

THE DIALECTIC OF VIOLENCE: RETHINKING ARMED ROBBERY IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S *ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS*

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Abstract

*The interaction of various dynamics which determine a society's socio-economic reality is always affirmed by the inevitable forces of demand and supply. However, observable dialectic of these socio-economic dynamics portrays lopsidedness in the distribution of wealth in favour of a category of citizens to the exclusion or disadvantage of another set of citizens. Through this kind of pervasive polarity, violence is enunciated within the underclass who feels alienated, deprived, and exploited. In response, the underclass reciprocates violence with brutal violence by plundering social spaces, partaking in the collective patrimony through banditry and brigandage. This paper argues that, to a good degree, armed robbery, banditry, and sundry acts of violence are caused, maintained, and sustained by contemporary social forces subliminally upheld by the government of the day. Femi Osofisan's play, *Once Upon Four Robbers* dramatizes the activities of four armed robbers who, in reaction to neglect by the subsisting power apparatus, unleash mayhem on society. The play provides a suitable platform for a critical exegesis of the socio-economic interplay that gives rise to violence which subsumes multiple vices. The attention of the public and the government is called to their remote complicities in the enthronement of violence. In this way, contact is made, awareness is created, and the general perception of violence is realigned.*

Key Words: Dialectics, Violence, armed robbery.

Introduction

Humanity is always confronted by different interpretations about sundry phenomenon that besets it. Sometimes the diversity in interpretation occurs along such essentialist categories like ethnicity, culture, religion, and political inclinations. Sometimes too, the diversity in the interpretation of certain human phenomenon is upheld by relative circumstances which

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border on personal experience. Because it is basically impossible to achieve a universal consensus on any issue, these divergences in interpretations have subsisted with a potential to develop to a more variegated vista. However, there are established norms which are embedded in the very nature of human existence but only challenged by interpretations. For example, violence is a global phenomenon which is regarded as a vice by every creed, culture, law, and religion, yet, it is an inexorable aspect of human existence. In this way, humanity agrees on the ideology of violence but veers off at the point of interpretation where such issues as root causes, the geography of victims, perpetrators, and suitable penal code hold sway. It is this kind of universal consensus of certain human phenomenon, free from interpretation, that Sebastiano Timpanaro, the Italian philosopher refers to by remarking that "phenomenon such as love, ageing, disease, fear of one's own death, and sorrow for the death of others, the brevity and frailty of human existence, the contrast between the weakness of humanity and the apparent infinity of the cosmos: these are recurrent features of human cultures, however variously they maybe represented" (xiii). From Timpanaro's submission, it is clear, to a good degree that in the absence of interpretation or representation, certain human phenomenon remains unchanged even though some scholars have referred to this trend as global conspiracies. Conversely, it is interpretation that encourages divergences and promotes further elucidations.

The divergences attracted by violence in terms of interpretation sustain dialectic of innumerable possibilities which cannot be totally condemned or validated but they continue to proliferate, providing further nuances for endless intellectual enquiries. It is the forgoing that provides the objective of this study which is to investigate the different shades of violence in Nigeria's 21st century and their various interpretations. In academic circles, perceptions and interpretations are rooted in the multiplicity of interdisciplinary subjects where they are upheld by the dialectic which in its fervent, provides the animating impulse for such intellectual engagements. In a sense, we can say that dialectic is truly alive to its responsibility of providing aspects of knowledge hitherto thought impossible or unachievable. Dialectic is undoubtedly dynamic, it saves us the strain and tedium of static assimilation of knowledge even though Terry Eagleton argues that "there are forms of permanence and continuity which are to be affirmed and admired". (xi) Of course, such 'permanence and continuity'

identified by Eagleton can only convey positives since no shade of negativity will be 'affirmed or admired'.

In pursuing the objective of this study, dialectic is viewed as providing different notions, different interpretative continuities for understanding and appreciating forms of human phenomenon. In this case, violence stands on trial since we must dissect it from multiple possibilities and different perspectives. Dialectic emphasizes exchange, it draws its strength from the continual flux of ideas on any subject irrespective of the context in which such ideas occur. Given the behavioural pattern of dialectic, it is parasitic in nature in the sense that it cannot stand alone but must necessarily depend on a counter viewpoint for its regeneration and relevance. Hence, any human phenomenon can be dismembered and interrogated in the tribunal of dialectic no matter how nebulous that phenomenon may be. Although many scholars have appropriated dialectic to develop their own school of thought, here, it is isolated and therefore devoid of any inclinations towards such school of thoughts like the Hegelian dialectic and the Marxist dialectic. In fact, there are neo-dialectic categories such as cultural dialectic, socio-political dialectic and gender dialectic. However, the dialectic of violence concerns itself with the interpretation of the phenomenon in a multicultural, ethno-religious plurimental society like Nigeria in the 21st century.

Violence is a negative phenomenon across the world. However, it has become a social construct in various societies so that what constitutes violence in one locale may not constitute violence in another locale. The most dominating aspects of violence within the African ideological bent are emotional violence and physical violence although some scholars have included domestic violence in the mix for those who pursue gender objectives in favour of feminism. We may consider the fate of Ojuola in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are not to Blame* and the degree of emotional violence she experiences following the revelation that she had sexual relationship with her son, Odewale, which produced four children. Physical violence is more immediate and impactful. It attracts more sympathy because it can be felt instantly. In Femi Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road*, we may consider the physical violence and brutality Akanji brings upon his people including his mother in his bid to become the Bashorun. Physical violence also finds expression in Festus Iyayi's novel, *Heroes*, where, in a war situation, the federal forces unleash untold mayhem and violence on the Biafrans in their attempt to force them to surrender. Domestic violence is easily located in a matrimonial setting where either the man or the woman suffers constant

assault from the partner although women are more prone to be victims. In Isidore Okpewho's novel, *Victims*, Nwabunor and her husband Ubanua become victims of domestic violence following the arrival of Ogugua as a second wife in the family. The couple are constantly involved in fisticuffs which sometimes led to Nwabunor fainting. Emotional violence and domestic violence share some similarity because given the example of Ojuola above, both women suffer eventual tragedy. While one loses her life, the other loses her only son and her sanity.

Among all the aspects of violence identified, physical violence bulks large in the African consciousness given the many times the continent has been despoiled by war, civil strife, and political upheavals. In contemporary times, physical violence finds expression in such social vices as armed robbery, banditry, brigandage, kidnapping, and other forms of organized crime. Indeed, no reason can justifiably extenuate crime of any kind but to some extent, reasons have been adduced for the increasing rate of crime in Nigeria in the 21st century. From government's failure to enunciate good youth policies that will engage the youths, to government's failure to provide employment, armed robbery, banditry, and brigandage have continuously lacerated Nigeria's social fabric in the 21st century, reaching a crescendo in the current political dispensation. Unfortunately, the recreation of these vices has been whittled down in literature since it seems that scholars and critics are more concerned with projecting and recreating African virtues, culture, and tradition, in response to Eurocentric sensibilities which endeavours to diminish the African identity and worldview. It is this kind of interpretive polarity that accounts for the near absence of the projection of violence in most contemporary African literature. There seems to be an innate apprehension within the African literary fraternity that the exposition or commitment to unveiling rampant vices in Africa will empower the West with ludicrous sledge hammer to bludgeon the African creative architecture. Thus, critics and scholars in a way become complicit by their failure to apply their widely acclaimed industry to good use. It therefore came as a relief and a breath of fresh air to see an academic conference dedicated to the excruciating topic of violence in Nigeria.

Violence as a human phenomenon defines its own scope. It makes no pretence about its personality given that it reproduces its own sub categories in equal dimension. As mentioned earlier, such categories of violence like emotional violence, physical violence, and domestic violence have dominated literary discourses in varying degrees. However, sub categories

like rape, sodomy, incest, prostitution, bribery and corruption, armed robbery, torture, kidnapping, money ritual, banditry, and brigandage have all held Nigeria in a vicious stranglehold much to the retardation of the Nigerian vision. Over the years, violence has struggled for space and relevance with tragedy and as a result, there have been debates, opinions, and counter opinions regarding the difference between the two. While some people argue that the two are the same, others argue that tragedy is a predictable, inevitable consequence of violence. The latter category believes that violence ushers in tragedy. They see it as the introductory level of human tragedy with its attendant anguish, pain, and heartbreak. In a way, trying to distinguish between violence and tragedy is only noble in so far as we understand the different categories and 21st century meaning of tragedy. The question to ask is this, does violence mean tragedy and vice versa? Does all violence bring about death and destruction? Does all violence bring about grief and sorrow? If we answer in the affirmative to the above questions, then it becomes easy to separate violence and tragedy because not every death, grief or sorrow deserves the accolade of tragedy. Violence and tragedy should maintain different identities. For example, can we say that the death of a criminal who has been terrorising a whole community is tragic? Can we say that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary is tragic seeing that the death, according to the homiletics of the Christian faith, provides a source of salvation and spiritual regeneration for millions of people across the world? Can we actually say that the death of a tyrant or a despot is tragic? Any death that serves the human purpose, any death that elicits freedom and happiness, even if such death is violent cannot be said to be tragic. In this way, tragedy and violence maintain separate identities even if they are closely knit. In drawing a line between violence and tragedy, it is important to also appreciate the difference between violence in real life and violence in a work of art. The same applies for tragedy where distinction must be made between tragedy in real life and tragedy in a work of art. Again, Terry Eagleton perceptively avers that "real life tragedy is a metaphorical derivation from the actual artistic thing, a view which converts an historical development into an ontological priority. For a host of exponents of tragic theory, there can be no more shameful naivety than confusing tragedy in art with tragedy in real life despite Fraud's teaching that the most tumultuous crisis of our lives is scripted by an ancient tragic drama" (14). From Eagleton's views above, it is easy to differentiate tragedy and violence in real life from their representation in art. While tragedy and

violence in art concern themselves with aesthetics, their occurrence in real life strictly depends on circumstances and interpretation where they cannot be predicted.

Rethinking Armed Robbery

No doubt, armed robbery belongs to the category of violence. No culture, creed or religion expressly excuses armed robbery or those who indulge in it. As a social vice, it attracts public outcry, it violates both individuals and institutions leaving in its wake, pain, tragedy, and ruin. In many countries of the world, the penal system is severely structured with very brutal provisions that sometimes border on life imprisonment, capital punishment or such as may be determined by the existing judicial system. In fact, in most African countries, Nigeria for example, armed robbers become victims of what is popularly referred to as *jungle justice* system, a situation where the robber is abruptly lynched to death by an angry mob. We must immediately make a distinction between *armed robbery* and *robbery* since they are inexorably separated from each other. Robbery is the act of stealing or removing what belongs to another person through guile and subterfuge. On the other hand, when such an act is carried out with arms, when the robber associates his/her act with a weapon, both for self-protection and to intimidate, to coerce, maim, and kill if necessary, the action becomes armed robbery. In Nigeria, many armed robbers indulge in their act with sophisticated weapons such as the AK-47 rifle or other such mechanized weapons. With these, they easily inflict damage and demobilize their victims before escaping with valuables.

The 21st century has witnessed a new perspective in the conception and understanding of armed robbery. Scholars and critics are committed to asking such questions as what motivates armed robbers, why does the vice not totally disappear from public space in spite of the very strict penal system that addresses its occurrence. Further questions such as the ways and means by which armed robbers source their weapons, how they are able to live among ordinary citizens unnoticed, have agitated the minds of scholars. For a start, research has proven that many people who indulge in the act of armed robbery are youths and young people between the ages of 18-45. This age bracket shows a spread of young people who are jobless and unemployed. Therefore, as a desperate means of survival, they embrace armed robbery, despoiling social spaces and taking laws into their hands to amass wealth. If we consider that a greater number of people who take to armed robbery do so for lack of jobs, then it follows that the government of

the day is complicit in promoting the vice through a subliminal negligence of their primary responsibilities. In Nigeria, successive governments have failed to enunciate programs that will engage the youths and steer their morality to positive ends. This disregard for youths has promoted the rise of armed robbery across Nigeria especially when these youths behold high standards of living which are in sharp contrast to their living standards. Left to his defiant devices and ignored by the government, the Nigerian youth inevitably responds to life by embracing violence. For Frantz Fanon, by remarking that "from birth it is clear to him that his narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence" (29), he gives much credence to the earlier view that youths unfortunately embrace armed robbery as a response to an emasculating world. Besides creating jobs for the teeming youths, Nigerian government of many years have also failed to embark on a national orientation that will inculcate good behaviour, diligence, and hard work on the psyche of the youths. In this way, government at all levels have failed in their basic responsibilities and therefore should partake of the blame in the incidence of armed robbery around the country. Three major factors can be identified as the immediate cause of armed robbery in Nigeria's 21st century reality. These are social factors, psychological factors, and hereditary factors. The list is not exhaustive, however let us critically engage the three listed factors to see how they have accounted for the unfortunate rise in the incidence of armed robbery.

Social Factors

Molly Anne Rothenberg's idea of achieving social change and eradicating vices that depreciate social values is to "identify a problem, locate its cause, and then eliminate that cause to solve the problem" (1). Although the above view seems tautological, it presents a most direct approach to solving social problems, especially armed robbery and this responsibility rests with the government. Failing to implement Rothenberg's simple logic above, government together with its various structures, tacitly encourage armed robbery. This is because they fail to live up to their basic responsibility of providing jobs for the teeming youths who populate a particular social space. Ironically, while a section of the society lives in squalor, devastated by perpetual need, and ravaged by hunger, another section wallows in opulence, crippled by surplus, especially politicians, government contractors, and those who are affiliated to the subsisting government apparatus. It is

this kind of existential, pervasive contradiction which bestrides our society that continually breeds violence and armed robbery in the country irrespective of strict punitive measures against the menace.

In our society, many faith and religious centres exist and in fact proliferate at an alarming rate. Ordinarily, these religious centres, through their frequent professing and engagements, ought to affect social perception on violence and dissuade people from embracing the phenomena. Sadly, and unfortunately, these religious centres only advance the narrative of violence by indulging in practices which reveals their craving for sophistication and materialism. In this category, Christian centres such as churches and various praying houses promote the culture of material acquisition and in fact, encourage people to become rich irrespective of the processes as long as they remit heavy sums of the proceed of their wealth to the church in forms of tithes and offering. Expectedly, vulnerable youths and adults troop to these places to be indoctrinated by a gospel of materialism instead of the gospel of salvation. In this way, the church and other faith centres which populate our social spaces fail in their responsibilities to act as a moral police, pointing the way to good behaviour and integrity. Therefore, it is safe to say that in certain respects, the failure of faith centres and religious establishments have led to the increasing trend of violence with particular reference to armed robbery. This materialistic conception of the Godhead by religious centres in Nigeria negates Hegel's views that "man has the infinite vocation and importance of being one of God's purposes and being in unity with God" (534). If we agree with Hegel, religious centres must pursue that primary objective which is to lead man to unification with God rather than to advance a gospel of materialism which promotes greed. Other social components such as culture and tradition have also failed to provide a mitigating morass strong enough to dissuade youths from embracing crime, violence, and armed robbery. This is because the custodians of the African culture and tradition have become hand-in-gloves with western tradition which promotes Eurocentric sensibilities which in return has eroded the African way of life. From the forgoing, the African social environment is violated and eviscerated by western impediments much to the abysmal disintegration of Nigeria's social space. Also, the lack of basic amenities in the society such as good roads, pipe borne water, electricity, and the provision of such other social welfare schemes to engage the youths have led to the increase in armed robbery. But the most social factor that accounts for the increase in armed robbery is the availability of sophisticated weapons,

heavy duty rifles, and different ammunition. These lethal items easily find their way into our social spaces where disgruntled youths have unhindered access to them. With a weak mind, poor orientation, and the inordinate craving for materialism, these youths employ their new found, deadly objects to good use much to the detriment of society in general. Again, the youths have access to weapons through politicians who use them as thugs to advance their political roguery. After the elections, these weapons are not recovered from the youths and having been schooled in the act of violence, they extend their ignoble habits to robbery, using these weapons.

Psychological Factor

The material conditions prevalent in a society hugely determine the psychology of individuals who inhabit such societies. Indeed, it is difficult to separate the material conditions of an individual from his general perception of life and psychological constitution. In this regard, many people who cultivate violence in the society by becoming armed robbers are products of their society. As these people grow up, they imbibe values of greed, hatred, and irresponsible behaviour which characterise their society. In this way, their psychological make-up gravitates towards such negative trends like armed robbery and kidnapping. When an individual is constantly assailed by negative comments, negative news, and negative reports, it follows that they build up in his psychological repertoire and easily find expressions at the slightest provocation. Today, many youths in Nigeria are mentally and psychologically disoriented, they are emotionally misdirected owing to the kind of negative vibes which confront them on a daily basis. Many youths who indulge in armed robbery grew up with a feeling of exploitation, neglect, deprivation, and self-pity. This explains why many of them take to armed robbery as a way to get back at the society which they feel has contributed to their tragedy. In indulging in their dastardly acts, such youths become very ruthless and merciless when they come in contact with individuals of social eminence, the rich and the mighty. It is this kind of unbalanced psychological mind-set that accounts for the many incidence of armed robbery around Nigeria. Also, many youths imbibe the wrong approach to wealth and materialism. They are psychologically misguided to believe that they can only become rich through acts of violence especially armed robbery, banditry, and kidnapping. A society with a psychologically unbalanced teeming youth will inevitably be manufacturing its own number of armed robbers. Lois Tyson's position on the cumulative effect of the

psychological history of an individual from the smallest unit of society, the family, through adulthood is expressly captured in these words “when we look at the world through a psychoanalytic lens, we see that it is comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experience in the family and each with patterns of adolescent and adult behaviour that are the direct result of that early experience” (14). From the foregoing Tyson’s observation, an individual’s violent disposition in adulthood cannot be totally separated from the person’s formative years through childhood experience in the family and in the larger society.

Hereditary Factor

Hereditary is the transfer of certain genetic traits from one being to another especially between members of the same family group. It has been discovered that many armed robbers share the same robbery traits with a member of the family whether immediate or extended. In the African cultural consciousness, it is believed that when a man is given to stealing, when a family is known or reputed to have such negative traits, it follows that there will always be a member of the family who will manifest those traits at some point in the future. Interestingly, many armed robbers have been known to come from families with such history of stealing. Hereditary as a causative factor of armed robbery is not so popular like the other two factors highlighted above but all the same, it does contribute in its own way to the number of those who embrace robbery as a form of violence in the society. Sometimes, these negative traits are not uniform in the sense that a man who has been known to be a deviant, an outcast, or a woman who is noted for various social vices, can end up having children who manifest these vices in no particular order. Some scholars have queried the origin of hereditary traits. Are there people born with innate negative characteristics? Why would some people be born with positive characteristics while others are born with negative characteristics? What factors account for these disparities in the origination of human species? The answers to these questions are embedded in Darwin’s *Origin of Species* where it is stated that certain traits are natural from the point of birth. If the armed robbery trait is hereditary, it follows that many armed robbers today in Nigeria will naturally have someone in their families who will take their place of ignominy and perhaps with a more daring, heinous approach. Therefore it can be said that although hereditary factor is the least causative reason for armed robbery, it appears to be the most enduring.

Violence in *Once Upon Four Robbers*

Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* dramatizes the lives of four robbers, Angola, Major, Hasan, and Alhaja whose criminal actions are motivated by social negligence, government irresponsibility, and socio-economic corruption within the corridors of power. The play recounts a prevailing social practice in Nigeria during the military era in the 70s, a period when apprehended armed robbers were taken to the bar beach, tied to the stake, and shot by soldiers much to the excitement and delirious appreciation of the spectators. The firing squad spectacle was an official violence which carried state approval that ensured open assassination of citizens of the federal republic of Nigeria caught in the act of armed robbery. Unfortunately, such acts of barbarism and callous waste of lives have done little to dissuade people from embracing armed robbery as a trade. In fact, it has only emboldened robbers who instinctively operate with more daredevil consistency, killing their victims which include police officers, military personnel, and rich members of the society. If therefore such grisly approach like open execution has not stopped or reduced the incidence of armed robbery, it means that a more fundamental and pragmatic approach should be put in place to check the menace. Alternatively, it means that the society should look inwards why people take to armed robbery which, according to the playwright, is caused by the obvious contradictory levels of existence in the society. According to Osofisan "It is obvious that as long as a single, daring nocturnal trip with a gun or machet can yield the equivalent of one man's annual income, we shall continue to manufacture our own potential assassins. For armed robberies, on the scale we are witnessing, are the product of our unjust society" (1). Osofisan implicates the society and holds governmental structures responsible for the growing rate of armed robbery in the country. In some ways, it seems that Osofisan, by blaming the government, is wittingly exonerating citizens who take to armed robbery as a vocation. Robbery, whether armed or not is a reprehensible act, it is a crime against humanity. No religion, traditional or modern, supports armed robbery because it is anti-progressive, anti-human, and retrogressive. However, Osofisan insists that armed robbery is promoted and enhanced by the lopsided distribution of the country's commonwealth. In effect, the playwright questions the obscene display of wealth by government officials, contractors, and politicians much to the neglect of the ordinary citizens. Sola Owonibi observes that "in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan requests whether it is right to kill a group of defaulters when those that sit in

judgement to determine their fates are worse, stealing in millions in their official positions, yet pronouncing death sentence on those that steal peanuts. He sees crime and armed robbery as products of bad leadership". (105) Owonibi's view about the social parody surrounding violence, basically expressed through armed robbery, implicates the leadership echelon and the hypocrisy that lubricates it.

The composition of the armed robbers in the play shows a skewed gender distribution with three men and only one woman, Alhaja. Through this kind of gender imbalance, although Osofisan demonstrate an all-inclusive participation of the citizens in armed robbery, he portrays that men take to the despicable vocation more than their female counterpart. By this kind of gender distribution, one can safely say that there are more men who take to armed robbery than women but even at that, many armed robbery groups have women in them. In fact, there are some armed robbery groups that are totally composed of women.

The play opens with a firing squad spectacle where some armed robbers have just been tied to the stake and shot. Among the killed armed robbers is the leader of a gang of armed robbers who incidentally is husband to Alhaja, the only female in the group. It is apparent that the armed robbers had come to witness the spectacle with a resolve to avenge the death of their leader on society. After witnessing the death of their leader, the robbers are set adrift, confused, and not knowing what to do. A minor discontent among them is immediately brought under control and suddenly, they come in contact with Aafa, an Islamic, spiritual marabout who promises to give them a magic wand that will ensure more success in their trade as long as the wand is used according to instructions.

AAFA: I'll put a power in your hands that will take you out of the gutters. Into the most glittering palaces.

The Aafa promises the robbers a magic chant that when sung, will enchant their victims, allowing them to rob and carry their wares successfully. However, he gives them three rules which they must observe in order to have a successful outing each time they embark on their deadly, violent mission.

AAFA: Three promises and you will be on the way to riches.

MAJOR: The first?

AAFA: Never rob the poor.

ANGOLA: But we have just told you.

AAFA: Promise! (*holds out his 'tira*) I know the poor, they do not love each other.

MAJOR: (*licking the 'tira*) Promised. (*they do so in turn*)

ANGOLA: And the second Promise?

AAFA: To rob only in public places. Not to choose your victims as you do among solitary women. Not to break into homes.

MAJOR: Alright! Promised! (*Again the ritual of assent*)

HASAN: Now, let's hear the third.

AAFA: The most important. You must promise never again to take a human life.

The Aafa emphasizes that the robbers must always chant the song collectively in order to ensure its efficacy. When the robbers apply the magic wand, to their utmost surprise, it works. As they carry on with their illicit vocation, one of them ultimately becomes greedy and tries to steal from the other members. Argument ensues and one of the robbers, Major is shot. The other members of the gang flee for safety and the police, upon arrival at the scene, take the victim's money. Alhaja, the only woman in the gang, approaches the scene where Major is to be shot. She does not succeed in her attempt to rescue Major because she would require the collaborative effort of the other gang members to chant the magical song. She entreats Angola, a leading member of the gang, to forgive Major in order to rescue him so that they can chant the magical song that will hypnotize the public while they escape. As the robbers collectively prepare to sing the song, the soldiers also prepare to shoot. Major and Aafa reappear, freezing the action, and turn to the audience to ask them for an appropriate ending to the play. This audience participation in Osofisan's drama in a sense symbolizes a commitment to task the larger society with a responsibility to become active participants in the affairs that concern them rather than a docile acceptance of various negative tensions that confront them.

Of note in the play is the significance of the market place as a centre for commercial and economic activities, and also as a trope which provides a melting point for humans and gods to intermingle. Usually located at a crossroad, the market place serves multipurpose in the Yoruba epistemological platform because it habits *Esu*, the trickster god of indeterminacy, choice and uncertainties. It is at this market place/crossroad that *Esu* encounters the robbers in the form of Aafa. Sandra Richards underscores the above view by inferring that "usually located either in the

centre of villages, the market place is a favourite spot for *Esu* who mediates the intersections of stability and disorder and of the human and the supernatural" (128). The crossroad literally represents *Esu*'s indeterminacy and idea of choice, and naturally becomes the god's preferred stomping venue. As a supernatural element, *Esu*, in the human form of *Aafa*, first berates the robbers for taking to ignoble vocation. However, *Esu* immediately changes its position as a moral gadfly and become an accomplice by giving the robbers a magic wand that will ensure their success. By becoming an accomplice, it shows that supernatural elements can become hand-in-gloves to perpetuate evil and wickedness in the society. In contemporary times, many armed robbers have been caught with charms given to them by spiritual personages, those who claim to have access to the gods. These charms are given to them to aid their illicit business and ensure more success. *Esu*, as an accomplice in armed robbery implicates supernatural elements in causing human misery and grief. Therefore, Wole Soyinka opines that "the Yoruba does not for that reason fail to distinguish between himself and the deities, between himself and the ancestors, between the unborn and his reality, or discard his awareness of the existential gulf that lies between one area of existence and another" (144). Soyinka's view above enjoins humanity to establish an identity that is not subject to the whims and caprices of supernatural elements. However, Derek Wright argues that in Yoruba cosmology from where *Osofisan's* draws his creative idiosyncrasies, the relationship between humans and supernatural elements is inevitable so that one cannot do without the other. According to him "in the single, undivided reality of Yoruba religious, social, and commercial life, the accessories of the modern world are constantly drawn into the embrace of cosmic essences so that the numinous and the mundane are never very far apart" (9). Although Wright's views above concerns the Yoruba spiritual system, it does however encompass a general idea across many spiritual continuums all over Africa as humanity and gods are infinitely intertwined in a reciprocal relationship. If we argue that the supernatural realm represents the perfect, quintessential existence, if we also argue that the gods represent that same realm, can we justify the role of the gods in perpetuating violence through armed robbery as we have seen in the role of *Esu* with the robbers? Today, violence in Nigeria is more prevalent in politics where desperate beings engage in treachery and subterfuge for inordinate goals. According to Soyinka:

Violence in politics takes many forms. All dead-end approaches

to political goals – that is, political acts which create a cul-de-sac for all participants in the political process, including even those who initiate the process, constitute a violence which in itself breeds counter violence. The nature of violence can be putrefying or it can be obscene (xxi)

Soyinka's observation above pigeonholes the political process as providing the platform for the incidence of violence in Nigeria and unfortunately, young, unemployed youths are exploited and deployed for devious purposes by political predators in the pursuit of political power.

Conclusion

Once Upon Four Robbers addresses the scourge of armed robbery in the society. In 2011 many years after writing the play, Osofisan remarks that:

I am concerned that for more than five decades now, since independence, anomy has been the routine condition of our 'normal' life. We wake from bed each day in febrile anxiety, unsure of our neighbours and of our governments, unsure even of the next sundown. Senseless violence unleashed with venomous and homicidal fury by one set of citizens upon another set of nationals, has become a banal cliché of journalistic reportage (6).

The playwright implicates the government for the prevalence of the menace because they fail to manage the country and put the necessary structures that will ensure an equitable distribution of the country's commonwealth among the citizens. The four robbers, Angola, Major, Hasan, and Alhaja, through their initial exchanges demonstrate their anger at losing their leader and also their resolve to avenge his death. However, their excuse that the government failed in its responsibility to provide adequately for the masses does not appeal to the conscious mind because their criminal actions are not only directly at the government but also to ordinary, poor citizens as themselves who have, through self-determination and hard work, achieved a level of success in their chosen field of endeavour. It is important therefore that the conscious mind condemns armed robbery in spite of the reasons of neglect by the government as extenuated by the robbers. Armed robbers are social outcasts and should be treated as such. No reason should justify the act of plundering the social space and inflicting misery on the people.

Viewed from another perspective, we see the role of the supernatural in the affairs of men. This is a regular motif in Osofisan's plays who posits that humanity must always resort to supernatural powers for advancement and progress. The robbers' encounter with Aafa, the Muslim marabout, who many claim is Esu, symbolizes man's inexorable encounter with supernatural elements. This is because Aafa claims to know the hidden secret of every human success and promptly demonstrates this by giving them a magic wand that promotes their illicit trade and guarantees them success. This show of solidarity towards social instruments of destruction by a supernatural element calls to question the place, position, and role of the supernatural in the affairs of men.

Besides implicating the government in the increasing incidence of armed robbery, there is also a negative exposition on Nigeria's security apparatus especially the army and the police who are portrayed as dishonest and deceptive. The exchange among the soldiers reveals their insincere hearts and the rot that runs through the rank and file of the Nigerian army. The soldiers, although sworn to oath of allegiance to serve the state, make a mockery of the government and its leadership structure while lampooning the leadership class who they protect. The soldiers' admiration of wealth and their desire to migrate to the wealthy class reveals a dangerous trend that runs through members of the armed forces. It is such inordinate craving for materialism which negates their oath of allegiance that pushes some of them to form alliance with criminals to sabotage the government and the society. Indeed, the play takes a pride of places within literary circles in dissecting the menace of armed robbers, identifying its root causes and also proffering a panacea as well.

Osofisan's ideological presentation of choice as the end of the play is captured by Femi Fatoba when he remarks that "when at the end of the play Aafa throws the question of choice to the audience, he is in effect asking them to choose between two different approaches to life; that of the "honest" thieves (represented by the four robbers) and the dishonest ones represented by the soldiers who are the servants and protectors of the rich and those of us who collude with them" (86). Literally, Osofisan encourages audience participation in the affairs of the country rather than a docile acceptance of the status quo.

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