism builds upon tradition while seeking to encourage pervasive change.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Osofisan was born in Erunwon, Nigeria. After attending primary and secondary schools in Ilesha, Ile-Ife, and Erunwon, he furthered his education at Government College, Ibadan. Osofisan subsequently enrolled at the University of Senegal, Dakar, in 1968 and then the University of Ibadan, where he received a bachelor's degree in French in 1969 and a doctorate in 1974. While a student at Ibadan, he worked extensively with the Orisun Theatre, a professional company established by drama pioneer Wole Soyinka. Osofisan's first play, *A Restless Run of Locusts,* was written and performed in 1969. In 1973 he became a member of the theater arts faculty at the University of Ibadan; in 1985 the university promoted him to the position of full-time professor of drama. His many academic and writing honors include visiting fellowships at Cambridge in 1986 and Cornell in 1992. He was a participant in the Iowa International Writer's Program in 1986, an artist in residence at Napoule, France, in 1990, and a guest writer at the Japan Foundation in 1991. In addition, he has served as president of the Association of Nigerian Authors and vice president of the Pan-African Writer's Association. As a journalist, Osofisan was a columnist and editor at the *Daily Times* of Nigeria. He won prizes from the Association of Nigerian Authors in 1983, 1987, and 1993. In 2004 he garnered the Nigerian National Order of Merit in the Humanities.

MAJOR WORKS

Osofisan's works expose audiences to various social and political problems facing Nigeria by combining avant-garde theater and traditional African performance techniques. *Once upon Four Robbers* (1978) borrows themes from Ghanaian folklore to question the morality of public executions. The play concerns a band of thieves that is granted a supernatural ability to rob people successfully under three conditions: the bandits must refrain from murder, steal only from the rich, and commit their crimes in public places. Bickering among the group enables government soldiers to capture them and start their public executions, but at the last moment, the old man who has narrated the entire drama freezes the action and calls for the audience to decide the fate of the criminals. If the audience chooses death, the executions are portrayed in an extremely graphic manner; if the audience chooses freedom, the actors proceed to rob the audience.

Osofisan conflates historical events and Yoruba legend in *Morountodun* (1979). The play is based on the true story of a female government spy, Titubi, who infiltrates a Nigerian farmers' rebellion. At the same time, Titubi's story is infused with the traditional legend of a Yoruba princess named Moremi who surreptitiously enters enemy ranks to save her city from destruction. Unlike Moremi, Titubi recants her role as spy when she sees the poverty and misery of the people, and she uses her position to aid the rebels. *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990) examines the pressures against democracy in contemporary Nigeria. As the young daughters of three families compete for an annual dance title, they learn that a local priestess plans on retaining the "power" bestowed by the dance rather than passing it on to the next generation of dancers. When the young dancers protest, the priestess argues that only by keeping the power has she prevented the internecine warfare that

characterized the families' relations in the past. The play draws attention to the military regimes of the 1980s and their reluctance to hand over power to civilian governments.

One Legend, Many Seasons (1996) promotes themes of benevolence and generosity while exposing the avarice of the bourgeois class in a narrative based on Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol. The Women of Owu* (2004) transplants the plot of Euripides's *Women of Troy* in the nineteenth-century Yoruba Kingdom of Owu in Nigeria. In addition to his theater work, Osofisan is known for his politically and socially trenchant nonfiction. The essays collected in *The Nostalgic Drum* (2001), for example, survey such subjects as the function of popular genres, the literary tradition of West Africa, and the place of aesthetics in social revolution.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although Osofisan lacks widespread recognition outside of his home country, reviewers have praised his plays throughout his career. In particular, they have highlighted his skillful inclusion of the audience in his scripts. According to critic Abdullahi S. Abubakar, "[T]he audience is made to participate in realizing the [play's] set objective, a step that changes [the audience's] disposition from dormancy to action." Furthermore, commentators have lauded the creative reevaluation of Nigerian history in *Morountodun* as well as the avant-garde aesthetic of *One Legend, Many Seasons.* They have also extolled the project of social transformation that undergirds such plays as *Once upon Four Robbers.* In addition, they have examined Osofisan's utilization of myth. In a study of *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest,* for instance, scholar Sola Adeyemi contended that Osofisan "delves into the realm of myths . . . to commit himself to an ideological stance about his society in a manner that is both revolutionary and subversive." While his work often handles complex themes, most reviewers have concurred with Sunday Enessi Ododo's assertion that Osofisan creates an "accessible theatre with aesthetic sophistication that thrives on realism and presentational skills, and re-creative deployment of indigenous production elements." Ododo concludes: "These artistic strategies account for the intense popularity his theatre enjoys in Nigeria today."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

A Restless Run of Locusts (play) 1969
Kolera Kolej: A Novel (novel) 1975
The Chattering and the Song (play) 1976
Who's Afraid of Solarin? (play) 1977
Farewell to a Cannibal Rage (play) 1978
Once upon Four Robbers (play) 1978
Morountodun (play) 1979
Birthdays Are Not for Dying (play) 1980
The Oriki of a Grasshopper (play) 1981
No More the Wasted Breed (play) 1982
Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels (play) 1984
Another Raft (play) 1987
Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen (play) 1988
Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tale (play) 1988
The Inspector and the Hero (play) 1990
Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest (play) 1990
The Album of the Midnight Blackout (play) 1994
Tegonni [adaptor; from the play *Antigone* by Sophocles] (play) 1994
One Legend, Many Seasons [adaptor; from the novella *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens] (play) 1996
The Nostalgic Drum: Essays on Literature, Drama, and Culture (essays) 2001
Insidious Treasons: Drama in a Postcolonial State (essays) 2001
Literature and the Pressures of Freedom: Essays, Speeches, and Songs (essays) 2001
The Women of Owu (play) 2004

CRITICISM

Tejumola Olaniyan (essay date 1999)

SOURCE: Olaniyan, Tejumola. "Femi Osofisan: Provisional Notes on the Postcolonial Incredible." In *(Post)Colonial Stages: Critical and Creative Views on Drama, Theatre, and Performance,* edited by Helen Gilbert, pp. 174-89. West Yorkshire, England: Dangaroo Press, 1999.

[*In the following essay, Olaniyan observes the potential normalization of social crisis and the possibility of social transformation in* Once upon Four Robbers.]

> Everyday my people dey inside bus—Suffering and Smiling
> 49 sitting 99 standing—
> Dem pack themselves in like sardine—
> Dem dey faint, dem dey wake like cock—
> Dem go reach house water no dey—
> Dem go reach bed power no dey—
> Dem go reach road go-slow go come—
> Dem do reach road police go slap—
> Dem go reach road army go whip—
> Dem go look pocket money no dey—
> Everyday na the sametin—
>
> Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, *Suffering and Smiling*[1]

One very suggestive paradox structures the dramatic oeuvre of Femi Osofisan: a gargantuan *will* to articulate what the oeuvre itself represents as incredible and unarticulable: the postcolonial Nigerian, nay African, condition. The 'incredible' inscribes that which cannot be believed—what is too improbable, astonishing, and extraordinary to admit of belief. The incredible is not simply the breach but the *outlandish* infraction of 'normality' and its limits. If 'belief', as faith, confidence, trust, and conviction, underwrites the certainty and tangibility of institutions and practices of social exchange, the incredible dissolves all such props of stability, normality, and intelligibility (and therefore, of authority), and so engenders social and symbolic crisis.

Contrary to popular assumptions, however, a regime of the incredible is not intrinsically negative or undesirable, since no self-conscious dominated group would shed tears for the passing of a despotic rule. In this case, the incredible could be a prelude to the (re)constitution of a more enabling social and symbolic order. For a dominated group, the incredible becomes a problem only when a presupposed interval, an 'interregnum' to borrow Gramsci's term, threatens to become the *norm* with a rapidly consolidating hierarchy of privileges dependent on the crisis for reproduction. This crisis-as-norm that is fast becoming the lot of many postcolonial African societies is what I call the 'postcolonial incredible', signally marked by 'a great variety of morbid symptoms'.[2] My epigraph from Fela Anikulapo-Kuti unequivocally specifies the content of the 'incredible' interregnum as modernity miscarried.[3]

Osofisan's creative response to the threat of the incredible becoming the postcolonial African norm is to pursue two apparently divergent projects. The first is to meticulously sustain, even aggravate, the perception of the crisis precisely as *crisis*; that is, to consistently widen the distance between the regime of the incredible and the opposing and often oppositional envisioned norm in the popular imaginary. The modes of such a task include venomous satire, rib-cracking humour, and extravagant poignancy. The second project is transcendentalist in aspiration: a profound exploration of the wherewithal to surmount the incredible and its rule. Here, there is hope and optimism, but as *catalysts,* not presences. More often than not, the apparently divergent projects are embodied in the same play as a veritable tension. For instance, while many of Osofisan's more popular plays, such as ***A Restless Run of Locusts*** (1970), ***The Oriki of a Grasshopper*** (1981), ***No More the Wasted Breed*** (1982), ***Farewell to A Cannibal Rage*** (1978), ***Morountodun*** (1979), and ***Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*** (1984),[4] revel in the presentation of a garish and untameable portrait of the postcolonial incredible, with all its attendant social and psychological devastation, they are at the same time unwilling to accept the notion of the incredible present which is not a transition.[5]

Sustenance and transcendence certainly do appear discrepant but are actually complementary in Osofisan's dramatic universe. The former stokes the fire of hurt so that the pain cannot be domesticated, while the latter explores remedies beyond the anodyne of domestication, in the hope that the harmed will thereby discern better possibilities. In a context where the incredible is increasingly being transformed into the norm, to sustain the sense of the incredible as *incredible*—to prevent us from 'getting used to it'—is to suggest that it ought not to *be*; that it could be historicized, confronted, conquered. Sustenance thus becomes one of the very weapons of the goal of transcendence.[6]

One of Osofisan's earliest articulations of his agenda appears in the essay, **'Anubis Resurgent: Chaos and Political Vision in Recent Literature'**, published in 1976.[7] Here, Osofisan surveys African literature of the late sixties and the seventies and discovers a frightful trend: the free reign of chaos, of 'Anubis'.[8] Rampant in the literature, he argues, is a 'rabid explosion of horror' and of aimless violence and anarchy, a 'prevailing image of Apocalypse' which the writers 'lucidly' present but which, alas, they could not deeply comprehend.[9] Their other major duty, 'enlightenment', or an exploration of means of transcending the disorder, thus suffers dangerous neglect. In other words, the writers show too much of the garish absurd and too little exploration of prospects for its alleviation. Much of this literature, Osofisan contends, either halts 'just at the doors of meaning', or 'diverts perception into the thrill of heroic picaresque'. The writers' 'poetic explorations into the dialectic of power and politics' are outstandingly lucid, but 'lucidity is inadequate, may even be fraudulent if its consequence is mere "intoxication", and if finally, it only results in perpetuating a philosophy of defeat'.[10] Perhaps we could argue that the writers capture the pervasive trend of their age; but this is only apparent, Osofisan chides, insisting that 'we must demand that our writers take a daring look behind the curtain of facility with which history clothes itself, that mask of superficiality or disarming fatality which consoles the ordinary citizen or the jejune poet'.[11] 'Reality in good art', he says, 'has always been double-faced, one a reflection and the other the ammunition for exploding that reality'.[12] Clearly, Osofisan intends his artistic practice to be an 'alternative tradition'[13] to the trend he describes.

The imprint here is of a fundamental optimism of the will, which makes it quite predictable that Osofisan rarely resorts to the tragic form in his dramaturgy.[14]

History is created by human beings and is alterable by them. To lose sight of this is to surrender passion and reason and unwittingly walk into the capacious jaws of the tragic snare. There can be mistakes, a momentary reign of the incredible, grief and anguish, but not irretrievable tragedy and ultimate collapse. Not to see beyond the postcolonial incredible is to live the tragic, and to live the tragic is to live a death. 'We must know', he argues with compelling lyricism, 'that if ever a cause is allowed to refine itself towards a tragic denouement, the cause will wilt. For a knowledge of the patterns of history as being immutably cyclic [i.e. tragic] will not quench the pangs of hunger or attenuate the lash of tyranny. Anubis must die, again and again'.[15]

I will attend to Osofisan's complex, bi-forked project by closely reading one of his most popular plays, ***Once Upon Four Robbers*** (1978), which not only shows the pervasive violence of the postcolonial incredible, but also uses technically sophisticated theatrical devices to implicate the audience in that regime *and* incite them to do something about it.

The Scaffold in the Age of the Carceral: An Incredible Postcolonial Mix

Two years after Osofisan published the polemical 'Anubis Resurgent', his ***Once Upon Four Robbers,*** on a similar theme of contemporary violence and chaos, premiered. The play inevitably becomes part of the dramatist's interventions in the discursive fictionalization of the dialectic of power and politics in an interregnum of the incredible, and shall be so examined. The four armed robbers of the play's title come across an aged medicine man, Aafa (also the story-teller or narrator), who gives them a magic formula—a quarter part each—to be used collectively so that no one can cheat by using it without the others. The magic is useable successively only three times and this is on the conditions that the robbers desist from robbing the poor, that they rob only public places, and never again kill their victims. The robbers reluctantly accept the magic but are pleasantly surprised by its wonders: incantations plus singing which makes all who hear it momentarily lose consciousness and dance, while the robbers conveniently empty the revellers' pockets and stores. The robbers have used the formula just twice when one of them, Major, grabs all the loot and makes to bolt. He is roundly opposed by the others, and only the bullets of pursuing soldiers puncture the simmering tension. In this encounter with the agents of the law, Major is caught and duly sentenced to death: public execution by a firing squad. On the appointed day and venue, the 'picnic'[16] crowd converges as usual. Major is tied to the stake and the soldiers take position. They are about to shoot when the other robbers appear and commence the magic formula, their third and final chance. The soldiers are caught in the magic trance and the play freezes. A veritable stalemate. With encouragement from the narrator, the theatre audience decides the end of the play by voting for a side—the robbers or the soldiers. Like the literary works Osofisan chastises in 'Anubis Resurgent', his own play too lucidly dramatizes the anarchy and violence of the postcolonial incredible; whether the play is apart from the trend, as Osofisan would hope, by not 'diverting perception into the thrill of heroic picaresque',[17] requires a critical analysis.

From the early seventies, the phenomenon of *public* execution of *armed* robbers has been a regular feature of the Nigerian penal system. The punishment, manufactured and reserved exclusively for a category of crimes against property, came at a time of significant growth in the national wealth, generated by the post-civil war oil boom. Differential access to this wealth swiftly sharpened antagonistic class distinctions. A large-scale accumulation of private property went hand in hand with an equally large-scale pauperization of the masses, and the phenomenon of armed robbery grew exponentially. Osofisan, in 'Programme Notes To The First Production' of ***Once Upon Four Robbers,*** implies that such a rise in violent robbery was almost inevitable:

> Take a look at our salary structures, at the minimum wage level, count the sparse number of lucky ones who earn it . . . and then take a look at the squalid spending habits of our egregious 'contractors', land speculators, middle men of all sorts, importers, exporters, etc. Or take a look at our sprawling slums and ghettoes, our congested hospitals and crowded schools, our impossible markets . . . and then take another look at the fast proliferation of motor-cars, insurance agencies, supermarkets, chemist shops, boutiques, discotheques, etc. The callous contradictions of our oil-doomed fantasies of rapid modernization.[18]

This is the context of the first promulgation of the anti-armed robbery decree, which has survived—after one repeal and reinstatement (1979-83)—till today. The decree authorizes a specially constituted tribunal to impose the death sentence in the case of robbery 'where the offender is armed with any firearms or any offensive weapon or is in company with any person so armed' or where he/she wounds any person immediately before or after the robbery.[19] On conviction, the criminal faces a firing squad at a fairground on a well-publicized date—a veritable sportive occasion.

Once upon Four Robbers presents us with a regime of unyielding violent crime and punishment. To grasp the specificity of the political economy of that (dis)order, I have borrowed from Michel Foucault's

work on power and disciplinary mechanisms to characterize the regime as the 'spectacle of the scaffold',[20] an order of power marked by a fanatical gaze upon the body of the condemned, its prolonged, methodical torture, and the public, spectacular fashion of the executions. In contradistinction to the 'scaffold' regime of the bygone era, Foucault posits that the current trend in the West is toward the 'carceral', a disciplinary order whose emphasis is the 'normalization' of society through an extensive and intensive accumulation of information and knowledge about the populace. The 'body of the condemned' is no more the target of violent physical assault but of systematic observation and surveillance. The 'scaffold' tortures the body but the 'carceral' harasses and intimidates the soul into conformity. The crime is no more against the 'person' of the king but 'the apparatus of production—"commerce" and "industry"'.[21] If the scaffold is emblematic of the age of 'inquisitorial' justice, the carceral signifies the age of 'examinatory' justice. In the latter, the agents of normality are no longer just the obvious—the police, the army—but all such institutions that relate, even if obliquely or weakly, to the organization and management of people: the school, church, social welfare, revenue division, hospital, and so on. The gathering, processing, storing, and circulation of information is so indispensable to the carceral society that some theorists have already—recklessly—proposed a 'mode of information' as the master-key to its understanding.[22]

Although Foucault does not construct an evolutionary graph from the scaffold to the carceral, it is obvious that the latter has all but eclipsed the former in the West today. Foucault warns against a condescending attitude that sees the scaffold period as characterized by unrelieved savagery, insisting instead on its specific conceptualization in its specific time. In any case, this attitude would be hypocritical, since the West has not eradicated the spectacular show of power but rather made it infinitely more subtle, economical, and inescapable, irrigating the social body 'down to its smallest particles'.[23] Because the spectacle of the scaffold exists in Nigeria alongside carceral methods, we have, then, not only a mind-boggling (equals *incredible*) example of the scaffold-in-the-age-of-the-carceral, but also a situation where the carceral, ideally 'economical' and less vulgar as it is, does not significantly preclude the scaffold. A speculation for this suggests itself: Foucault argues that the invention of the new carceral 'economy' of power was one of the very conditions of possibility of capital accumulation and the rise of the bourgeoisie.[24] If we agree with Foucault that there is a link between the level of socio-political and economic development and the degree of sophistication in managing the population, can we then see the enigma of the-scaffold-in-carceral-times as betraying Nigeria's 'postcolonial' (substantively speaking, 'underdeveloped') status and poor surveillance methods? From this perspective, Osofisan's play not only thematizes a major content of the postcolonial incredible but also, through that process, historicizes the general postcolonial 'condition' itself.

As Foucault demonstrates, the scaffold is not an expression of lawless rage, but a *technique* of power—one of the ceremonies by which power is manifested. It 'functions not so much to establish as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength'.[25] It is a bad 'economy' of power: unwieldy, ineffective, and likely to engender resistance. In the Nigerian context, spectators at public executions often come away with lost wallets, money, wristwatches, bicycles, motorcycles or cars, or return to find their homes looted. And the fictive world of ***Once Upon Four Robbers*** opens with a public execution, yet the other robbers are undeterred.

The representation of power relations within the play is characterized by this controversial and powerful detail: a radical refusal to exonerate any one group from responsibility for the socially anaemic condition. This partly explains Abiola Irele's point that the play is 'notable for its shock value . . . [its] comprehensive indictment of contemporary Nigerian society'.[26] If the power relations of the regime of the incredible represented in the play are inferred to be dehumanizing, the State, directly represented by the soldiers, may be no more responsible for this than the cheating and profiteering masses of the market people (the institution of commerce), as the 'Song of the Market' indicates:

> We make inflation
> and hoard away
> as much as we may relish
> essential commodities
> like sugar and salt
> like milk and oil
> so we can leave the market
> each day a-rolling in wealth!
>
> (p. 34)

Osofisan is certainly a master of the disorienting art of the nearly bizarre—what looks (ab)normal but not quite. Ordinary and humble characters, not expressly 'negative' by the text's overall design, joyously bask in moral turpitude and wear self-derision like a second skin. In other words, they embrace subjection as tightly as if it were subjectivity, and sing, dance, and laugh when they ought to hang their heads in shame and cry. Another stanza from their song goes:

> The lure of profit
> has conquered our souls
> and changed us into cannibals
> oh praise the selfless British
> who with the joyous sound
> of minted coins and gold
> brought us civilization!
>
> (p. 34)

Osofisan's infectious orchestration of the characters' self-parody may be unrelenting but these characters have no doubts at all about where to put their talents: in the service of rabid self-interest and ostentatious consumption. The lowly masses, usually the object of the greatest sympathy by the radical intellectual, here assert desires no different from those of their oppressors. The moral aporia is unmistakable.

The robbers too may be victims, but they are no less accomplices in the reigning order of violence, as indicated in their song:

> We are what we are
> and no apologies!
> We are what we are, gate crashers
> Who, uninvited, bash into parties
>
> (pp. 7, 76)

> Yes, they call us robbers
> But we are about our trade . . .
> Whoever desires death
> Should try to block our way:
> He'll see his intestines gush out!
> He'll watch his kidneys in open air!
>
> (pp. 16, 78)

Everyone is implicated in the ruling order of power, a situation that should remind us of Foucault's well-known insistence on the apparent homelessness of power—power as present in every interstice of society, relatively 'autonomous, anonymous, programmatic and dispersed'.[27] For Foucault, power is to be seen as a network, to be sought in its multiple nodes rather than in the 'primary existence of a central point':[28] 'power isn't located in the State apparatus . . . nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and along the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed'.[29] If power is ubiquitous, then the struggle to change it must be directed at every one of its pores; the revolution must be everywhere. No wonder at the end of the play, the soldiers, market people and the robbers are all brought together in a relationship that implicates them in, and shows their complicity with, the operating relations of power.

But these groups are *not* implicated equally. To exculpate their excesses, the profiteering market-women point to soaring bills from the landlord, tax inspector, headmaster, doctor, and a host of others. And the robbers, too, accuse 'the rich', a catch-all phrase for the local bourgeoisie and the organ of their rule, the State, whose maladministration creates the enabling conditions of crime. One of the robbers laments:

> I have sworn never to be a slave in my father's land. All I wanted was the right to work but everywhere they only wanted slaves. . . . [T]he grown man . . . crawl[s] the street from month to month on his belly, begging for work, for a decent pay, for a roof, for a shelter. . . . The world is a market, we come to slaughter one another and sell the parts.
>
> (pp. 67, 68)

The 'buck' ends with the rich—'they' in the above scene who only wanted slaves. In a small passage that is rarely noticed in discussions of Foucault's notion of power, Foucault as much as admits such a hierarchy. Although he is more well-known for implicating—as the play does eloquently—both the high and the low in the reigning regime of power, and for insisting that 'the summit and the lower elements of this hierarchy stand in a relationship of mutual support and conditioning',[30] he also argues forcefully that the hierarchy and its different levels with their unequal power-effects be foregrounded: 'Certainly everyone doesn't occupy the same position; certain positions preponderate and permit an effect of supremacy to be produced'.[31] Likewise, the play insists that within the vertiginous chaos where no one is innocent, the 'rich' benefit most and thus have the most vested in maintaining the status quo.

The postcolonial incredible is here vividly presented, but Osofisan hopes to be different from those who, to paraphrase him, simply stop at 'lucidity', through his insistence that the suzerainty of the incredible order *can* be challenged, even if the reign of violence and chaos is overwhelming and all-encompassing. There can always be 'subversive recodifications of power relations', a process of 'detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates'.[32] Such symbolic 'subversive recodifications' are most boldly accomplished in the *form* of the play.

The robbers are not just the central focus of this play—they appear in all three parts—but their characterization daringly subverts conventional images of the armed robber in popular discourse, in the bilge spewed out daily by the government media. In the play, various crimes are critically contextualized, shocking the audience into the recognition that armed robbery is not an isolated mode of criminal behaviour. All those crimes of the elite—stealing government files, altering

accounts, swearing affidavits, granting sick leaves, selling contraband, colluding with aliens (pp. 16-17)—which often elicit merely smug indifference, are no less forms of social violence, and are part of the enabling conditions of more 'extreme' social vices such as armed robbery. Robbery is never by choice and no one is born a robber; it is but a characteristic element of a society in which primitive accumulation or hyenic self-interest is the ordering principle. 'The rich are powerful', say the robbers, 'They make the laws', 'build the law courts', 'train the lawyers', and 'own the firing squads' (pp. 14-15). What the robbers have done is exactly similar: created a 'coherent' manipulable world where they can live, 'work', love, and die without having to be someone's 'slaves' (p. 68). Part One of the play is an understanding but nonetheless unapologetic evocation of this world. From both the corrupt world of 'the rich' and the violent one of the robbers, the play ever so subtly suggests, true humanity shrinks.

It is probably the play's inclusion of a woman, Alhaja, among the robbers that most disturbs the ruling discourse on armed robbery. The armed robber in the popular imagination is a heavily built, fierce-looking, gun-toting, and knife-wielding male in his thirties or forties, never a woman. Alhaja is not simply a woman in a 'man's world', but in one of the most execrable and criminalized margins of that world, one farthest removed from her supposed (as a woman) gentle, nurturing, and non-violent essences. But Alhaja performs her tasks unimpeachably, and the other robbers never regard her as anything but an equal. She is one in a long line of Osofisan's women who are represented as subjects and active agents of social transformation.[33] Indeed, Tess Onwueme, herself a notable playwright, is right to celebrate Osofisan's achievement in de-conventionalizing the representation of female characters and male-female relations, an achievement without parallel among African male dramatists. Alhaja is certainly 'independent, forceful, enlightened and socially conscious'; and her 'humane nature builds credibility for the robbers' antisocial behaviour and desperate acts'.[34]

Unlike Onwueme, I see some ambiguities and equivocations in Osofisan's representation of women in his drama. For instance, he constantly throws into focus relations between men and women, but only in their connection to the larger class struggle, rarely in terms of the tension-soaked issues of unequal sexual arrangements and gendered roles and attitudes. A class-based radicalism thus coexists with an unexamined patriarchal outlook. Specifically in ***Once Upon Four Robbers,*** 'Market Women' appears in the cast list as a category of characters separate from 'Traders, Customers'. Soon enough into the play, we find the reason for this: the market women symbolically represent the institution of commerce and its retainers—and in larger terms, the social entity as a whole ruled by greed and untethered private accumulation. The song which the market women sing and which they call their song is, revealingly, not titled 'Song of the Market Women' but 'Song of the Market' (pp. 33-34). The problem here is the mapping of the institution of commerce onto women. Those who share Osofisan's ethnic background—also the one implied in the play—would know that buying and selling, and the market as an institution, are gendered in Yoruba popular discourse.[35] The play uncritically appropriates this rationalization of roles. Within such symbolic logic, the venality of the market is only a stone's-throw to the venality of the gender that bears its image.

The play's truly seditious portrayal of the robbers remains the central focus of its deconstructive energies, rather than the representation of women as women within a social set-up. In what is obviously an abomination, the robbers are deftly placed on a comparative scale with the market people—'law-abiding' common people 'honestly doing their own business and struggling to survive', as the cliche goes. The real difference, we learn quickly enough, is one of *means*; the *end,* 'great profits', is the same. A stanza in the 'Song of the Market' goes thus:

> The lust of profits
> keeps us in the world
> this life that is a market:
> refuse to join and perish,
> rebel and quench!
> For those who spit at gold,
> otosi asinniwaye!*
>
> (*penurious scavengers; p. 34)

The dream of these lowly people is, perhaps predictably enough, to see their offspring become part of the powerful rich few: 'Among the few / that's seen each day / whipping the world with lashes / and strutting round like lords, / let's count our sons!' (p. 34). Because of their investment in the dominant aspirations, it rarely occurs to them that their quest means little more than a reproduction of the existing arrangement, an arrangement they are wont to complain against at other times. Osofisan is without doubt a keen-eyed observer of the contradictions of ideological interpellation.

Even the soldiers, the agents of the law and the protectors of the people, fare no better. In their own worlds they are oppressed too—overworked and underpaid—but they are also as corrupt as their employers. In one revealing scene, they appropriate (without a qualm) the loot left behind by the fleeing robbers. The Sergeant addresses his men: