

The playwright and social justice in Nigeria: A study of Femi Osofisan's 'Once Upon Four Robbers'

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ABSTRACT: Playwrights play a pivotal role in championing equal justice within society. Through the dynamic medium of drama, they address pressing social issues and work towards catalyzing positive societal change. This qualitative study examines the playwright's role in advocating for social justice in Nigeria using Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* with a Marxist theoretical framework. The research unveils the moral ambiguity surrounding the government-sponsored military execution of the armed robbery gang leader. It contends that this action lacks justification, given that these individuals turned to crime due to the government's failure to provide opportunities for the youth, raising questions about the government's legitimacy in administering justice while perpetuating conditions of injustice. In response, the study recommends that in societies riddled with social injustice, playwrights must diligently fulfil their role as social commentators, fostering positive change for the greater good. It stresses that playwrights should not compromise their societal responsibilities but instead advocate for constructive reforms and offer solutions to prevailing societal challenges. This can only be achieved when writers fully recognize their roles as change agents in society. This research therefore underscores the vital role of playwrights in advocating for social justice, especially in contexts where systemic issues threaten equality and fairness.

Keywords: Playwright, society, social problems, social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian playwrights and dramatists have utilized their works to show the rot in Nigeria and the injustices inflicted on the masses by their leaders. This injustice including mismanagement, joblessness, hunger, abuse of influence and public treasury, and unequal dissemination of the country's wealth, have pushed many into crimes, causing more problems for the nation. It is a reality that if the lack of equity, justice and fairness, is sustained, the consequences will be unimaginable. Truth be told, you do not beat a child and expect the baby not to respond by crying. And when the child cries, the noise becomes a problem for all within that environment.

A society loaded with inconsistencies, corruption and injustice; its reflection will undoubtedly not be any different. What is more, to assemble an equitable society bereft of injustice. Durkheim (1893) as cited in Rawls (2003, p.224) states that unselfishness, morality and social solidarity are the basic ingredients. Furthermore, the three ingredients

highlighted above are almost impossible to have in many modern societies, with Nigeria inclusive. The writer is a mirror which reflects and uncovers the financial and socio-political, social and even religious exercises pervasive in the society. As a social pundit and investigator, his real job and commitment is to uncover the social difficulties and their causes; regardless of whether the causes are of people or things which hamper a reasonable, equivalent and free society.

Nigeria, a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse nation, grapples with various social issues like unemployment, kidnapping, pipeline vandalization, militancy, youth restiveness, poverty, and corruption. Playwrights bear the responsibility of acting as watchdogs, critiquing these problems and offering solutions through their art. They also serve as advocates for social justice. However, many Nigerian playwrights often neglect to address how justice can be achieved, leading to increased crime rates,

especially among the marginalized. This raises questions about the nature of justice, its administration, and who truly benefits from it. While these questions may spark debates, it is important to recognize that many crimes result from the absence of basic social services and equity. While punishment is necessary for criminals through legal institutions, the government's failure to provide an inclusive environment for all, regardless of ethnicity, gender, social class, or physical ability, represents a form of social injustice often overlooked by playwrights. This study aims to define justice and explore ways the government can prevent further injustices by creating a conducive environment where youths are not forced into due to government neglect. It underscores the consequences of government-induced social injustice using Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) as a case study.

The vast majority of contemporary Nigerian dramatists are set on reflecting different shades of social unfairness, joblessness, and numerous other social indecencies. No wonder, Ngugi Wa'Thiong'o (1983, p.51) portrays the writer as a voice of his people. In the same vein, Soyinka (1973, p.27) considers the playwright as the "recorder of his people's history". Osofisan (2007) paints the playwright with the aesthetic characteristics of "an onlooker, maker, writer, correspondent, scientist, mystery agent, official of the majority and the ethical soul of the general public" and he satisfies these traits in his works. The above assertions by the various scholars and writers are to solidify the importance of the playwright to his environment and by extension, his society. Wole Soyinka highlighted the role of the writer when he wrote his Jamaican inspired play, *The Beatification of Area Boys* (1999), in which he hinted that the problems caused by area boys in Nigeria, were not different from what Jamaica was facing. Hence, identification of the social problem, and a responsibility and commitment to combat it, were key to providing a plausible solution to the problems. It is worth noting that a large crop of Nigerian plays produced from 1980 to date contains ways to revive and rejuvenate Nigerian society and spare it from complete breakdown. Adeoti (2015, p.56) places that "such plays separated from showing social limpness in an imaginatively admissible forms, additionally endeavour to produce new knowledge and perceptions that can guarantee the achievement of the dramatic agenda". Examples of plays which have attempted to highlight the socio-political inadequacies in Nigeria include: Henry Bell-Gam's *Ube Republic* (2000), James Ene Henshaw's *A Man Of Character* (1956), Wole Soyinka's *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985), *From Zia with Love* (1992), and *The Beatification of Area Boys* (1999), Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), *Midnight Hotel* (1982), *Aringindin and the Night Watchman* (1992), Ola Rotimi's *If... a tragedy of the Ruled* (1983), Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* (1991), Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1992), Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods* (1996) and Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of*

Vultures (2001) and others.

In the same vein, amidst the predominant environment of harshness, lawlessness, poverty and illness, partisan brutality, youth anxiety, joblessness and crimes by persons from the universal public, the dramatist is the only entity who can utilize his work to retouch the fallen walls of national solidarity. The foul play and social indecencies are surely not a suffering of a precise ethnicity or people, yet rather a general issue that cuts across the nation. Rawls (1971, p.54) one of America's social equity scholars, characterizes social injustice as "imbalances that are not to the advantage of all". This definition by him demonstrates injustice in every society, favours one group at the expense of another. Consequently, it is the duty of the playwright to expose these imbalances and advocate for a more fair, just and equitable society. Femi Osofisan, one of Nigeria's leading playwrights with a strong bias for Marxism, whose work, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, exemplifies how playwrights can advocate for justice in society, argues that:

Arts born of that society, comments back on the social matrix, and by commentary, I am implying here both the possibility of consolidation and erosion, of reaffirmation as well as contradiction. Sooner or later, therefore, it must collide or collude with authority, whether of state or shrine, of pulpit or classroom. Everywhere, is the close intimacy of life, or the expensive space of social being, no hegemony is sacrosanct to the probing impertinence of art (Osofisan, 2007, p.108).

In Nigeria, a privileged few are reaping the benefits of the nation's wealth, while the vast majority languish in poverty. As Odebode (2004, p.16) notes, over the past 25 years, Nigeria has amassed more than \$300 billion in oil revenues (after accounting for payments to foreign companies). However, this wealth has yet to translate into tangible benefits for the Nigerian people. Consequently, Nigeria remains one of the world's poorest nations, with over 70% of its population living below the poverty line. This dire situation arises from the unfair distribution of the country's resources among its diverse population of 250 ethnic groups. This disparity has fostered a deep sense of distrust between minority ethnic groups and the majority. A stark illustration of this discord is the ongoing unrest in the Niger Delta region, where militants resort to pipeline vandalism and illegal oil refining activities as a means to claim a share of the nation's oil wealth for themselves. According to Mark (2020, p.1), Nigerians have held onto hope for positive change, yet the nation's economic and social circumstances have continued to deteriorate. This grim reality has given rise to various separatist groups, including the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Nnamdi Kanu, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), Asawana

Deadly Force of Niger Delta, Red Egbesu Water Lions, Niger Delta Marine Force, and others. These groups advocate for a fundamental restructuring of Nigeria to ensure a more equitable distribution of the nation's resources.

Again, if we are to condemn the reward system of action of our society through the government as demonstrated by Krama (2016, p. 21), which is one noteworthy operator of social reconstruction, we will grasp that the "approaches of government and the procedures of administration increment changes in the general public... In this manner, government arrangements unmistakably and clandestinely incite socio-social changes..." Our society is not anymore a conventional one however a modern society, which means we practice what Durkheim calls 'Natural Solidarity', which supports Interdependency made by the specialization of roles in which people and establishments become seriously reliant on others in an awesome division of work. Which is not working in our present society since we, collectively have not assumed our jobs as expected, including those we depend so greatly on, the people at the helm of affairs.

As shown through Durkheim (1893) as cited in Rawls (2003, p.298) "the request and very survival of society (mechanical) relies upon their routine with regards to centre natural solidarity or dependence on one another to do their required job honestly". For example, the militant boys are paid more than sixty thousand naira each month for sitting idle, while a government employee serving the country is requesting an addition to the eighteen thousand naira minimum wage, and the legislature is dragging its feet on heeding their pleas. These militant boys are likewise trained by the government in various skills and thereafter are given employment opportunities. Meanwhile, there are many unemployed graduates roaming the streets. By then I ask, would this act by the government be viewed as social justice? Durkheim considers equity as a useful prerequisite of what he calls natural solidarity... present day social orders whether intentionally or not, practice natural solidarity. What is more, without equity, present day separated work societies repudiate themselves. It will just add up to man's brutality to man, a wrongdoing against oneself and the country, should a Nigerian writer, composing for a Nigerian group of spectators today, decide to only play to the gallery despite the various discernible shameful acts in the society. This, maybe, is the reason Achebe (1981, p.3) says that "any author who attempts to maintain a strategic distance from the huge social and political inquiries of his time will end up being totally unessential to his society". He compares such an essayist to the foolish male in an Igbo axiom, who goes out to seek after the rodents escaping from the flares (Achebe, 1981, p.13).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This work is anchored principally to Karl Marx's Marxist

literary theory. This theory is best suited for this work because it views literary works as reflections of the society from which the playwright got his inspiration. Eagleton (1976, p.60) states that "Marxist criticism is not just a sociology of literature, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the running set. Its plan is to clarify the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive observation to its forms, styles and meanings... It analyses literature with regards to the historical conditions which produce it". Again, in his Primer 'Marxism and Literary Criticism' (1976, p.40), Terry Eagleton states that "Marxist criticism analyses writing as far as the chronicled conditions which produce it". It is, regardless, not just the sociology of writing. The matter of the Marxist literary hypothesis is to understand belief systems, the thoughts, qualities and sentiments by which men experience social orders at different occasions and to highlight the artistic work appropriately. Along these lines, the usefulness of the use of Marxist theory to literary investigation is evident, as Butler (1984, p.112) maintains that "it is the endeavour to uncover concealed ramifications of the text predictable with their philosophy that is pivotal to Marxist translation".

In his *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx (1848) succinctly posits that "the history of all previously existing societies is the history of class struggle". This statement underscores the integral role of conflict in the progress of civilization, asserting that without conflict, no societal advancement can occur. This principle has persisted as a guiding law throughout the course of human history up to the present day. Every society, regardless of its stage of historical development, is fundamentally anchored in its economic foundation—the mode of production. This mode of production comprises two essential components: the forces of production and the social relations of production. The collective sum of these relations of production constructs the economic framework of the society. At a certain juncture in its evolution, the material forces of production within society inevitably clash with prevailing property relations. This inherent antagonism and conflict between these two classes become inexorable as class consciousness and militant class action gain momentum, ultimately leading to the overthrow of the existing system.

The state or government is used by the dominant class as a tool to dominate the other class; this dominance is expressed through laws and policies that are made by the state that represent the interests of the dominant group. According to Marx, "the state is but a committee for the managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie..., the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interest" (Engels, 1919). The crux of societal power resides within the economic infrastructure, where the forces of production are owned and manipulated by a minority—the ruling class. This relationship with the means of production engenders the foundation for their dominance and exploitation in society. Consequently, the state assumes a historically significant role in preserving this social structure.

It is important to note that this dominance by the bourgeoisie (ruling class) does not necessarily imply direct governance through the state apparatus. Omoyibo (2012, p.23) underscores that this dominance is primarily established at the level of the social organization of production. This level sets the fundamental rules that govern the scope of state authority, delineating what it can and cannot do. Consequently, within a capitalist framework, governments may, in reality, be influenced or even controlled by other classes or groups, such as workers, bureaucrats, or smaller factions within the system. These groups, however, are permitted to partake in governance only if they adhere to the established rules prescribed by the dominant bourgeoisie, marking a dynamic governed by power relations at the production level.

The Marxist theory will be used to underscore the discrepancy between the ruling class and the masses in Nigerian society as captured in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, resulting in the various forms of social injustice.

NIGERIAN DRAMATIST AND THE SOCIETY

Society can be portrayed as a cluster of people, who share a common money related, social and modern infrastructure, and a society most occasions is made up of individuals from various ethnicities. Society is an association of individuals who share a common cultural and social foundation (Jenkkins 2002, p.34). The term society is the most central one in sociology. Sociologists consider society as a group of persons with common territory, interaction, interest and culture. Society is of two persons or more who collaborate and relate to one another. Individuals of the same society share aspects of their culture, for example, language or beliefs. Culture alludes to the language, values, beliefs, behaviour, and material objects that begin a people's lifestyle. It is a characterizing component of society (2002, p.40).

Nigeria comprises diverse groups who share common values and objectives, aspiring to create a society that benefits everyone. Given the nation's abundant resources, realizing this aspiration should be attainable, as its wealth, if managed properly, could suffice for all its citizens. However, corruption has turned our beloved nation upside-down, undermining our values, and way of life. This transformation has motivated numerous playwrights, including James Ene Henshaw, Henry Bell-Gam, Ola Rotimi, Chinua Achebe, Sam Ukala, Julie Okoh, Alex Asigbo, and many others, to write plays inspired by the realities of their immediate and neighbouring societies. Their aim is to prevent further deterioration of society. In Nigeria where corruption, inequality and social vices of all sorts have pushed many citizens into poverty, hardship and unlawful means of survival, playwrights endeavour to capture the essence of these issues to restore integrity and

dignity across all aspects of society, including the economic, social, legal, religious, political, and educational systems.

The country's wealth, derived from abundant natural resources like crude oil and coal, should benefit all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, or education. Currently, Nigeria's revenue-sharing formula allocates 52.68% to the federal government, 26.72% to state governments, 20.60% to local governments, and 13% to oil-producing states (Onuigbo and Innocent, 2015, p.14). However, the reality is that only a select few in power enjoy the nation's wealth. Despite some progress since 1999, Nigeria still grapples with deep-rooted structural issues, institutional weaknesses, and performance problems that threaten its democracy and national unity (Dawood, 2015, p. 60). Many years after gaining independence, the nation has failed to ensure the well-being of its citizens, leading to inequality, injustice, poor governance, poverty, corruption, unemployment, and rising crime rates.

Nigeria's current challenges are largely attributed to rampant corruption, and despite government and stakeholder efforts to address these issues, they persist and worsen. Theatre, as a reflection of its time, serves a vital role beyond entertainment by driving social change. Nigerian playwrights have harnessed theatre to address national concerns, viewing their work as a duty to society. They blend truth and fiction to fulfil a social responsibility, echoing Soyinka's belief in artists as the voice of their people (Osofisan, 1997, p.7).

Nigerian theatre artists and filmmakers passionately advocate for social change, portraying public sentiments and opposition fervently on stage and screen (Ogunleye, 2012, pp. 9, 10). They act as watchdogs for Nigerian society, representing its joys, needs, and aspirations while championing national integration. Utilizing popular mediums like theatre and film, artists effectively communicate diverse messages to the public, making these platforms crucial for fostering public understanding and involvement in nation-building (Ogazie and Odetade, 2017, p. 319).

Social problems

Social issues are the general factors that affect and harm the general public and include issues influencing the real world. These social issues impact numerous individuals inside a society. It is a typical issue we as a whole observe occurring in our society, and it has a method for influencing individuals' responses. A couple of instances of social issues are social injustice, poverty, joblessness, drug abuse, prostitution, anti-social behaviour, financial hardship, rape, early pregnancy and childbearing, female genital mutilation, sexual maltreatment, and others.

The primary cause of social issues is joblessness, which is also a social issue itself. Numerous industrial towns in

England were progressing admirably and blasting in the middle twentieth century due to their ship building and mining businesses. At the face when all enterprises were closed down during the 80s, the joblessness rate arrived at its most elevated point in English history. The lack of cash in these territories pulled in other social issues like criminality, greed, lack of respect for humanity, etc; subsequently, social and monetary advancement in these regions was severely influenced (Mark, 2020).

The term social issue is generally used to allude to social conditions that upset or harm society; injustice, poverty, wrongdoing, joblessness and numerous others. Conversely, the sociologist characterizes social issue contrastingly and adopt a different logical methodology. These methodologies in several bags called constructionist, characterize social issues as long as a procedure, rather than a kind of state (Eagleton, 1976). The social issues procedure starts with claim makers who make claims that a little condition should be seen a matter and that this issue should be understood in specific ways, and that it should be thought as similarly. The claim makers are non than the sociologists, who take a look at the anomalies in the general public, consider them to be social issues and attempt to see how they can be resolved.

BIOGRAPHY OF FEMI OSOFISAN

Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan, better known as Femi Osofisan, was born on the 16th of June 1946 in Erunwon, a village in the western region of Nigeria, specifically in Ogun State. His early education took place in Ife for elementary school and Government College, Ibadan, for his secondary education. Following his secondary schooling, he pursued higher education at the University of Ibadan. His academic journey continued with postgraduate studies at Sorbonne, Paris, before he eventually held faculty positions at the University of Ibadan, where he later retired as a full professor in 2011.

Femi Osofisan is a multifaceted Nigerian talent, known not only as an accomplished playwright but also as an author, critic, poet, editor, and pundit. His body of work is primarily centred around socially engaged plays that often incorporate elements of traditional African performance. Throughout his career, Osofisan has held various prestigious positions and received numerous accolades. One of his notable achievements is the 2006 Fonlon Nichols Award, presented annually to outstanding African writers for their excellence in creative writing and their contributions to the struggle for human rights.

Among his literary awards and recognitions are prizes from the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in both drama (1980) and poetry (1989). Furthermore, in 2004, he was honoured with the Nigerian National Order of Merit (NNOM), the highest academic distinction in the country. Femi Osofisan has also served as the head of the Pen Nigerian Centre and held the position of General Manager of the National Theatre in Lagos. He is married to Nike

Osofisan, the first Nigerian PhD holder in Computer Science, and they have four children.

Osofisan's prolific career spans various literary forms, including drama, prose, and poetry. His works frequently draw inspiration from myth, history, and cultural references, often reinterpreting them to address contemporary issues. He holds the distinction of being Nigeria's most prolific playwright, with over sixty plays to his name. Additionally, he has authored four prose works: *Ma'ami*, *Abigail*, *Pirates of Hurt*, and *Cordelia*.

As a Nigerian writer, Femi Osofisan is recognized for his incisive critique of cultural issues and his unflinching stance against political injustice. He skillfully incorporates elements of African traditional performances and surrealism into his works. One recurring theme in his oeuvre is the perennial conflict between good and evil. In essence, Osofisan is an educational writer whose works aim to provoke thought and inspire change in his society.

Some of his notable plays include *Kolera Kolej* (1975), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (1978), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), *Morountodun* (1982), *Midnight Hotel* (1986), *Another Raft* (1988), *Birthdays Are Not For Dying* (1990), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991), *Twingle-Twangle A-Twynning Tayle* (1992), *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (1999), *Women of Owu* (2006), and many others.

SYNOPSIS OF ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS

Once Upon Four Robber features an intricately woven group of people who are bound together by their shared occupation as armed robbers. The story revolves around four robbers whose leader has been executed by soldiers one early morning, right in the middle of a bustling marketplace. This execution is a result of the law that mandates punishment for anyone caught in the act of robbery. The play also includes a storyteller who begins by presenting a tale about the cunning tortoise, accompanied by a traditional melody, before delving into the main narrative involving the four robbers. The storyteller assumes the role of the play's narrator, at least until an opening sequence where the other actors seize control of the storytelling. They dictate the direction of the play by deciding who they want the storyteller to become—a Muslim Priest, for instance. They then dress him appropriately, complete with props like a prayer mat, beads, and a kettle of water.

The remaining robbers—Angola, Major, Hassan, and Alhaji—find themselves contemplating a future without their leader, especially with most of their associates having been executed and the armed robbery decree severely limiting their means of livelihood. In this state of discontent and confusion brought about by their leader's murder and the restrictions imposed by the armed robbery decree, they encounter Aafa, who offers them a magical solution that would allow them to continue their robberies without getting caught. However, this solution comes with a

condition: they must adhere to the charm's rule, which involves targeting only the wealthy and avoiding attacks on public places.

During their second mission, they are apprehended and face impending execution in accordance with the law. Just before their execution, they break into song, causing chaos at the execution site. With their deaths and those of the other nine gang members, the brotherhood quickly falls apart.

The playwright and social justice in *Once Upon Four Robbers*

Femi Osofisan's play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, is a reaction to the declaration proclaimed by General Gowon's administration that made armed robbery deserving of public execution in Nigeria during the 70s (1989, p.5). Osofisan composed the work to contribute to the discussion on the public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria. He brings up the viability of death punishment as a measure to manage the recalcitrant danger of armed robbery in Nigeria and criticizes the flaw of the death punishment decree which will always be powerless to check the inescapability of armed robbery in society until the major factors are looked into. He is likewise worried about the causes of armed robbery instead of its outcomes on society. Furthermore, he addresses the hidden financial variables in control of the predominance of armed robbery in society, for example, eagerness, joblessness, hunger, neediness, defilement, foul play, misappropriation of open assets, and crazy pay structure, among others. He reacts to the contemporary social issue of armed robbery and the collapse of government to provide a believable solution. He demonstrates the outline of the state as a terrorist organisation which comes up short on the moral ability to kill armed robbery through death punishment without first furnishing its citizens with the fundamental foundation. The state security apparatus is incapable of putting the looters out, while capital punishment order just compounds the circumstance (Adeyemi 2011, p.116).

The play analyses the moral and lawful meanings of 'Robbery' in the more extensive sense and the consequences of the Armed Robbery and Firearms Decree 47 of 1970 on the public psyche, as one of the significant results of the Nigerian Civil War was robbery, which became common and fierce. In the words of Osofisan, during the 1970s, sentenced armed robbers were executed by a military killing squad, and individuals from the public were invited to observe the incident at the Lagos bar beach and other public places, for example, the central market or the military terminating range. These consistent events at the Lagos bar beach became known as the Bar Beach Show (1989, p.5). There was an open condemnation of the executions, and scholars like Osofisan reacted by showing an ethical argument against the practice in their works.

At the height of public trials and executions of armed robbers in Nigeria, there were cases when looters were indicated not exclusively to be related to cops or military men, but to have weapons 'acquired' from government stores (1980, p.61). A 1980 case involved one Lawrence Anini, who became famous for murdering nine cops in revenge for the betrayal of his group by certain police officers who were members of his robbery gang in Benin City, Nigeria. He was captured in December 1986, and executed in March 1987 (Adeyemi, 2011, p.17). The play was composed somewhere in the range between 1976 and 1978, and he directed the first performance of this play at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, in March 1979 (Adeyemi, 2011, p.1). The production incorporates Yoruba songs and incantations, and a glossary gives an English interpretation as a guide for different directors to substitute fitting dirges.

The sub-text to the play depends on Yoruba culture and reaction to capture viewers and put off all feelings that may arise among the audience members. The play is organized into a prologue, parts one to three, an interlude, an epilogue, and an opening glee that is like the classical theatrical prologue wherein an entrance melody or chant often precedes the play. The play takes the form of the Yoruba story-telling tradition and narrative technique. The Yoruba narrating custom features Ijapa, the tortoise as a trickster in many stories. The specific story that Osofisan gets his play from, rotates around the tortoise utilizing his tricks to steal from his fellow animals.

Once supposedly, there was starvation and dry season on the earth. All the animals consented to dig a well to give water, yet the tortoise would not go along with them. For his unconcerned attitude, the animals restricted him from drawing water from the well, and when they completed the process of digging, they posted a guard to secure the region. Around nighttime, the tortoise, in disguise, came singing and dancing. The watchman fled and the tortoise drew as much water as he could. He kept taking water from the well until the animals built a wooden figure and coated it with gum glue, which obviously, could not flee from the tortoise. Amazed at the insolence of the gum-man, the tortoise slapped and kicked the stature, and got sucked. In the morning, the other animals saw that the beast was none other than the tortoise and they dealt with him. After the tale of the tortoise, he sings about four robbers whose leader has been executed and whom he wants to help. As the tune accumulates force, the actors inside the crowd start to assemble in front of an audience (Osofisan, 1980, p.1).

The story-teller fills in as the narrator of the play until in the opening, the other actors remove the narrative power from him. They decide the way of the play by picking who they need him to be, an Islamic cleric, and afterwards clothe him in a suitable outfit, complete with props, for example, a praying mat, beads and a kettle of water. The story with Aafa uncovers that the robbers are all result of the civil war. The three male robbers are ex-soldiers and

Alhaja was an 'attack dealer' during the civil war (i.e. one of the ladies who engaged in business by crossing the bleeding edges, purchasing and selling to both sides of the conflict).

The play includes an intently knit gathering of people bound as one by the common occupation of armed robbery. It centres on four thieves: Alhaja, Hassan, Angola, and Major. It is early morning in the marketplace, the robbers have just watched the Bar Beach Show. Where their leader Alani, Alhaja's husband was slaughtered through public execution by soldiers. Alhaja cries sharply over the fall of her husband, Alani. She sings a slow dirge for her late husband, as the robbers pledge to revenge. They contemplate a future without their leader, with a large portion of their associates slaughtered, and the armed robbery decree confining their work. It appears as though all hope is lost. Major says: 'It is done, wrapped up. We've arrived at the end of the road (Osofisan, 1980 p.7). The robbers argue about the next line of action. Major feels it is the ideal time for them to change and begin another life, yet Hassan disagrees, with the energy to fight as far as possible. Major says, 'Hold it Alhaja... The party is finished, and it will be each man for himself starting now and into the foreseeable future... Face reality man! As far back as this new order on armed robbery, we've been done. You can just walk that far. 'At some point or another, the blade cuts in' (Osofisan, 1980 p.8). Hassan is reluctant to simply leave and give up as he answers, 'we are left. We'll battle them' (1980, p.8). There is by all accounts an absence of leadership which undermines the solidarity of the gang. Major thinks it is time to get some distance from looting and killing individuals, however, Hassan sees their activities because of a general public where certain individuals at the top rule mercilessly, without pondering the welfare of the larger part. In the following discussion, the issue of recognizing who is the victim ends up convoluted. Osofisan introduces questions in the audience's mind and makes them show sympathy for the robbers in view of what they have experienced. The group of spectators is constrained to ponder whether the looters steal because it is hunger that drives them to or whether they are straightforward as they just take from the rich, and to be sure whether they have been rebuffed enough for their wrongdoings by the death of their companions.

While the robbers quarrel over what to do next, Aafa, a Muslim cleric shows up and starts to pray. The hoodlums choose to ransack him however cannot, and he puts Angola and Hassan under a spell. In the long run, he releases them and chooses to assist them with a magic formula which they are to utilize just three times. To get the magic, they should vow not to rob poor people, not to slaughter and to burglarize just public places, orders to which the looters from the start object to. In the long run, they choose to utilize the magic formula that Aafa offered them to loot market women of their products. Aafa draws out the paraphernalia of Aafa and divines for the robbers, before teaching them the magic formula that will make

them rich. On their robbery strikes, they say a couple of words of incantations, start singing and the women all dance away leaving their merchandise, which the looters immediately packed. This causes an economic catastrophe that shuts the market for about fourteen days. It likewise creates a dilemma for the robbers, on the best way to dispose of the merchandise. The next time, they choose to hold up until the closure of the market day and loot the women of cash. The ladies looked for the security of the soldiers however they fell under a similar spell of the magic again just as the soldiers.

On this second raid, Major deceives the gang and is gotten. As Major attempts to deceive the other robbers, the soldiers who danced away, return and indulge the robbers in a shootout. In the shootout, the soldiers wound Major before capturing him while the others ran away. Upon the arrival of his execution, the robbers choose to join together and save Major. As the story unfolds to a point of stalemate, Aafa approaches and requests that the crowd decide the fate of the armed robbers. Like the tortoise in the Yoruba folktales, or like Esu the messenger god who shows up all over and makes the market his home, Aafa encapsulates varying characters. He is a Muslim evangelist, a 'babalawo' and a decent legitimate man yet, he excuses robbery and supports it. Osofisan rejects the ambiguity of Aafa's character with a proverb: If just one path led to the stream, what number of women would fill their pots? In Aafa, Osofisan exposes the degree to which the characters, who are representatives of the bigger society, will go far.

An individual examining the play may misunderstand the play to appreciate wrongdoing especially armed robbery, and maybe may feel that the dramatist bolsters the wrongdoing of armed robbery. The play does not mean to help a social bad habit like armed robbery, yet it gives us a socialistic perspective on our society where culprits are the results of a degenerate society. He clarifies in the play that these are not just abhorrent men after all! Shaken by the unfurling contention, the audience starts to recognize and acknowledge the robbers as humans such as themselves not just as negative types. Osofisan is disappointed with the wanton homicide of armed robbers yet wants us to have a rethink about the entire ghetto issue, or there will be consequences, robbery and violence will keep on reigning in society. He utilizes this play to indulge the general public to take a look at: the crazy salary structures, the lowest pay permitted by law, the squalid spending habits of our terrible 'contractors', land speculators, middlemen of assorted types, importers, exporters slums and ghettos, congested medical centres, crowded schools, unimaginable markets, multiplication of motor cars, insurance agencies, stores, chemist shops, boutiques, discotheques, and so on (2007, p.VIII). He is persuaded that unless the government takes a look at all these, the issue of armed robbery will continue unabated in society (2007, p.166).

Indeed, even the looters in the play identified the

reasons why they rob innocent citizens. Major says: 'Forgive us. It is hunger that drives us' (Osofisan, 1980, p.14). Hassan then again says: 'We are damned, my brother... What else do they recount but the unending stories of the weak against the strong...?' It is a past filled with repeated defeat, mistreatment, of nothing improving (Osofisan, 1998, p.60). The question along these lines is not whether armed robbers ought to be shot or not, yet that death penalty is not the answer to the hazard of armed robbery in society (Osofisan, 2007, p.120). Osofisan urges the group of spectators to have a profound and enraged thought about everything. He wants the government to address the fundamental needs of the poor in society and see to the equitable circulation of the country's resources. The play investigates the inordinate connections that exist between the two classes of society, and how it has driven some set of individuals into the world of negativity. This has created a society loaded with corrupt authorities and a selfish ruling class, bringing about a lack of work and the battle for survival. While the proletariats, similar to the armed robbers are slaughtered through public execution, the bigwigs of the society who steal riches from the country's purse, are not put forward for public execution. He additionally demonstrates to us the frailties of our societies and helps us understand that the serious issues of contemporary Africa go past the wrongdoings of poor people, but lie firmly in the degenerate activities of the rich. He accepts that the machinery of persecution in human society is made by man and must be destroyed by man also.

Femi Osofisan (1980, p.8) transforms his audience into participants in a debate on their views about armed robbery. In the program notes to the text, he highlights the inconsistencies in society and states clearly his vision in the play that:

The phenomenon of armed robbery appears to me a well-suited metaphor for our age yet its existence outside the stage is unmistakably increasingly fierce, without any sentimentalism. With every one of our decree orders, we have not succeeded in arresting this particular aspect of the violence of the age rather the problem has become intractable, worsening as time passes. The legalized butchering of the erring individuals of our society for at all offense, will unquestionably not carry the rebuilding of our society to its primordial sanity. For armed robberies, on the scale we are seeing, are the result of our unjust and inconsistent society. I trust this play changes our frame of mind from passive acknowledgement or sterile indignation into a progressively powerful, incensed assurance to stand up to ourselves and our lives, else the four robbers will keep on ruling our streets (Osofisan, 1980, p.8).

Femi Osofisan propels the argument that it is really everyone who is criminal in intent and act, and who in this line should be remembered for the punishment of a society that is just. In essence, if the need is seen for the bad ones (the robbers) to be killed in order to instil sanity in society, then everyone in the society should be looked into as the 'lure of profit' causes great anguish for the market women, the robbers and other members of the society. It led the robbers to robbery, to be like the corrupt politicians they envy, as revealed by Major in the play (1980, p. 52). He suggests that there is no rationale behind executing armed robbers while neglecting fraudulent government workers, corrupt law officials, politicians and profiteers. Rather, a social environment that will make criminality unattractive, must be incited. He further expresses the phenomenon of corruption installed in the society in such a manner that the soldiers deal with the situation. They recuperate the stolen cash however keep it for themselves, with the sergeant assuming responsibility for distribution. The sergeant says, "As far as we know, the robbers fled with the cash. We did not discover anything. Let us meet later tonight at my brother's house".

Section three of the play begins with soldiers building a stage on which the convicted robbers will be executed. Alhaja lures the officers away with cash, unlawful gin, and the guarantee of sexual favours to discharge Major from jail. The endeavour is fruitless. The robbers at that point utilize the remaining magic to create a stalemate, but not before bringing up the moral question about public execution. Everyone on stage freezes, and at that point, the robbers start singing. The play finishes on a debate and stalemate, as the other robbers led by Angola and with the utilization of incantations, conflict with the soldiers at the execution ground as the stage vibrates with the conflicting orders of soldiers and robbers. In that disarray, everything all of a sudden goes to a stop (Osofisan, 1980, p.71).

The group of spectators who have been urged to be full participants in the unfurling drama by singing along with the storyteller, and reacting to his questions have to decide the result of the play. The robber is either freed or executed according to an audience vote. Aafa as the storyteller moderates the debate, ensuring there is a full discussion, not only a gimmick. Whichever decision the group of spectators comes to, the ending is negative. In the event that the robbers win, lawlessness and anarchy rule, while a triumph for the soldiers points to an unending obscurity and the fear of military rule. Femi Osofisan in this play likewise brings up some significant questions. He asks to what extent an individual can endure injury before it influences his conscience and adjusts to the torment. The robbers feel denied as a result of the absence of chances to have a nice job. They see modestly paid employment with abhor and jokingly sing to Aafa that they are not idiotic enough to be misused when the individuals who are privileged utilize their positions to profit their pockets through corruption and voracity. The market women

appear to have a similar view. They sing to uncover their own corruptibility and to express the fact that they are ready to go to make benefits, by whatever methods available, insatiably cheating and storing clients. Osofisan (1980, p.16) uncovers this part of the frame of mind of the market ladies through the song of the market: "The work of benefit carried us to this world... The lure of benefit has vanquished our spirits and transformed us into savages... We make inflation and hoard away... So we can leave the market every day rolling in riches". Hassan further braces the possibility of human flesh consumption where he says, "The world is a market; we come to butcher each other and sell the parts... Ask these ladies. They will slash each other to bits at the jingle of coins" (Osofisan, 1980, p.16). This lure of benefit causes extraordinary anguish for the market ladies, the robbers and the other members of the society. It drove the four robbers into theft, causing them to imitate the degenerate politicians they envy. Osofisan also explores the theme of realism, a perspective prevalent among many Nigerians, through the following discourse: "the robbers want to be bosses; they do not wish to serve under anyone or bear social responsibility" (1980, p.17). The market women enumerate a list of reasons and motivations to justify their pursuit of increased profit, which includes constant harassment by robbers, high taxation, school fees, family obligations, and bribes paid to the Cost Control Officer and soldiers for protection. However, in reality, they also aspire to enrich themselves, as only then will they have the ability to influence policies and laws to their advantage.

Osofisan contends that these four robbers are products of an unjust society where the wealth of the land is distributed unfairly. The oppressors continue to amass wealth, while the oppressed become increasingly impoverished. The poor, like the rich, are also members of the same society and share similar needs; perhaps the only distinction between them is the lack of opportunities. They, too, have legitimate needs. In the face of this injustice, should they remain silent and resign themselves to their fate?"

Conclusion

The playwright, as an integral member of the global community, has a significant role to fulfil in seeking various forms of harmony and justice within the international society. In a place fraught with inconsistencies, corruption, and injustice prevalent in nearly every aspect of life, the playwright's task is undeniably crucial. Emerging from a society with similar challenges, the dramatist generally employs their efforts to portray and unveil the economic, socio-political, cultural, and even religious activities commonplace in the wider public sphere. Serving as a social observer and investigator, their substantial duty and commitment to their society involve uncovering social difficulties and their underlying causes, irrespective of whether these causes stem from individuals or factors

hindering a fair, equal, and free society.

The research uncovers the moral ambiguity surrounding the government-sponsored military execution of the leader of an armed robbery gang in Femi Osofisan's play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*. It argues that this action lacks justification, as these individuals turned to a life of crime due to the government's failure to provide opportunities for the youth. This raises questions about the government's legitimacy in administering justice while perpetuating conditions of injustice. In response, the study recommends that in societies plagued by social injustice, playwrights must conscientiously fulfil their role as social commentators, working towards positive change for the common good. It emphasizes that playwrights should not compromise their societal responsibilities but rather advocate for constructive reforms and offer solutions to prevailing societal challenges. This can only be accomplished when writers fully acknowledge their roles as agents of change in society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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