

DRAMA AND SOCIAL CHANGE: OSOFISAN'S HUMANISTIC APPROACH IN ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the concept of drama as an instrument of social re-ordering and of Osofisan's belief in its use to assert the equal humanity of all men. In Once upon Four Robbers, Osofisan argues that armed robbery is a societal creation and as such demands a societal solution and not recourse to divine intervention. The paper investigates the unusual theme and characterisation, harsh and vitriolic use of language and tone as employed by Osofisan in this play. It concludes with the playwright's artistic mediation of this social experience and his proffered solution to the social menace constituted by armed robbery. Change is at the centre of this discourse. The play becomes a veritable weapon in Osofisan's hand to call for change in society. Whether he succeeds or not in this bid is what is examined in this paper.

Introduction

This paper is an investigation of the notion of art as a weapon of social engineering. Writers are known to be very sensitive and conscious of the dynamics of the society and have employed their works as a means of

changing the society towards a more just and equitable system of things. It is in this direction that we explore Osofisan's *Once upon four Robbers*.

Change is seen in common parlance as the only constant phenomenon in life. It is a movement from one state to another and in a positive sense; it involves growth from bad to good. It comes about either in a subtle, evolutionary or dramatic and revolutionary manner. The need for change is made more insistent in a severe situation of grave corruption, bad government and moral ineptitude. In Africa in general, tyranny, socio-economic malaise and "sit-tight" leaders have become recurrent features of the political landscape. Rampant poverty, inflation in the midst of plenty, and unrest characterise social life in Nigeria, in particular.

In such a situation, writers become the voice of the people, its seers, and its critics and usually, they are on the side of the poor masses calling for transformation. Osofisan falls within this group of writers. In "*After the Wasted Breed...*" (Osofisan 2001) he says:

... my relentless determination in a number of my works is to expose the real culprits in our society, to unmask the true authors of our anguish, and to identify those I believe should be the targets of our anger (Osofisan 2001:18)

He continues in the same manner:

My hope is that by so doing through this provocation and unsettling of discourse, I can succeed in re-empowering our people, in shocking them out of lethargy or despair, out of hopelessness. (Osofisan 2001:22)

Such is the posture of active resistance engaged by Osofisan in his plays. He takes on the toga of revolutionary combativeness and he is optimistic that with revolution, change is possible. This is also the position of Chris Dunton, Saint Gbilekaa and Harry Garuba who assert that Osofisan is

strident in his call for change of any oppressive system. Drama becomes the site on which this social change is preached. It is the most comprehensive of all art forms and because of its immediacy, it is a veritable tool for mass mobilisation. Affirming this view, Abiola Irele (1995) states:

Of the various art forms that have flourished in the especially fertile atmosphere in which cultural production has proceeded in Nigeria, drama has been, and remains, the most vibrant. More than any other form, drama, both in its literary/textual embodiments and as it manifests itself or inheres in other performance modes in the country, has exhibited most distinctly the dynamic interplay between the various factors that animate the manifold texture of life in contemporary Nigeria. (Irele 1995: IX)

Once Upon Four Robbers: A Tale For Change

The basis of *Once upon Four Robbers* is the topical issue of the execution of armed robbers in Nigeria by the military government of General Yakubu Gowon. A decree was promulgated that all arrested armed robbers, if found guilty were to face the firing squad. Olu Obafemi (1996) argues that

Armed robbery is a major after-effect of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, when arms got into the hands of other than those of the military and have been used to commit armed robbery. A decree promulgated by the military administration to curb the rate of armed robbery by making robbers face deaths by firing squad has made them more ruthless and more scientific in their operation. (Obafemi 1996:193)

Osofisan, however, problematises the issue and shows armed robbers as human beings capable of feelings like other people in the society, and not phantoms as the government would have the populace believe. He reveals that this group is a product of a corrupt, inhuman and uncaring society. It

is in this respect that we see the play as subversive occasioned by the writer's anger and call for change. Osofisan believes that "no public executions will solve the potency of oppression." (Programme Notes to the first production of the play, iii)

There is therefore a subversion of public morality in Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers*. His anger at society is cool and controlled as he reveals armed robbers making useful points towards the development of the society. The play is in itself "an apt metaphor for our age". The playwright's anger with a corrupt and oppressive system that cannot provide for its people finds expression in the robbers' argument and "bragging". Aafa advises them to give up robbery and their response is a revelation of the kind of society they live in. Major, one of the robbers, replies: "Forgive us, it's hunger that drives us" (Osofisan, 1982: 20). The robbers claim that poverty is the reason for their dabbling into armed robbery.

Thus, Osofisan explores the Robin Hood Phenomenon. Robin Hood in the English legend re-distributes wealth by stealing from the rich to give to the poor and needy. In like manner, the four robbers insist that they only steal from the rich (Osofisan, 1982, 21). To them, the rich class has more than enough while the masses live in abject poverty, and their job is to assist in re-distributing wealth.

Again, the play opens with a recount of the robbers' past exploits as they rob, kill, maim, and render people desolate. They are seen as despicable members of the society. Together, they are the cause of tears and death in many homes. Osofisan subverts these assumptions and shows them as a creation of the society. Perhaps, what the playwright seems to say is that robbers will continue to exist as long as some people in the community are very rich while others live in dire poverty; that there will be robbers as long as "too many people ride their cars along sore-ridden backs of the poor" (Programme Notes). And that, no matter how many robbers are

tied to the stake at the Bar Beach, "it is obvious that as long as a single daring nocturnal trip with a gun or machete can yield the equivalent of a man's annual income, we shall continue to manufacture our own potential assassins" (Programme Notes). These robbers are merely rebelling and resisting the effects of a class society where some are very rich while others live on the crumbs from the rich man's table. Like Robin Hood, the robbers justify their action: "we are honest. We steal only from the rich". (Osofisan, 1982:21)

In spite of the danger involved in armed robbery, the robbers see it as the only way out of their condition. They proudly state they could not be housemaids, part-time mistresses or washer-men for the rich class. According to Hassan, "All I wanted is the right to work, but everywhere, they only wanted slaves" (Osofisan, 1982: 90). Given the programme Notes stated above, Osofisan's sympathies lie with the robbers. He is seen as playing the devil's advocate. He however does not support the evil but calls on the audience to understand the robbers' position and do something about the corrupt system that breeds armed robbery.

The theme of class war is obvious in the play and to use Osofisan's image, the people are polarised into which side of the street they belong. On one side is the rich and powerful that are seen as the "winners". On the other side are the dregs of the society, the robbers, the struggling market women and the poor soldiers. This last group represents "the race victims are made of". The sharp division is created by the prevailing socio-political situation in the country. Still, in the Programme Notes, Osofisan says (Osofisan 1982: iii):

Take a look at our society structures, at the minimum wage, 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', middlemen of all sorts, importers, exporters, etc. or take a look at our sprawling slums

and ghettos, our congested hospitals and crowded schools, our impossible markets ... and then take another look at the fast proliferation of motor cars. The callous contradiction of our oil doomed fantasies of rapid modernisation. (Osofisan 1982, Programme Notes iii)

Based on the above, the anger of the robbers is apparent just as that of the playwright with a society that cannot take care of its own. This anger seems to be justified; anger that is geared towards change. The robbers react sharply to the unjust conditions in the society. Their sole form of response is crime. Although, this anger is futile in the face of superior government forces, the robbers are however, united against the society and especially against the rich.

Conjoined to this is the theme of oppression. The issue is exemplified in Hassan's speech where he makes a catalogue of the different forms of oppression a man is subjected to from parent, teacher, pastor and society:

... Listen, Ahmed. Teacher flogged us at the writing desk – remember his Tuesday specials, when he always came dressed in red, Reverend flogged us with divine curses at the pulpit, the light glinting on his mango cheeks like Christmas lantern – and poor mama. She laid it to us routinely behind the locked door, her work-hardened palm stinging sharper than whips but for what? So that afterwards the grown man can crawl the street from month to month on his belly, begging for work. (Osofisan 1982: 90-91)

It is against this background that the robbers call for a change of situation. There should be a demarcation between oppression and discipline. Hassan misinterprets modes of socialisation process for oppression because for him, parental wickedness is a form of oppression.

A fundamental theme in most of Osofisan's plays is collectivism or what Awodiya refers to as "Collaboration". This idea is related to the central theme of change. For the anger of the oppressed to be effective, according to Osofisan, they need to unite and fight together. These robbers are united by hunger coupled with determination and courage, to achieve their aim. They are united by their common grievances against the society, especially the rich. In spite of Major's betrayal, we note the unity that they exhibit at the final scene in order to save him. Underlying the overtly angry stance and clamour for change is what seems to be a conscious effort at exploring the issue of love, kindness and genuine fellow feeling. Awodiya (1995: 110) puts this idea succinctly: "Osofisan admonishes individuals to be kind and compassionate with each other in order to build a virile, united and progressive society". This issue goes to show that Osofisan's anger with societal hypocrisy and ills is not a malicious one. It is his love for the society. It is his call for change. Alhaja, a robber, who, however, has the milk of human kindness and shows compassion, enjoins the other robbers to learn to show love by forgiving a traitor like Major (Osofisan 1982: 6).

One issue observed in this play is the subversion of religion. The Aafa who is a Moslem removes his garb to reveal the traditional Ifa amulets with which he magically helps the robbers. Osofisan's dabble into religion is not to attack any type of religion but to expose its limitations. Religion has been used to serve the purpose of a group; usually, those in power while it remains the "opium of the poor". As revealed in this play, Osofisan's belief is that social problems are man-made and their solutions should equally be man-made without recourse to extra-human powers. (Awodiya 1995: 141).

Together, the robbers assault the Aafa but only as a joke. The Aafa is intrigued by their joke and decides to help them on three conditions: that they never rob the poor, that they do not choose their victims among solitary women and that they must never take human life. Each of them is

given a formula and a warning that they must act together in order to get a “bountiful harvest”. Their second attempt at armed robbery brings out the traitor in Major. He is arrested by the Police. Again, while the others were grumbling, Alhaja persuades them to rescue Major from the prison.

Osofisan’s characters in this play are bold, daring, fire-eaters who confront circumstances with both physical and verbal anger. They are rebellious and clamour for a change of the injustices in society. The story of the robbers is one of defiance. They defy all odds to achieve a change of their situation. The song the robbers sing is that of change. They are determined in their struggle against exploitation and oppression. Osofisan has offered them hope of freedom as they decide, plan and take action against injustice. By stealing, Major intends to change his life. He says:

This is money! Money! A new life. No more scurrying in the smell of back streets. A house the size of a palace! The law tamed with my bank account! And children! Listen, I am going to be a daddy! I’ll own the main streets, six, no ... ten Mercedes, the neon lights, the supermarkets. (Osofisan 1982: 52)

This is Major’s hope of escaping the back-streets. By stealing, he intends to change his circumstance in life even if it is through corrupt means. The society will honour the rich without giving a thought to the source of the money.

Osofisan’s attitude to change in *Once upon Four Robbers* is couched in a parable. The play is constructed on a parable and especially on the Yoruba traditional theatre aesthetics. It is this parable that hides the intensity of his anger over the issue. It begins on a moonlit stage with a story-teller and audience as participants:

(Light begins to fall off in the auditorium, gradually leaving behind a pool of light which should be suggestive of moonlight. Commanding this spotlight is the STORY TELLER.... He shouts the traditional introductory formula: ALOO! As usual everybody replies AAALO!) (Osofisan 1982: 1).

The story-teller starts a song – the song about the nefarious activities of armed robbers and as he does this, the musicians and the actors emerge from among the audience. This is suggestive of the fact that the armed robbers are from within our society. All this happens in the Prologue.

In Part 1, the actors move on stage, recognise one another and pick up their costume and dress up in the presence of the audience. Many critics like Olu Obafemi have referred to this act as one of the Brechtian theatre aesthetics. Brecht's Alienation Effect or 'Verfremdungseffekt' may have been adopted here. Its purpose is to remove the illusion on stage and also to "implant into the actors" minds that they are not to immerse their personality in the role they play" (Obafemi 1996: 198).

(Already the actors and the musicians have gathered on the stage evidently all in a light mood, as they recognise one another and exchange warm greetings. Then discovering the costumes, they begin to pick and choose, and then to dress up, gradually establishing the various roles they will be playing....) (Osofisan 1982: 3)

Thus, the audience becomes aware from the beginning that what they see on stage is only a play which demands that they apply their reasoning faculty. Another aesthetic effect is the use of the story-teller who also becomes an actor/character in the play – the Aafa. We must realise that despite the Brechtian label given to these forms, they are basically part of the traditional story-telling techniques in Africa. The fusion of these forms

with the modern play techniques towards a dialectical purpose is what Olu Obafemi (1986) has referred to as “revolutionary aesthetics” but which we prefer to call “aesthetics of change” since the basic passion which informs or shapes Osofisan’s writing is “anger” directed at change. Obafemi in his book, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre* contends that such traditional forms are not new to the Nigerian theatre as they have been employed by J.P. Clark and Kola Ogunmola in their plays. Osofisan’s use is different because of its subversive intention. Osofisan “uses the technique as a metaphor for a contemporary subject” (Osofisan 1996:195) not the transmutation of an old theme. Thus, we encounter in the prologue, the narrator who tells us a story not of the past but of the present. The song of the story-teller goes thus:

Itan mi dori o dori
O dori o dori
Dori Olosa merin
Danodanon akoni ni won
Ajijofe apanilekun
Awodi jeun epe
Arinko soledahoro
Ron ni sorun apapandodo (Osofisan 1982 : 1)

Translated in the glossary as:

An ancient tale I will tell you
Tale ancient and modern
A tale of four armed robbers
Dangerous highway men
Freebooters, source of tears
Like kites, eaters of accursed sacrifice
Visitors who leave the house desolate
Dispatchers of lives to heaven.... (Osofisan 1982: 70)

This song aptly encapsulates the theme of the play and at the same time recounts the praise-names (Oriki) of the robbers. Such names as “Ajijiofe” (freebooters), “Awodi jeun epe” (Like kites, eaters of accursed sacrifice) are apt metaphors describing the danger and the evil armed robbers are to society. Again the play is replete with songs like the songs of Aafa as interlude (Osofisan 1982: 34) and the “Song of the Market” (Osofisan 1982:45-6) especially, which shows the other side of the women as traders “... the lure of profit has conquered our souls” The songs are not just for entertainment but also serve as an indictment of their activities.

The use of songs and other elements of Brechtian aesthetics mentioned earlier, points to the need for change. In other words, their purpose is to create awareness in the audience. The audience is intellectually aware to question the action on stage. Through them, the playwright is able to show his disenchantment with the situation while the songs aid the interpretation of the dramatic action. Even the Aafa's magic given to the robbers is a song which makes the hearers dance and sleep. The songs especially give the play the sense of total theatre.

Once upon Four Robbers is divided into three parts with a Prologue, Interlude and an Epilogue. The prologue establishes the play as a tale with a modern content while part One introduces us to robbers as they mourn the death of their leader who has just been shot at the Bar beach. It is the death of their leader that hardens the robbers the more. They become more determined and daring in their nefarious activities, knowing full well that the Bar beach is the ultimate end. The robbers are introduced to the Aafa who decides to help them in their ‘trade’ on certain conditions. They are given a ‘song’ to aid their robbing activities without recourse to murder. Part Two opens with the concerted effort of the Sergeant and his group attempting to combat the menace of armed robbery. Part Three reveals Alhaja's attempt to save the captured Major and the others coming together to rescue him. The Epilogue sees Aafa back on stage as he tries to resolve

the “stalemate”. As usual with Osofisan, he provides alternative endings to the play. At the end, Aafa becomes the narrator who collects opinions from the audience on whether the robbers should be set free or shot. In other words, the audience gets to decide how the play should end. The ending of the play like its beginning is done in pantomime.

The language of the robbers is harsh, full of invectives and verbal abuse. A few instances will be pointed out:

Major: The Only rubbish I know is you standing there, you bundle of Guinea-worm. (Osofisan 1982: 7)

Angola: Let me mangle the foul-mouthed coward (Osofisan 1982: 7)

Angola: Listen to him. It's disgusting! What are you if not a corpse? Tell me. You were born in the slum you didn't know you were a corpse? Since you burst out from the womb, all covered in slime, you've always been a corpse. You fed on worms and left-overs, your body nude like a carcass in the government mortuary, elbowing your way among other corpses. And the stink is all over you like a flooded cemetery in Lagos (Osofisan 1982: 10)

Proverbs are also used in support of the change which the playwright suggests. A good example is when Major appropriates the stolen money by force:

Yes? And now what? Treachery, as Hassan said? (Laughs)
You are all little men. Like me. Our Leader, your husband Alhaja, he was a great man. But his death taught you nothing. Nothing! *When the man walking in front stumbles into a pit. What should those behind do? Loyalty? Affection? Should they because of these passions follow him into the pit? The grasscutter of the forest what must he do to claim the*

elephants legend? Dress himself in ivory tusks? Listen, we were all brought up in church and what did you learn there, apart from how to break the Ten Commandments? There was a Messiah, once, and was enough for all centuries! One great monumental mistake and nobody since has been in any hurry to repeat it. They crawl to the cross, they fall on their faces, wail and moan, but no worshipper asks to mount it and leave his life there. No! The nails and blood, the crown of thorns, all is a charade, kept for tourist value and the ritual of house-cleaning. Afterwards are the buntings and the picnics to affirm the reality of living, of survival. And its privilege, living. That's what the leader's death says to us if you will clean your ears. Every man for himself. And all the rest: 'rob the rich and feed the poor'. They're all part of the furniture. You hear! Each man for himself! (Osofisan 1982: 51-2 Emphasis mine.)

We have quoted this speech at length to show the venom emitted from Major's mouth. He is angry with the others who want to continue the trade without learning anything from the leader's death. The italicised proverbs are illustrative of these.

The proverbs that are used in the play are those that enhance the anger of the characters. During the robbers' bickering after the death of their leader, Major says: "Raise your voice now. Other people are here to save you from harm. *The dog boasts in town, but everybody knows the tiger is in the bush*" (Osofisan 1982: 8). In other words, Angola is the dog boasting while he is the more powerful tiger.

Aafa, too, uses proverbs to educate the robbers that he has powers over them:

(Looking at them) The bat has no eyes, but it roams with the ease in the dark. They think chameleon is a dandy but if he

were to talk what strategies of dissimulation he'd teach our cleverest spies (Osofisan 1982:17)

These are some of the Proverbs used in the play, and in the hand of Osofisan, proverbs become an indirect instrument to convey the idea of change.

A careful analysis of the sentence structure used by the writer reveals that declarative and exclamatory sentences are often used. They are the types to record the playwright's observation of the situation and shock the audience. An example is Major's speech:

For ever! We are the race victims are made of! We dream,
we hug the gutters till we're plastered with slime. Then we
begin to believe that slime is the only reality. We built it into a
cult ... and others continue to lap the cream of the land.
(Osofisan 1982: 53)

When the declarative sentence is used as a statement with the exclamatory, it has a directness and clarity which enhances comprehension. The anger in such statements is overt and imagistic as the grim situation of the poor is made even more real as against those who "lap the cream of the land". The imagery used in this speech is poignant and fascinating: "... we hug the gutters till we're plastered with slime. Then we begin to believe that slime is the only reality" 'Slime' as used here refers to poverty. On the same page, Major says: "... the other side are winners." This metaphor refers to the rich class and those in power.

Significantly, when Major forcefully appropriates the stolen money he declares that "... I have crossed to the other side of the street." (Osofisan, 1982: 53) He believes he is now a member of the rich class. By the statement, Osofisan seems to suggest that there exists a wide gap between

This same image is continued on page 93 in Sergeant's speech to his brother, Hassan, the armed robber:

I did not choose it to be so.... Blood is an accident. It's only our beliefs that bind us together, or rip us apart. *Hassan and I are on opposite sides of the street.* (Osofisan 1982: 93).

In the same vein, the images of 'hunters' and 'rabbit' are used by Hassan in the play: "Same as happened to you. Washed up. You run with the hunters. I, with the rabbit." (8). The "hunters" are the rich, the powerful and those in government, while the "rabbit" is the poor and the oppressed to which armed robbers belong.

The "Bar Beach" is also a metaphor for where the armed robbers will end. As Hassan says "All we have left is the Bar Beach ..." According to the playwright, the "Bar Beach of Lagos is the most notorious venue at the time for public execution of robbers (Osofisan 1982:15). The robbers have been "trapped with guns and decrees" and like their leaders, the Bar Beach remains their death-place.

The various uncomplimentary images with which the robbers describe themselves, or others in the play, include "vultures", "hounds", "guinea-worm", "corpse", "refuse" and "chicken". The sordid images they use show the powerlessness they feel and so, their recourse to verbal abuse. This suggests an irony that though the robbers have guns, have been described as daring and dangerous, they are still powerless.

Alhaja's trance also underscores the plight of the robbers; she goes into a trance where she sees herself bearing unwanted seeds:

(Slow, as she enters a trancelike statue.) Nothing changing ... only my story starting anew. Like before, like always, like ever more.... And all alone I will swell with the terrible burden of unwanted seed, unwanted because condemned to die. I

will swell. I will explode, bearing the laughter of new corpses
... (Osofisan, 1982: 80-1)

In a parable or a tale – an apparently harmless tale – the ignobility of the robbers and the society that breeds them is dramatised in *Once upon Four robbers*. Osofisan's anger is couched in this tale but it is unmistakable. It is there in the harsh language of the robbers who only steal from the rich. It is also there in the society that gives birth to armed robbers; a society where a few "ride their cars along the sore-ridden backs of the poor". (Osofisan 1982: 29). His anger is also against the market women who are themselves poor but exploit others. His anger is more on the corrupt Sergeant who decides to keep the stolen money recovered from the robbers.

Hassan's tirades on his brother, the Sergeant, reveal his defiance in the face of the firing squad:

The family circuit, eh? Like a huge female breast eternally swollen with milk. But it is a mere fantasy, isn't it? The family breast can be sucked dry, however succulent, it can shrivel up in a season of want Ahmed, hide behind your bayonet, but I want to pay back all those lashes and the lies, of teacher, priest and parent. The world is a market. We come to slaughter one another and sell the parts.... (Osofisan 1982: 90-1)

Tied to the stake, Major's angry speech is not only defiant but revolutionary:

Yes. The day is beautiful. Your stomach proves it (laughter). But man is so fragile, so easy to kill. Especially if he robs and lies, if he wantonly breaks the law. Serg., today that law is on the side of those who have, and in abundance, we are fed and bulging, who can afford several concubines but tomorrow, that law will change. The poor will seize it and twist its neck. The starving will smash the gates of the supermarkets, the

homeless will no longer yield in fear to your bulldozers. And your children, yes, your dainty, little children will be here where I stand now on the firing block ... (Osofisan 1982: 84-5)

It is the manner in which he has presented the play that translates it from mere propaganda to the level of art. Osofisan has in this play, played the devil's advocate. While not supporting armed-robbery, he exposes the reasons some go into armed robbery and he puts the blame on society. He has been deliberately subversive. The ending of the play implicates the audience in the process of calling for change. The audience is to determine whether the robbers are to be shot or set free.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to examine the relationship between drama and social reality using Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers* as focus. Through this play, Osofisan has created enough social awareness for social change. By critically examining the society, he seems to make a call to action. His play thus becomes a vehicle for social change.

Although the play itself is first and foremost entertainment because it is realised in song, dance and spectacle, by its unusual topic and characterisation, it becomes in addition, a weapon. Osofisan describes the society's perception of the robber as: "a god without a face, arbitrary and volatile, hardened to carnage and operating clandestinely, beyond compassion, with unbridled cruelty and carnality". (Osofisan 1982: 69-70)

The play has given us a different viewpoint on armed robbery. Olu Obafemi (1996) succinctly puts the whole idea behind the play in this way:

The argument of the play clearly suggests that in order to change men's social behaviour and attitude, precisely in order to curb armed robbery, the whole body politic and economic

structure must be changed. "Legalised Slaughtering" will only aggravate matters. (195)

Osofisan, like some other "second generation" playwrights, has shown in this play that "social change could come by the playwright's ability to raise mass awareness to a positive revolutionary alternative to social decadence". (Obafemi 1996) His *Once upon Four Robbers* becomes a tool to motivate and mobilise people to accept change and through the angry outburst of the robbers, the play calls for social change. This is also the view of Sandra Richards in *Ancient Song* that Osofisan is "passionately protesting the ugliness of his society in hopes that reflection will spur reform". (Richards 1996, 4).

According to Osofisan, in a process of several national debates and (maybe) the impact of the play, the gruesome act was eventually stopped in Nigeria. Hear Osofisan himself:

Then not long afterwards, the issue developed into a nationwide debate, and all over people argued whether it was right or wrong that robbers should continue to be executed in public. Till in the end, the carnival thankfully ceased.... (Osofisan 2001: 82-3).

In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan has been able to capture the essence of societal change in the clamour by the robbers for a more humane attitude by the government and the rich towards its poor citizens. The type of change he posits is one that embraces a turn-around from an insensitive attitude to a caring one. To him, the gap between the rich and the poor widens every day and this gap produces the likes of robbers portrayed in this play. By the use of vitriolic language as employed by the robbers against the corrupt leaders, Osofisan shows that literature can be a potent force in raising awareness of the people. This impact is revealed in the

kind of response that is generated at the end of several productions of this play. Osofisan says:

Night after night, audiences debated the issue and came out of the hall still arguing. On occasions, I was confronted with sometimes angry, sometimes bewildered spectators, but no one came out indifferent. (Osofisan 2001: 18)

In this play, Osofisan clamours for a just and equitable system. He uses the play to urge change and has sufficiently provoked enough debate on the problem. He views armed robbery in Nigeria as a social problem brought about by inequality among citizens. The message is that social change is necessary to stamp it out and this cannot be achieved by punitive measure as harsh as court orders for condemned robbers to be squad-fired at the Bar Beach.

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