



**ENRICHING AFRICAN LITERARY DRAMA WITH THE CREATIVE
TECHNICALITY OF INDIGENOUS STORY PERFORMANCE APPROACH:
THE EXAMPLE OF FEMI OSOFISAN**

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Abstract:

Much of the distinctiveness of Osofisan's plays can be found in his creative manipulation of the indigenous storytelling approach. Universally, storytelling is an age-long enriching, and memorable platform for instruction and amusement for all humankind. Its spontaneous and improvisatory style has the special ability to enliven, to a large extent, contemporary African plays as it readily reawakens that familiar communal interaction between the audience and the performer(s) entrenched in African local cultures. Hence, the focus of this essay is an interrogation of the enlivenment features of the indigenous story performance approach in Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*. In these traditional plays, one observes that both the narrator and the audience drive the trend of the plays. Thus, the paper not only engages the role of the narrator and the audience, but also analyzes those indigenous events like games, dance, riddles, and songs that sustain this camaraderie between the audience and the actors. In all, the paper establishes that the storytelling mode is the fundamental enriching ingredient in these selected plays of Femi Osofisan.

Keywords: storytelling, African drama, performance theatre

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1. Introduction

In Africa, particularly in traditional Africa, stories are not just told, they are performed. The African performance approach to storytelling seems to adequately lend itself as a strategy for effective dramaturgy because drama is an art of the theatre and as Cohen rightly opines, all *"theatre is performance"* (19). Cohen goes on to assert that performance is *"an action or series of actions taken for the ultimate benefit (attention, entertainment, enlightenment, [and] or involvement) of someone else... the audience"* (19).

As a creative process, performance stimulates thought, creates suspense, yields amusement, and compels participation on the part of the audience. Helen Chukwuma asserts that *"the performance itself is a dramatic act... appealing to both aural and visual senses"* (229).

There seems to be a natural correlation between (literary) drama and the oral narrative performance as manifested in the fact that beyond the entertainment objective, they both artistically embody linguistic, philosophical, historical, political, and sociological elements which can be narrated, dramatized, sung, or mimed. This correlation makes the oral narrative performance strategies invaluable tools in the hands of an ingenious dramatist.

Drama all over the world seems to have its roots in communal festivals and celebrations. It is so with African drama. The much-talked-about origin of drama being ancient Greece is linked to the communal celebration in honour of the Greek god, Dionysus. This communal festival of Dionysus gave rise to formal acting which was pioneered by Thespis. Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus and the plays they wrote belong to the formalization of acting which in turn gave rise to the tradition of written drama.

Communal celebrations and festivals are an integral part of African life. Political, religious, and social events often lend themselves to festivals and communal participation. Agricultural harvests, childbirth, the coronation of a King, etc., call for celebration by the entire community. People would wear masks, assorted colorful costumes with corresponding make up and carry fitting and required properties, and dance to music accompaniment. In addition to these, there will be storytelling. Usually, the performer of the story would choose a story, often with a mythological, imaginary, historical or legendary character. The life of this character would provide the plot of the narration. The performer often plays the role of the central character and other characters in the story or selects members of his audience to play these roles.

Formalizing all of these by way of writing plays cannot be said to be a borrowed practice. Available records show that the Greeks were the first to formalize the tradition of writing plays but they formalized what they had. Africans formalized the tradition of writing plays much later, most likely because literacy is, without a doubt, a recent development in Africa. Drama, as an art form, has been a part of African life from time immemorial because traditional festivals lend themselves to drama and so do religious ceremonies and social functions.

There is no doubt that having come in contact with the discursive playmaking principles of Euro-America via colonialism and missionary activities, before formalizing its tradition of written drama, these principles will exert some influence on the African playmaking tradition. However, as Margaret Laurence puts it, African writers today *"are engaged in reassessing their past, in rediscovering their inheritance, in interpreting themselves both to their own people and to the rest"*

of the world" (9). An outcome of this is that playmaking in Africa, today, is a cross-fertilization of the African oral, aural and visual festival tradition with the received discursive principles of Euro-America.

Therefore, this paper examines Femi Osofians's application of the African oral narrative performative construct in the making of some of his plays, viz: *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*. In so doing, our objectives are:

- 1) to show how Femi Osofisan projects the counter-hegemonic resilience of the so-called subalterns by asserting his identity.
- 2) to show how the African oral narrative performative construct has enriched playmaking with transformations and innovations.
- 3) to show how the African cultural heritage affects the form and content of the dramaturgy of African playwrights, and in the process increase scholars' knowledge of cultural studies including the diversity of the global cultural heritage.

2. African Literary Drama and the Postcolonial Outlook

From the moment of its first contact with the West, from the yester years of colonialism to the present days of neocolonialism, Africa has been locked in a struggle against foreign domination. The struggle against the dominance of the imported culture over the indigenous is on-going. Traore observes that it is "*this phenomenon of opposition to acculturation in practice that brings about a fusion of the traditional and the modern*" (43). Postcolonial dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo among others are known for this mosaic mix in their playmaking. Highlighting this fact, Saint Gbilekaa asserts that African literary drama is "*a product of cultural hybrids*" (vi).

It does appear to us that, African literary drama has been postcolonial in outlook from its inception as we see African writers striving for the reclamation of their culture and history. We, therefore, understand Kalu Uka when he defines this drama which is, structurally, a mosaic blend of Western principles and African forms as:

"The total corpus of contemporary attempts to create, from elements of traditional drama, artistic texts, which possess recognizable forms and structure, and which convey definite visions of the times through significant historic sensitivity toward problems, ideas, and beliefs." (15)

Afam Ebeogu sums it up by asserting that African literary drama reflects "*themes, events characters, techniques, philosophies, etc. which are recognizably African*" (4). In other words, African literary drama interrogates the African reality; its past, present, and future.

The techniques and strategies that have engendered African literary drama's mass appeal and helped it evolve its own distinct style are primarily embedded in the aesthetics of oral tradition. It is through the corpus of the oral performance that African literary drama derives meaning and is sustained. J. Ki-Zebro enthuses that "*oral tradition is total knowledge...the great school of life*" (62). This accounts for its preponderance in African literary drama.

The employment of the oral narrative performance strategy goes beyond aesthetic delight to function as a postcolonial identity marker.

3. Justifying the Postcolonial Theory in this Study

Elleke Boehmer succinctly defines Postcolonialism as *“that condition in which colonized people seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalized world”* (3). Postcolonial studies are a discursive framework geared towards the historical, literary, and cultural experiences of formerly colonized people, particularly those under British imperialism. Therefore, the literatures emanating from former British colonies have been referred to as ‘postcolonial’. In this regard, Charles Bressler explains that the postcolonial theory is *“an approach to literary analysis that particularly concerns itself with literature written in English in formerly colonized countries”* (199).

We should note the difference in the terms ‘post-colonial’ and ‘Postcolonialism’. While the former refers to the time after independence, the latter engages the hegemonic ideologies of the West. Lois Tyson avers that postcolonial criticism as a theoretical framework, *“seeks to understand the operations – politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies”* (365). It appears, therefore that postcolonialism emerged as a counter-dialogic perspective to the monocentric narratives and texts of the imperialist. Abrams and Harpham (2012) argue that the postcolonial agenda is geared towards dismantling Eurocentric norms of literary and artistic values so as to expand the literary canon.

Thus, strongly compelled to correct erroneous stereotypes and misrepresenting views of the subalterns, postcolonial theorists like Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Helen Tiffin, Gareth Griffiths, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Walter Rodney, Chinua Achebe, Chinweizu, V. S. Naipaul, among others, began to churn out polemical texts that questioned Western hegemony and ideologies; invariably laying the groundwork for the emergence of postcolonialism.

Hence, postcolonialism is a constructive socio-political discourse that offers the subalterns an intellectual space to assert and re-establish their identity and otherness-otherness being a term located in the postcolonial concept of Difference. Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin in their book, *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, opine that Difference which,

“...in colonialist discourse connotes a remove from normative European practice, and hence functions as a marker of subordination, is for postcolonial analysis the correspondent marker of identity, voice, and hence empowerment. Difference is not the only measure by which European episteme fails to comprehend the actual self-naming and articulate subject. Moreover, difference demands deference and self-location.” (230)

It is this ‘difference’ that distinguishes African writings, lending them the possibilities and potentials that entrench identity.

Accordingly, postcolonialism seeks to understand the multifaceted issues of history, ethnicity, difference, migration, feminism, oppression, resistance, hybridity, etc. as it concerns the subalterns in relation to their former colonizers. Ashcroft et al opine that *“postcolonialism*

studies are based in the historical fact' of European colonialism, and the diverse material effects to which this phenomenon gave rise" (2).

Postcolonialism thrives on the representation of cultural differences steeped in colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies in literary works. In projecting this complex phenomenon, literature from third-world nations essentially becomes sites of political control and cultural conflicts. The outcome is a hybridity of forms which is in turn projected in the linguistic medium, in the portrayal of characters, and in the manipulation of the literary form.

4. Examining the Oral Narrative Performative Pattern in the Selected Plays

We begin with a close examination of the plot layout of Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*. The play has a loosely structured plot of six divisions and opens in a media res format. The play revolves around the lovebirds, Olabisi and Akanbi who are the protagonists in the play. Each part of the story is symbolically given titles from a wrestling match. Apparently, this is to foreground the conflicts and tensions that plague this union. Also, it is to highlight the playwright's Marxist ideological underpinning that for equity and liberty to thrive, a collective struggle against tyranny is imperative on the part of the oppressed. Thus, revolts must be staged and battles must be fought and won in order to attain justice. Therefore, Osofisan's play, like its title suggests, calls for an end to the atavistic barbarism and antagonistic predispositions of man. The antagonist here is the bloodthirsty Adigun, who is the spanner in the works of the couple's union.

The first part of the play is entitled 'Ringside' – a position close to the ring. It zooms in on the boisterous spectators; the deafening din and the excitement in the air. This lively montage introduces the audience to the setting and the would-be cast of the play amidst a euphoric platform of drumming, games, and songs - quite similar to that of a traditional setting. The second part, titled 'The First Fall' is the exposition, (the match proper) which reveals the inciting conflict brewing between Akanbi and his uncle, Adigun. The two contestants are figuratively locked in a battle over Akanbi's choice of bride, Olabisi. The older Adigun rejects Olabisi because Olabisi's father murdered Akanbi's father. At this point, Akanbi is torn between following his heart's desire or preserving the family's honour.

The third and fourth parts of the play, titled 'The Second Fall' and 'Intermission' are where complications rise, as Akanbi reasons with his childhood friends, Gbadamosi and Fatai to reject Olabisi since women learn to dance many dances (128). However, in the 'Intermission', Osofisan suspends all action, for a rest-interval; to give the audience a peek into all the behind-the-scenes actions of the cast – "*Actors stretch their legs, go for fresh air, iron their costumes, etc. refreshments are brought and distributed*" (130). This temporary suspension of the play strategically helps to sustain the audience's interest as the plot gears up to hit its climax in the 'Stalemate.' However, all conflicts and tensions are resolved in the denouement. Aptly, titled 'Knock-out,' the denouement presents harsh confrontations and heated arguments between guardians and wards. It is the final tussle (physical and intellectual) between Akanbi and Adigun and culminates in Adigun committing suicide and Akanbi and Olabisi renewing their vows.

Deriving his narrative framework from the ecstatic atmosphere analogous to that of traditional African fests, Osofisan sets the play rolling by employing a lively session of games akin to that of musical chairs, with the actors singing and dancing around rolled-up mats. Invariably, Osofisan's theatre re-establishes the fact that the theatre is the home of entertainment. Similarly, Cohen rightly observes that "*theatre and games have a shared history. Both were developed to a high level of sophistication in Greek festivals*" (13). Thus, Osofisan's theatre holds its audience spellbound right from its exposition as it compels audience attention and entertainment via the theatrical ecstasies derived from games, dance, song, and drumming. The opening glee of the play is of a vivacious nature as "*a group of young men and girls, accompanied by an orchestra...sing and dance around the mats. As the music stops suddenly, the dancers rush forward to pick up a mat each*" (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 98), and the actor without a mat is made to tell a story. As a matter of fact, traditional games as a cultural heritage hold a prominent place in indigenous theatre, for it fosters social and cultural integration and interaction amongst the actors and audience. Furthermore, it creates an atmosphere of intense group activity which communal theatre is all about. Apart from enlivening Osofisan's stage, the game act is also symbolic as it has a direct bearing on the fate of the characters – in this case, who the narrator will be. The actor who fails to grab a mat is the loser of the game. He automatically becomes the playmaker - the narrator who renders a story in a dramatic form to his audience. Hear him begin:

Narrator: "...Let me see... (He reflects briefly). Yes, I know the story I'll tell. It's one of reconciliation." (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 98).

And:

"... Right. I'm ready! Let's begin. It is night, on the hill of Iloto. Olabisi waits alone." (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 100).

It would appear from the above passage that the narrator's story is not directly addressed to the proscenium audience but to his co-actors who become his primary audience. Accordingly, the Narrator addresses two sets of audiences. His primary audience is more intimate and participatory than the proscenium audience, hence, in a true folkloric manner, he weaves his primary audience into the tale as demonstrated by their apt positioning on the stage. Notice also, how the Narrator pretends to be unaware of the presence of his secondary audience when he assumes the role of a director; assigning roles, going over rehearsals, and trying to coordinate the cast:

Narrator: "...And I shall need some actors. First, a man and a woman. (Several offers, he chooses): You ...and you. You'll be Olabisi, the girl, and you're Akanbi, her boyfriend. (Titters and jeers from the others). I need more people, please (Hands up again) You, come and play Adigun. Adigun is the uncle of Akanbi. You are his uncle, but he calls you Father because you brought him up, and his real father, your brother, died long ago. Okay? You, play Detoun, Akanbi's mother. You've always been half-crazy, anyway, like her. And come, Akanbi, won't you greet your mother

properly? ...Yes. More players? Okay, you- come and play Titilayo. She's the mother of Olabisi. And – No! what are you doing? Don't go to that side! Keep away from Adigun. You're bitter enemies, for reasons, which you'll soon find out. What? Just wait and you'll see. Yes, more offers? I need a priest now, a traditional priest. (A hand up) No, thank you Rafiu. Your looks are too villainous for this part. Baba Soye- that's his name – is supposed to be a kind and benevolent priest... ah, yes, you ojare. Come and play the Babalawo." (Farewell to a Cannibal Rage 98).

Moreso, pretending to be oblivious to the proscenium audience, the narrator imitates the actions of the set designer. He organizes the mise-en-scene, improvising astutely as he goes about it. Hear him:

Narrator: *"Scenery. Décor. Background. Location. The ...look, I don't know what the theatre people call it. But I'll show you what I mean. You see, this story I'm going to tell you takes place in a village. Right? Now, the village is at the foot of a hill, right? Well, we can't have a real hill here now, can we? (Responses) that's what I mean. But we can simulate one. Create it, er... figuratively. Yes, with our bodies and so on. Got it? That's the background I mean. Whenever a scene is about to begin, I'll announce the location, where it is to take place, right?" (Farewell to a Cannibal Rage 99).*

Also, notice how the narrator, in a true directorial manner gives the actors an opportunity to rehearse their roles in the mock play:

Narrator: *"Okay. Before we start, I'll just try you. Ready (Responses) Right, the next place by a seaside. Give me the setting. (some players rise) ...Everybody, once you're not on stage, you stay with the orchestra till you're called. So, get ready, while I tell the principal actors what to do." (Farewell to a Cannibal Rage 99)*

Osofisan also lets the audience in on all the seeming frustrations and confusion encountered by the narrator cum director when the members of the cast go astray.

Narrator: *"(Interrupting) Wait! Wait! Who are you?... (In anguish) Oh God, what's this!! Okay, I suppose you go on, whether we like it or not. So, let's not waste more time. Well, Bisi, can you please take us back a bit?" (Farewell to a Cannibal Rage 157)*

Technically, this is a play-within-a-play technique. Invariably, this leitmotif deployed by Osofisan shatters the conventions of playmaking. This concept Bertolt Brecht calls Defamiliarization that is breaking the conventions of theatrical realism (Webster 70). So, Osofisan, defamiliarizes or demystifies the stage by revealing the mechanisms through which illusions are created.

Thus, by making visible the invisible aspects of playmaking, the secondary audience is forced to witness, and appreciate the needed leadership skills, and managerial and imaginative control that bring about enthralling performances in the theatre. But more than anything else,

Osofisan foregrounds the workings of indigenous theatre. He presents its peculiar playmaking style which inspires the mutual and communal transaction between the stage and spectators. Osofisan's theatre no doubt is a spectacularization of African culture.

Furthermore, the plot of *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* thrives a lot on internal digression, as with folktales where the storyteller or narrator repeatedly interrupts the tale to broach other related subjects. Ademola Dasylyva admits that "*digression is a basic characteristic of oral performances*" (396).

Hence, in a true folkloric manner, notice how the narrator's repeated interjections "truncate" the storyline:

Narrator: (*Stepping forward*). Wait! I'm sure we'll love to see the scene. Yes? Right, let's withdraw the hill of Iloto, temporarily and build the market of Efon in its place. O ya, go on, and Simbi- who'll be Simbi? Good you... (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 140).

Invariably, digression heightens the suspense. Augusto Boal concurs that "*in theatre, any break stimulates*" (148). Therefore, it is on this basis, that Akinyemi and Falola opine that "*the real significance of Osofisan in his drama...is his experiment with the African theatre form. He obsessively creates new forms by mingling conventions with daring experiments*" (9). Osofisan's dramatic approach of digressing and interjecting unearths the versatile potential of indigenous performances where the narrative may be punctuated to accommodate a new actor or actors into the action. Clearly, this indigenous device recognizes and fosters collective participation and involvement of both actors and the audience. Stylistically, this dramatic strategy has the overall effect of building suspense, thus sustaining the larger audience's attention.

Apparently, Osofisan handles these structural 'disruptions' in the narrative artistically, as rather than mar the action, they aid the postcolonial posturing of the play. Boehmer is quick to remind us that "*the postcolonial writer flamboyantly crosses, fragments, and parodies different narrative styles and perspectives*" (196). Osofisan, as a postcolonial dramatist is no exception. He is well-known for experimenting with and engaging in various dramatic styles. Bhadmus captures Osofisan's theatricalism in these words:

"He ceaselessly works to explode the classical (Aristotelian) form of terse and elitist theatre, for a more popular, and simpler mode. Some of these reforms and hybridity are noticeable in his use of the popular theatre and can be usefully examined as dialectics in ambiguities." (240)

In all, Osofisan craves a theatre that is technically innovative, unconventional; unhindered by European conventions, and a theatre that is as close as possible to his audience, and of course, one that best seeks to express his novel ideas. Thus, by letting his audience in on the 'workings' behind the production, Osofisan demystifies the theatre. He pulls down every air of mysticism and gives the audience a sense of belonging on the stage. Osofisan also presents the theatre as a place with no class barriers or demarcation, hence roles are shuffled and reshuffled amongst actors to give all members of the cast an opportunity to act. We glean this from the directorial comment: "*...At this point, if the Director wishes, a protest can rise from some of*

the actors. They wish to swap roles. The Narrator argues that the audience may be confused, but actors counter by saying it's all playmaking..." (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 130).

From this, it becomes clear that the play operates an episodic or elastic plot structure, which is subject to the manipulations of the narrator/director. Put differently, what is significant about this play is that, in various scenes, the narrator has the prerogative to alter the stage directions or change the cast. Even so, we notice that the narrator's role as a storyteller is often times taken over by other characters. This method known as communal narration encourages active participation from the audience. Chukwuma explains that "...the audience's active participation is seen in taking turns at storytelling" (237). Take for instance, Baba Soye narrating a folktale:

Baba Soye: "It was market day at Efon... Simbi was her name, and she stood in her stall like a queen of noon! Simbi of the velvet skin,..." (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 140).

And Titi, recalling the painful memories of her husband's death:

Titi: (Wearily). "It's a long story. A sad story. Your father and Akanbi's had long been friends. It became even proverbial. Then one day, a stranger came to the village..." (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 147).

As the above excerpts show, Titi and Baba Soye, having neglected the services of the narrator, are better able to narrate their experiences via the communal narrative. Perhaps, it is this communal tenet in the play that explains the absence of the narrator's closing remark at the denouement. This is, however, not the case in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* and *Once Upon Four Robbers*.

In *Many Colours Make the Thunder-king*, Osofisan appropriates the reality of the Yoruba pantheon of spirits, gods, animals, and humans to comment on human experiences and topical issues. As with the other plays, the service of the raconteur is called to aid. One of the major characters in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-king* is Igunnun. Igunnun is versed in storytelling and masking skills and plays the role of the narrator as well as a member of the cast. As a narrator, he delights the audience with dances, songs, and quizzes them with riddles. Igunnun practically lights up the play's exposition with an enthralling mask performance and his oratorical dexterity. Of all the plays interrogated in this paper, *Many Colours Make the Thunder-king* is the most traditional play. It is hinged on the Yoruba myth of Shango which in this context preserves the philosophical foundations of the Yoruba people via storytelling. Osofisan recreates the Shango myth by thrusting his audience into an opening glee of masquerade festivities, ancestral worship, chanting, music, etc. – all of which are dramatic components that can be located in indigenous storytelling. As stated before, it is hinged on the Yoruba myth of Shango, which in this context, preserves the philosophical foundations of the Yoruba folk. Myth, as Agantiem Abang states:

“is an anonymous story having its roots in the primitive folklore or folk beliefs of races or nations and presenting supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular a special perception of man or a cosmic view.” (83).

Hence, by utilizing the myth of Shango, Osofisan educates his audience on the many ills of inordinate ambition and materialism amidst a framework of festivities.

Many Colours Make the Thunder-king’s robust and enlivening dramatic structure can be attributed to the plethora of songs and dances performed virtually in every act of the play. From panegyrics in the prologue, to love songs, epithalamiums, and dirges in the body of the play, the play reverberates with mythic, cosmic, and elemental references all woven into its dramatic tale. Shorn of the flashback technique, *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* is rich in its use of role-play. Igunnun, the storyteller adopts many roles in the course of the play. Right from the beginning of the play, he assumes the role of a masquerade, then transforms as Alagemo:

Shango: *“You again, Igunnun? How did you-“*

Alagemo: *“No, not Igunnun anymore, that was only one of my masks! Call me Alagemo, Kabiyesi. The Chameleon capable of endless mutations!” (Many Colours Make the Thunder-king 21).*

In true chameleonic character, Alagemo is known for the art of disguise, in order to help Shango achieve his purpose. From Shango’s servant to Shango’s child, Alagemo’s role-playing lends his character a mystic aura, which no doubt aligns with the nature of myths. Again, the essence of role-play projects the dynamisms of indigenous drama where multiple roles could be played by a single actor or the narrator.

In the play, living and non-living elements are personified. These non-human characters are endowed with the ability of thinking and act like human beings - Shango is a Yoruba deity of lightning and thunder; Oya is the river; Osun is the forest; Oba is the mountain, the ants, etc. Apparently, these elements of nature stage humanistic roles in the play. As such, this feature of personification is grafted from oral aesthetics where animals, humans, and inanimate objects mingle freely and interact.

Another striking feature of the storytelling approach is the role the audience plays. In *Many Colours Make the Thunder-king*, the audience is actively involved in the unfolding of the plot. Like in *Once Upon Four Robbers* provision for the audience to participate fully is allowed. Watch how a member of the audience breaks into the narrative in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*:

MOA: *“Can I ...will you, please, allow me to propose the last riddle?”*

Ant: *“Who are you?”*

MOA: *“I need to be sure you’re not cheating”*

Ant: *“And what business of yours is it, if we do?”*

MOA: *“I bought a ticket! If Alagemo is not released how will I see the end of the story!” (Many Colours Make the Thunder-King 67).*

In this regard, therefore, Osofisan endorses Augusto Boal's assertion that; it is through the audience's incursion on stage that drama becomes palpable as the spectator turns Spect-Actor. Thus, aware of its performative potentials, the African audience enthusiastically brings to bear its talents into the storytelling act. Still elucidating on the audience's invasion of the stage, Boal argues that; "*it symbolizes all the acts of trespass we have to commit in order to free ourselves from what oppresses us*" (xxi). Thus, rather uncomfortable, with the way the play pans out, the MOA is compelled to invade the stage and become part of the action, and by so doing, he disregards the Western criteria of playmaking- where there is a sharp divide between audience and actor.

Even so, we can trace audience involvement to the flexible and fluid nature of oral narratives in Africa, as is also the case in *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* where the audience is actively participatory. Anigala Augustine makes us understand that: "*festival theatres thrive on the spectator support given to it*" (26).

In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Aafa, the storyteller also doubles as an imam and a medicine man as the play unfolds. The play begins with the opening salute of Yoruba traditional tales: "*Alo o! by the narrator, to which, everybody replies: Aaalo!*" (19) This opening glee obviously breaks the ice between actor and audience in any Yoruba folktale session. This point is succinctly exemplified in Baba Soye's storytelling session in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*. In the play, Baba Soye refuses to begin, until Olabisi responds accordingly, hence breaking through her hedgy nature:

Baba Soye: "*I start: A-a-lo-o (He waits for a reply). You don't answer?*"

Olabisi: "*(Amused). Can't you just go on with your story?*"

Baba Soye: "*Not without a proper beginning, according to the rules. I start again. A-a-a-lo-o!*"

Olabisi: "*A-a-a-lo! (The orchestra joins in the response)*"

Baba Soye: "*One day...*" (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 139).

It is in this same manner that Aafa in *Four Robbers* begins his tale, after the necessary chanting and responses of A-lo-o s! Then, he bursts into the storyteller's song. Finnegan stresses that:

"It is common for the storyteller to begin a song in the course of the narration –often a song sung by, or representing the actions of, one of the characters- and for this to be taken up antiphonally by the audience acting as chorus, in this way participating in the dramatic enactment of the story." (236).

As such, Aafa weaves into his song, the story of four robbers whose leader has just been executed at Bar Beach;

*"...An ancient tale and modern
A tale of four armed robbers
The day government fire burnt them
And the gang leader was caught*

*And his back was turned to the sea
Death of the wretched, penalty of pain
Yes he was condemned to die...*" (Once Upon Four Robbers 19).

As the narrator sings with the audience echoing, the members of the cast and musicians are busy getting set for the play – “they begin to pick and choose costumes, and then to dress up, gradually establishing the various roles they will be playing” (20), right in full view of the audience. Thus, while, the narrator’s song serves as a cue for the cast to get set, it also fills the audience in on what had happened previously. In this dramatic tale of five parts, Osofisan presents a societal malaise that Nigeria continually grapples with – the issue of robbery (armed and unarmed). But in presenting this theme, he also examines its remote causes which are poverty, unemployment, greed, illiteracy, and corruption. Faced with the misery and complexity of life, the gang of robbers: Alani, Hassan, Angola, Major, and Alhaja have resorted to robbery to make ends meet. But, with the recent decree promulgated by the military, (death by the firing squad for any robbery suspect) the gang members begin to have a re-think as their leader, Alani has just been executed by the firing squad.

But, rather than deter them, his death emboldens them to embark on more raids, particularly now fortified with Aafa’s magic formula. At the end of the play, the law catches up with them, even as the law itself is guilty of robbery. But interestingly, the audience is left to decide the denouement of the play – to execute or not to execute the robbers. The call is theirs, and the cast is ready to carry out their dictates. It is at this point, therefore, that Aafa, the narrator, throws open the floor for audience participation and interaction. He relocates from the stage and moving towards the audience, literarily hands over the role of narrator to them, by directly seeking their opinion. Hear him:

AAFA: (Walking among the audience): “A stalemate? How can I end my story on a stalemate? If we sit on the fence, life is bound to pass us by, on both sides. No, I need your help. One side is bound to win in the end. The robbers, or the soldiers who are acting on your behalf. So, you’ve got to decide and resolve the issue. Which shall it be? Who wins? Yes, Madam? Your reasons please? And you, gentleman? Should the robbers be shot? Please do not be afraid to voice your opinion, we want this play to end. Okay, I’ll take five opinions, and then we’ll let the majority carry the day...yes? (Once Upon Four Robbers 77).

Even so, this is a very crucial aspect of storytelling as the audience is given an opportunity to witness the ongoing violence, air their views and subsequently end the play. By so doing, Osofisan implicates the audience into the plot of the play. He purposefully leaves the play’s resolution open-ended. It is therefore on this basis, that one espies the fluid nature of oral performances. Irele opines that “an oral text is...thus open and mobile...perpetually recreated, modified as the occasion demands and given new accents from one instance of its realization to another” (81).

Accordingly, the dramatization of *Four Robbers* always shores up different reactions to different productions. Osofisan admits that:

“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” (The Nostalgic Drum 18).

Thus, the aim of *Once Upon Four Robbers* is to stir up deep thinking in the hearts of the audience with a view to addressing these ills. It presents to them the insensitive and crass society where the margin between the rich and poor has led to robberies and graft in all spheres of the society, and how jungle justice for the criminals is a feeble attempt at curbing the menace. Ironically, The Sergeant, who belongs to the upper echelon of power is also complicit in the act of stealing. When he discovers the loot, he hastily barks:

Sergeant: *(Knocking him down): Shut up, you fool! Can't you restrain yourself! (Looks round rapidly.) Corple, take care of the money. And listen...as far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money! Is that clear? We found nothing... (Once Upon Four Robbers 54).*

It is ironical, that even those leading Major and the saboteurs out for execution are also guilty of the same crime. Chief among them is the Sergeant. Thus, it is this stalemate that Osofisan plunges his audience into. Should the robbers be executed, even as other “unarmed-robbers” are being shielded by the law? Or should they be set free, to continue their reign of terror? At any rate, whatever the audience’s choice, it is important to note that they are drawn into the core of the play. They no longer become spectators waiting to be served the moral of the story, but *spect-actor* as Boal puts it. Boal elucidates that:

“...the Spect-Actor is not fictional. He exists in the scene and outside of it – in a dual reality. By taking possession of the stage in the fiction of the theatre he acts not just in the fiction, but also in his social reality. By transforming fiction, he is transformed into himself” (xxi).

5. Conclusion

The narrative structure of the plays thrives on the folktale performance. Through the ancient art form of storytelling, theatre artists can showcase the potentials of our oral tradition. Africa has always been a continent of storytellers, as its people are groomed and nurtured via storytelling. Ojike Mbonu argues that *“there is no good African child or adult who does not know at least half a dozen stories”* (128). Hence, stories remain a veritable platform for social interaction and communication in the continent. Understandably, all drama is communication, and resorting to the storytelling mode with all its aesthetics of performance as seen in songs, games, riddles, dances, etc. greatly redefines African drama. In the storytelling approach, the narrator’s or narrators’ gesticulatory movements and oratorical gifting are dexterously manipulated to ensure a memorable experience. Akporobaro explains that:

“the African storyteller does not just introduce his story anyhow, but with a set of formulaic statements or phrases which his audience knows and recognizes to be the formal opening of the

tale... the narrator brings to bear his narrative verve, his imaginative power and verbal dexterity by telling his story in a manner that is dramatic, graphic, and enthralling to the audience.” (98-99).

In essence, the narrative mode comes alive with the aid of the narrator, as every component of the play unfolds by his dictates. Harold Scheub reminds us that:

“the poetics of storytelling deals with meaning, with emotion, form, repetition and myth. It has to do with music and the consequent metaphor; and with performer and audience, with ritual and performance” (98).

Accordingly, the storytelling approach is a creative technicality that beautifies and enriches modern African drama (Effiong Johnson 93). It alters the frame through which the modern audience views drama, as it strongly compels them to be part of it.

In the selected plays, the storytelling or narrative technique strongly encourages audience participation and total theatre. In fact, audience participation is a key factor in the realization of the plays. Furthermore, the storytelling approach comes with a plethora of literary devices. Dramatic strategies like the fluid plot structure, improvisation, allusion, flashback, role-play, the principle of the fourth wall, rhythm, foreshadowing, etc. have not only been employed for the realization of the themes and techniques of the texts but have also been interrogated in the course of examining their narrative patterns.

Through the plays, Osofisan has drawn us back to the fond memories of moonlight tales, dilemma tales, games, and entertainment sessions in village squares that once fostered communal ethos and social interactions. But more than that, he has employed these indigenous devices to share Africa’s unique cultural experiences in such a way as to challenge the dominant Western ideology and domesticate African literary drama.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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