

Aesthetics: Redefining Femi Osofisan's Dramatic Commitment

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Abstract

Nigeria's playwright Femi Osofisan's dramaturgy challenges the inherent disequilibrium in class stratification. Through a Marxist prism, he seeks to awaken the masses out of lethargy by exposing the prevailing, dilapidating conditions in society. The widespread and continuous interpretations of his plays along Marxist ideological designation have stripped them of literariness especially their aesthetic immediacy. This has posed a problem in classifying his plays. Using the Formalist Theory, this study reveals that Osofisan's drama conveys sublime literary sensibilities in the same breath as the ideological outline which is the concern of many critics. Through a combination of style, content, technique, and other literary strategies, the playwright promotes his art to align with the 'art for art sake' school of thought. The study further demonstrates that the playwright's aesthetic commitment imbues spontaneity to his artistic current, thus, playing more vital roles in the appreciation of his plays. His plays, *Morountodun* and *Once Upon Four Robbers* are critically interpreted through the Formalist theoretical framework to convey artistic and theatrical flourishes which emblemize them as literary manuscripts rather than political or ideological tracts. By identifying the aesthetic unity in the texts, the playwright is seen more as an advocate of literary culture than a socio-political, Marxist crusader which diminishes his creative reputation.

Key words: Aesthetics, Formalism, Art, Interpretation, Re-definition

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Introduction

The immanence of aesthetics in the creative process constitutes a significant aspect of art. Creativity is the cornerstone of aesthetics. It thrives on imagination, providing the necessary impetus for every artistic creation. Imagination is the foundation of aesthetic creativity without which art will flounder on the heels of bland mediocrity. Art broadly includes literature, sculpture, music, painting, philosophy, and history. However, of all the listed forms of art, literature, which includes drama, poetry, and prose, has a domineering, sometimes tyrannical identity over the other forms. Beyond the foregoing branches of knowledge mentioned above, aesthetics encompasses other disciplines where it sometimes morphs into a theoretical framework which becomes a guiding precept for that discipline. Echoing the preceding sentiment, Angela Calcaterra remarks that “spanning disciplines including philosophy, literature, art, political theory, and environmental studies, the field of aesthetics contains what can seem a dizzying array of theories and perspectives” (16). Calcaterra’s observation relating to art further emblemizes the multiple identity of artistic creation. This demonstrates aesthetics’ vast tentacles which extend to different disciplines, sub-categories of disciplines, and other sub-divisions of knowledge. The overriding interest in this study is to demonstrate that Nigeria’s playwright Femi Osofisan, in addition to his Marxist, social inclinations, also utilizes the rich resources of aesthetics to promote a robust literary enlightenment. Although literature mirrors humanity in diverse ways, sometimes assuming the role of a moral police, social crusader, entertainer, and a mouthpiece for an egalitarian social structure, its identity as a discipline of sublime beauty bulks large in the entire artistic procedure.

The desire to achieve aesthetics is first and foremost the inevitable purpose of artistic engagement which subliminally excites the sensibilities of the reader or audience, sometimes without their being aware. Without aesthetics, art will lose its flavour and appeal. Without aesthetics, art is inconsequential. Therefore, one can profitably argue that aesthetics is the first philosophy of art. Hegel elevates art above nature by remarking that “the beauty of art is higher than nature” (2). Although some critics may argue that Hegel’s observation is hyperbolic, it argues in favour of the intrinsic beauty of art over nature. It is debatable if indeed art possesses more beauty than nature. However, Terry Eagleton has a different idea of aesthetics which, when interrogated is not far from artistic appeal. According to him:

aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body. In its original formulation by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, the term refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek *aisthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought (13).

Eagleton steers aesthetics away from art, situating it within the ambience of beauty in relation to the human body. Although it appears that Eagleton moves aesthetics away from the artistic region, his argument reinforces the pride of place which aesthetics occupies in art. This is because human beauty and all its essences are captured in artistic creation to the extent that beauty in art and beauty in human body are conspicuously intertwined. Robert Appelbaum argues that aesthetics is better understood when it is studied as a major component of art. He remarks that “though ‘aesthetics’ is commonly used to designate the philosophy of art, it is more useful to discuss aesthetics as the interaction of artworks and their audiences, readers and viewers” (10). The relationship between an artwork and the audience is composed of the effect the artwork can elicit from the audience. These effects range from a narrow sphere to wider possibilities, laughter to cries, and admiration to resentment and so on.

The aesthetics in literature is the primary motive which the writer may unconsciously convey while consciously paying attention to ideological objectives. In the hierarchy of the effects of art on human sensibilities, aesthetics occupies a pride of place, ranking the first by its concise impact on human faculties. It is always the first to titillate the senses and sustain an unspoken but present interest in artistic pleasures. Timothy Aubry reminds us that “though rarely discussed explicitly, certain tacit aesthetic criteria and the desires they serve have continued to play a central role in shaping the arguments literary scholars produce” (2). It follows that literature and all its dynamics are indebted to the aesthetic experience. With regards to literature, aesthetics is split into two different dimensions – the external and the internal. The external aesthetics is immediately recognizable to the faculties and its effect is apparent to external observations. Visual, auditory, and olfactory sensibilities are external aesthetics’ first bride. Its effect could be temporary and fleeting with a possibility to be replaced by a more exalted aestheticized endeavour. Internal aesthetics on the other hand purges the soul through catharsis. Its effect is more enduring with a capacity to alter perspectives, beliefs, and convictions. While painting and sculptor are more identified with external aesthetics, literature is more associated with internal aesthetics which resides in the inward being. Hegel again reminds us

that historically, “there was a period when works of art were treated with regard to the feelings they were supposed to produce, as, for instance, the feeling of pleasure, admiration, fear, pity, and so on” (1). Hegel’s categorization of art has not changed much in contemporary times. Art still serves the same purpose even in the 21st century artistic pursuit. We can talk in terms of the beauty of drama, prose, and poetry, although, this beauty may not be seen or perceived immediately. It is located inwardly but stakes a claim for sensual accommodation in the outside world.

For the purpose of this study, aesthetics shall be restricted within the confines of literature, especially drama. Specifically, drama provides a veritable platform for aesthetics to blossom given its capacity to accommodate theatricality, improvisation, costumes, and other artistic effects which serve as vehicles through which the aesthetic experience is conveyed. The importance of drama in the dynamism of aesthetics is collaborated by Mathew DeCoursey when he remarks that “the idea of aesthetics has had a particular functional place in drama education especially where drama is viewed as a means to teach other materials” (13). DeCoursey’s view of drama and its relationship with aesthetics can be interpreted to mean that drama provides the essential elements which furnish other artistic avenues – their aesthetic immediacy. Thus, we can say that in art, the bedrock of aesthetics resides in dramatic composition.

The image of art and its effect on the audience have continued to exercise an overwhelming influence on lovers of creative beauty. However, Theodor Adorno believes that the continuous transformation of art into various forms makes it difficult to ascribe any definite identity to it. According to him “the concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements, it refuses definition. Its essence cannot be deduced from its origin as if the first works were a foundation on which everything that followed were constructed and would collapse if shaken” (11). It is that transformation of art that has given birth to literature and its multiple branches. Whether drama, poetry, or prose, there is a sense in which we can say that literature, through the written word, embraces other forms of art. Writing is a sublime activity which involves creativity at the highest echelon. Many creative writers are easily identified for one concern or commitment, yet many more are noted for multiple concerns and commitments. While some writers are interested in the aesthetics of imagery, other writers may be interested in the aesthetics of style, rhyme, ideology, semantics, and technique. Femi Osofisan’s creative idiosyncrasies straddle aesthetics achieved through the appropriation of African folkloric contents on one hand and ideological concerns achieved through the recreation of the Marxist bent on the

other hand. While the former focuses on entertainment, the later aims to create mass awareness to the deplorable socio-economic conditions in his native Nigeria. Again, while the former is largely muted but has consistently provided a benchmark for the appreciation of the playwright's artistic commitments, the later has received overwhelming attention all over the world, becoming the playwright's recognizable identity as a literary artist.

Aesthetics is sustained out of an immediate desire to entertain but also to create an indelible, enduring artistic impression on the mind of the audience. It goes beyond creating a jocular or comical atmosphere for entertainment. It is deeper than that. It is the soul of art, the irreducible principle of beauty which grants eloquent signification to literature and enthrones it to an honorific level above philosophy, history, and music; although these disciplines have their remarkable aesthetic complexion by which they are recognized. Given the unstable and inconsistent nature of art in the 21st century owing to the balkanization of the frontiers of interpretation, literature seems to be losing its original glory, gradually becoming a political tract, and an ideological blueprint of some sort. Therefore, it is necessary to re-establish its glory as an artistic discipline by restoring its intrinsic heritage. The beauty of art must take precedent over all other considerations. Osofisan's drama is one of the many examples where beauty is defined but which unfortunately has lost out to ideological paradigms. An immediate recognizable aspect of Osofisan's dramaturgy is his recreation of various African folkloric components such as songs, dance, chants, proverbs, incantations, and performance. These aspects of Africa's artistic heritage combine to create aesthetic realities, an appealing acceptance which revalorizes literature as an eternal vehicle of beauty. Osofisan's plays selected for this study animate his creative ingenuity showing an uncommon commitment to art and culture. His artistic/cultural commitment intersects his concerns with the plight of the masses which inevitably exposes his ideological inclinations. Given his observable interface between artistic and ideological realities, it is safe to say that the playwright's creative output can be situated in external and internal aesthetic complexion. In that way, his works can be regarded as a complete aesthetic manuscript which impact external and internal sensibilities. Although we can say that aesthetics' external effects are short term and fleeting while the internal effects are more enduring, both combine to achieve and create a total aesthetic experience. Literature possesses multiple, flexible and sustained apparatuses which create a comfortable habitation for upholding aesthetic inflections in general art. But more directly, African folklore which is Osofisan's anchor provides an irresistible aesthetic master class.

Aesthetics: Formalist intrusion

Formalist critical theory otherwise known as the “art for art sake” school of thought conceives literature as a distinct, specialized discipline, an aspect or category of knowledge which should be interpreted and understood on its own merit. It establishes an immediate connection with aesthetics through emphasis on beauty conveyed by the literariness of the text. Suffice it to say that formalism is a lieutenant of aesthetics. The close-knit relationship between formalism and aesthetics is reinforced by Fredric Bogel’s remark that “historically, the term formalism in criticism and theory as in aesthetics usually signifies a concern with an artwork’s formal features, not just its thematic or representational elements” (4). From Fredric’s observation, formalism and aesthetics share a commitment to establish and revalidate the artistic characteristics of art which is why they have occurred together in this study. Although Osofisan’s two plays selected for this study are prominent in the realm of thematic, ideological, and historical concerns, the study glosses over them to concentrate on the nuances of aesthetics. In a way, if we consider that language and other aesthetics of literature constitute the first encounter by readers, it then means that formalism should be the first approach to any creative or literary engagement.

A first encounter with Osofisan’s plays immediately indicates a deployment of such African folkloric components as proverbs, incantations, songs and dance which provoke a fascination lost in the chambers of ideological interpretations of the texts. Elements of literariness are embodied by iconic literary items such as language, form, and content which provide the catalyst for the formalist theoretical framework. The theory challenges literature to demarcate its own contours without necessarily depending on other ideological strands as politics, ethics, history or myth. According to the principles of formalism, a piece of literature prose, poem or drama must not be viewed as a political, social, ideological text but rather must be understood by allusion to its inherent artistic, literary values which the text portrays. To embark on a critical formalist interpretation of a text therefore, the critic must concentrate on such artistic identifiers as songs, language, technique, style which all combine to convey the text’s connate aesthetic values. Formalist critics argue that art should compulsorily appeal to the sensibilities through the deployment of major artistic ingredients. These ingredients, they argue further, are what confer on art its essential identity distinct from other disciplines.

From 1915 when it originated in Russia, formalist theory, through the combined efforts of Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, started by denouncing the previous literary theory, Mimesis, which was anchored on ideological precepts such as the

imitation of reality but which stripped literature of its beauty and appeal. Given its growing popularity across the world especially in Britain and America, Formalism acquired a new nomenclature as New Criticism because it sought to replace the old ways of interpreting literature. While challenging the previous theories, Formalist Criticism charted a new course by prescribing to the world the values of literary elements which not only entertained but also inspired. The theory sought to redeem literature from the confines of impressionistic and subjective posture of the critic saddled with the responsibility to analyse it. Interpreting African literature through the formalist prism seems an enjoyable, easy task because there is avalanche of linguistic materials expressed through the writer's deployment of African traditional components such as folklore and culture. These traditional materials do not exist in isolation but rather are animated through the vehicle of language and the formalist is interested in these linguistic complexions. Also, because songs have specialised distinct characteristics, they are rendered in poetic structures, style, and technique which enable their immediate understanding and comprehension.

Part of Osofisan's theatrical fervent is located in his use of African cultural components such as chants, songs and dance. These constitute the first literary elements which contribute to the growth and acceptance of his creative repertoire. Although Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* attempts to denounce the socio-economic contradictions in Nigeria that gave rise to the spectre of armed robbery in the early 70s, the message of the play is conveyed through the language of songs and incantations. Having started the play with the song "Iton mi dori o dori", the playwright sets the tone for a sensuous appreciation of events which culminate in further singing by the characters to achieve a musico-dramatic import. The use of incantation and its efficacy is achieved through a song mode where the characters are required to chant it for immediate impact. Therefore, songs, chants and incantations constitute an admirable formalist import in the play. In *Morountodun*, viewed through a formalist prism, the play-within-a-play technique is a vehicle for conveying and recreating the flashback technique which helps to alternate events in the play from the past to present. However, there is a sense in which we can argue that the formalist complexion of both plays is not easily discernible due to the playwright's apparent commitment to his Marxist and social engineering concerns.

Aesthetic outlines in *Morountodun*

The immediate striking artistic identity in Osofisan's *Morountodun* is the play-within-a-play technique, a dramatic form where the parent play accommodates

another play and through it, extends the thematic concerns of the playwright. Although this technique in *Morountodun* raises some concerns and creates difficulties in the understanding of the text, it is through the same technique that the play's aesthetic identity is sustained and understood. Most of Osofisan's aesthetic fervor in his art is primarily borrowed from history, culture, myth, and folklore which he utilizes to furnish his Marxist/class orientation and showcases the propriety of his aesthetic commitment. Borrowing is a legitimate practice in art. When writers and artists borrow, they are at liberty to manipulate the resources of their source and transmute them for personal, creative purposes. In pursuing his class dichotomy ideas, Osofisan borrows from history and myth and in so doing, conveys an aesthetic consciousness which adds to the exaltation of his creative fount. Harry Garuba emphasizes this culture of borrowing by remarking that "Osofisan adopts a free-wheeling iconoclastic attitude to antecedent texts from which/whom he constantly borrows materials which he then refigures for the purpose of his own creative interests" (136). It follows that Osofisan borrows most of his aesthetic materials to furnish his artistic commitment. In the same vein, Sandra Richards reinforces Osofisan's historical borrowing by remarking that "grounding his vision of change in a dialectical reading of history, Osofisan manipulates his Yoruba and Western heritages to speak directly of socio-political challenges facing his society and to scrutinize art as a (counter) hegemonic practice" (vii). This means that whether in his social or artistic commitments, Osofisan relies on the provisions of other humanistic disciplines such as history to furnish his creative ingenuity. His play *Morountodun*'s main project is to recreate a historical event that took place in parts of Western Nigeria in 1969 when farmers took to arms and fought against the state. However, in his bid to also move away from history and situate his revolutionary concerns in the present, the playwright introduces another play within the main play which serves as an extension of his social commitment. A play that occurs within another play can be regarded as a sub-drama that embellishes the main dramatic project or becomes its collaborative accolade. This kind of technique has a suspended effect on the audience due to its ability to create a double effect of understanding on the sensibilities.

In a sense, *Morountodun*'s first aesthetic appeal is the play-within-a-play technique which is provided by a historical event. In the beginning of the play, the audience is immediately confronted with a play which many believe is the main play but which is only a different play serving as an introduction. Omofolabo Ajayi pointedly remarks that "particularly effective is the structure of the play which employs a dramatic technique of double inversion of fiction and reality. This is a structural and

aesthetic device that departs even from the conventional *play within a play*" (88). Ajayi calls the play-within-a-play technique "double invasion of fiction and reality". Whatever is the nomenclature, Osofisan's aesthetic experiment in the play is anchored on the introduction of a play which introduces the main play. In the play, the Director of a drama group is rallying his troops for a presentation to recreate the Agbekoya farmers' revolt, a historical event which took place in the Western part of Nigeria in 1969. Given that aesthetics generates its artistic elevation as a source of pleasure, sensation and feeling, the dramatic enactment which introduces Osofisan's *Morountodun* can easily be interpreted along those appendages because the play titillates the audience's sensuous faculties. The foregoing idea aligns with Thomas Hilgers' submission that "every aesthetic experience, however, must involve the participation of one's sensuous capacities" (1). First, the introductory play gives the audience a measure of pleasure to learn about a historical event where ordinary farmers took to arms and rose to fight against the government. The pleasurable, sensuous complexion of the event is sustained by the hitherto perception of farmers as docile, illiterate, and timid but who, suddenly, are roused out of lethargy to a sudden awareness to fight for their rights. The dramatic incident also generates more aesthetic sensuous pleasure because in addition to recreating the historical incident, it utilizes the opportunity to lampoon the avaricious tendencies of the wealthy, ruling class in society. In this way, the opening drama, in its aesthetic immediacy achieves two pleasurable aims – to recreate history and to challenge a bourgeois, capitalist society. The second aesthetic disposition of the introductory drama is its elicitation of sensation and feelings among the audience. According to the Director of the play: "We decided not to be silent. We decided to go and rouse people up by doing a play on the subject. We decided to do a play about it, and take it round to all open places. We thought we were contributing towards the process of finding a solution ..." (6)

Aesthetics as a source of sensation relates to how art gains access to the human sensibility and affects its total composition. In a way, sensation could be rebellious in which case the senses reject or oppose what has been communicated to the human faculties. This rebellious nature of the senses could be provoked unconsciously because the human faculties prefer to remain unchallenged in relation to already acquired notions of the world. Indeed, the human mind fears every new idea because it exposes the inadequacies of the cognitive, knowledge-searching endeavour of man. In addition to being rebellious in its reaction to aesthetic effects, the senses can also be accommodating, in which case they accept and digest the beauty of art

upon reception. Rebellion and accommodation as sensuous reactions to art could vary from one individual to another and among different people. The drama at the beginning of *Morountodun* could achieve both objectives on the senses depending on the consciousness of the reader. For example, a wealthy person who has always benefitted from exploiting the poor, someone whose life is defined by avaricious tendencies, a bleeding capitalist mindset who believes in the primordial inequalities in human existences will naturally have his sensibilities rebel against the opening drama, opposing its commitment. Such rebellion and opposition could manifest outwardly in the form of frowns or quietude which underscores the turmoil in the senses. In addition to stirring sensation in the human faculties, aesthetics of art also enthrone pleasure, fear and admiration. So, for a bourgeois apologist, the opening drama could elicit fear, that is, fear that the unequal and exploitative nature of the upper class was about to be exposed and ridiculed. The fear could then transmute to admiration and pleasure because the police, a perennial willing instrument in the hands of the rich immediately arrives to interrupt the play. Also, Titubi, the ebullient daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, a rich woman and leader of the market women, came to disrupt the play. Such admiration and pleasure at the interruption of the play could give rise to laughter, applause, and cheers which are all outcomes of the effects on the senses.

In the same breath, an impoverished person who has serially been a victim of capitalist exploitation and deprivation will easily be receptive and accommodating of the thrust of the play because it seeks to expose the disequilibrium in economic and social relations in society. That the play is a product of history is a plus for the person of sympathy towards unequal class relationships. This is because it shows that even in history, the poor resisted attempts to continually subjugate and exploit them. Such sensate reaction in the reception and accommodation of the play could be in the form of laughter, clapping, and a rapt attention to learn and enrich the senses. Beyond history which the opening play recreates, the immediate concern of the play which is to educate the poor and provoke them to react to various treatments of injustice also excites the victim of class contradiction. By so doing, Osofisan achieves an aesthetic objective in his play using a mini play to undergird his thematic concerns. The opening play's aesthetic intrusion finds expression in demarcating two classes of people within the audience. Although there could be a third category of audience who are neither rebellious nor receptive of the dramatic message, even indifference to artistic beauty is in itself an aesthetic experience. To be indifferent to the beauty of art is to recognize its existence but to maintain that the senses are not

affected by it. It is truly difficult to remain indifferent to the introductory drama with which Osofisan sets off his artistic project in *Morountodun*. Some critics have interpreted the introductory scene of the play as Osofisan's ideological bent towards Marxism but Muyiwa Awodiya thinks that the playwright does not align himself to any ideological sect. According to Awodiya, "Osofisan shuns dogma and ideological labelling. Whenever he is asked to define his political ideology, he is always evasive because according to him, all the labels have been abused and misused" (37). Osofisan's denial of any ideological subscription further justifies a classification of his creative engagement as aesthetic and literary rather than as political and social.

Osofisan's further aesthetic experiment in *Morountodun* is easily located in his redefinition, restructuring, and re-ordering of the dramatic convention of compartmentalization. Ordinarily, every drama is compartmentalized into acts and scenes which introduce new occasions and events. However, in *Morountodun*, the playwright moves away from that conventional approach to dictate and enable a different approach. In the play, instead of the traditional acts and scenes, the audience is presented with an unusual numbering which starts from one to sixteen. In this way, the playwright jettisons the regular rule of separating drama into acts and scenes as a communicative strategy. This is a major artistic departure which grates on the sensuous and contributes to the aesthetic project of the play. By adopting an approach inconsistent with the dramatic genre but consistent with the fiction genre, the playwright introduces a new way of dramatic delivery without tampering with the core issues of the play. Its aesthetic creativity is not lost but rather enables an easy, critical following of events in the play as they develop. *Morountodun's* only dramatic identity is the separate lines spoken by the characters. Beyond that, the play shares almost a striking semblance with a piece of prose which adopts a narrative approach. While prose makes use of chapters to demarcate the various events in it, drama makes use of acts and scenes. While prose makes use of narration, drama makes use of dialogue. Osofisan's *Morountodun* can therefore be termed as a quasi-prose due to its structural delineation. Beyond the structural quasi-prose complexion, the characters speak their lines in a prosaic form which is inconsistent with the normal poetic delivering of dramatic lines. The aesthetic immediacy of that artistic approach creates a sensuous appeal which demands an altogether new assessment of the relationship between prose and drama. The structure of both genres of literature can collapse into each other without altering their creative identity.

Aesthetic complexion in *Once Upon Four Robbers*

Once Upon Four Robbers has always been interpreted as an ideological drama which argues that armed robbery subsists because the government has enabled the vice due to its negligence of the citizens. According to Femi Fatoba “*Once Upon Four Robbers* is a dialectical interpretation of the sociological phenomenon of armed robbery which has plagued Nigeria since 1970” (81). Again, Biodun Jeyifo avers that “first everyone knows that Femi Osofisan is a man of left, a radical writer and critic and has embraced a class approach to the production and reception of literature in our society” (230). Also, James Taar Tsaaior conveys the same radical ideological bent which informs Osofisan’s artistic commitment. According to him, “as a committed and engaged artist whose sympathy resides with the people, Osofisan has mobilized his art and etched it on a visionary pedestal as a revolutionary imperative for the social transformation of society and the re-humanization of the people” (39). However, beyond the ideological concerns of the play which these critics identify, its aesthetic appeal towers high to also confer an artistic, creative emblem to it. The dramatic and aesthetic complexion of the play thrives on a dense eclectic artistic attribute which straddles entertainment on one hand and didactic commitment on another hand.

Osofisan’s first aesthetic intrusion in the play is the deployment of song and dance which immediately appeals to the senses, creating an enduring literary beauty. Song and dance are aspects of the creative imagination which derive their roots and origin as elements of African folkloric composition. Scott McMillin underscores the importance of music as a wholesome branch of art by remarking that “the musical is a dramatic genre of its own” (10). Perhaps it is the importance of music as an aesthetic ingredient in dramatic genre that inspired Osofisan to anchor his theatrical nuance in the text on music and dance. Originally, the composition of local songs formed part of the African cultural heritage which the traditional society utilized in achieving diverse purposes ranging from entertainment, historical preservations, celebration of myth and legend, and as a remarkable part of local festivals. Dance on the other hand was the cognate accomplice of songs which were adopted to add flavour and entertainment to diverse cultural practices. Most African traditional practices are preceded by songs and dance especially those associated with festivals and cultural celebrations. Gradually, songs and dance became creative instruments in the hands of literary artists who saw in them an avenue to demonstrate their aesthetic consciousness. The usual artistic platform that accommodates song and

dance is drama. Although there could be aspects of songs and dance in other genres of literary art especially poetry, its deployment in drama is more pronounced because it forms part of the dialogic pattern which a playwright can freely recreate. In contemporary times, there are musical compositions which also contain drama. In Africa, cultural festivals derive their verve and vitality from the rendition of songs and dance. Indeed, there is a sense in which we can say that songs and dance provide the most visible and impactful aesthetic experience in literature no matter in what genre they occur. For Osofisan, songs and dance provide the immediate spine in his play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Although the ideological commitment of the play is stronger than its artistic and aesthetic concerns, yet, it can be appreciated from a standpoint of its sensuous effect on the audience.

At the beginning of the play, Osofisan introduces a song which immediately ushers in an entertaining atmosphere far removed from the initial expectations of the play conveyed through the title. The play starts with a prologue where a story-teller engages the audience through a song and response pattern which achieves a rhythmic design forming an aesthetic experience. The title of the song is *Song of A Story-Teller*. Although the song is rendered in Osofisan's native Yoruba language, its translation at the glossary section at the end of the play preaches the message contained in the entire play. This kind of dramatic strategy is at once captivating and at large invigorating because it strips the play of its expected horrific design which such compositions about armed robbers convey. The significance of the song hinges on its passionate rendering by the story-teller. As he renders the song, the audience is involved, replying to the calls and queries thus achieving a refrain which adds captivating beauty to the dramatic composition. Without necessarily asking the audience to dance, the inviting allure of the song becomes increasingly irresistible which ultimately provokes a dance from everyone. The song and dance at the beginning of the play, beyond creating an aesthetic atmosphere achieves two main objectives. First, it complements the sensuous faculties of the audience and initiates their sensibilities into an entertaining mode devoid of the angst and apprehension of robbery tensions. In this way, the audience is better disposed to accept and interpret the play objectively which is always Osofisan's creative strategy in his literary repertoire. The playwright is convinced that instead of being subjective in communicating with the audience through art, they should be allowed to watch, draw inferences and make their judgements. Secondly, although the lyrics of the song are depressing because it introduces the audience to highway men, yet, beyond

the wordings, the song's lyrics delicately titillate the senses through its aesthetic complexion.

Song and dance again occur in the play as an important determinant of its aesthetic design. The four robbers in the play encounter a spiritual marabout called Aafa who pretends to know the secret of human indulgences and relations. The robbers hold him in awe and he promises to give them a powerful spiritual medium that would aid their daring escapades as armed robbers and make them rich within a short time. However, the Aafa gives the robbers three conditions under which the magic wand will work effectively. First, he tells them never to rob the poor, secondly, he tells them to rob only in public places and third, he tells them never to take human life in their operations. The armed robbers agree to all the conditions and in return, the Aafa gives them the magic wand which is in the form of song and dance.

According to the Aafa:

Aafa: Yes, sing and dance. It's an irresistible power. Once you begin to sing, anyone within hearing distance stops whatever he is doing and joins. He will sing and dance and then head home to sleep. And he wont wake till the next morning. (31)

The secret of the song is that each robber must sing his lines differently to ensure the efficacy so that no robber can do without another robber. The potency of the magic wand through song can only be achieved through a collective approach. Thus, song and dance are categorized as possessing the power to hold people together, ensuring their togetherness. More importantly, the aesthetic imperative of song and dance for the second time in the play is structured through the instrumentality of magic via a spiritual process. At this point in the play, the introduction of song and dance helps to relieve the tedium which hitherto overshadowed its artistic canvas. However, the deployment of song and dance here is for the attainment of nefarious objectives which are at variance with the traditional understanding of the place of song and dance in African culture and folklore. Given Osofisan's use of song and dance in the play, there is a sense in which we can refer to the play as a verse-dramatic composition because it combines dialogue and acting. Immediately the robbers apply the magic wand of song and dance as instructed by the Islamic cleric Aafa, their victims dance, moving away from their wares. Thus, the robbers rob the victims effectively. Indeed, songs and dance are undeniable attributes of the creative experience. Its infusion and use in Osofisans drama elevate his art form beyond the rudiments of ideology. At the heart of the deployment of song and dance is

entertainment. It also revalorises the cultural and folkloric ambience of the Yoruba indigenous creative culture.

Also, in *Once Upon Four Robbers* as in *Morountodun*, Osofisan again invests the play with a new structural outline which jettisons the regular dramatic divisions into acts and scenes. The playwright divides the play into three parts, Part One, Part Two, and Part Three. The division elevates his dramatic commitment above the mundane and simplistic because through it, he is able to create his artistic posture without abiding or restricting himself to the old order. Osofisan's aesthetic commitment in the two plays achieves a rare immediacy which harbours in their bosom, entertainment, didactic posturing and cultural revival. Although it can be argued that his deployment of song and dance in the play aids criminality and achieves an objectionable end, its aesthetic appeal is not lost on the audience. Also, it can be argued that the playwright through his use of song and dance in the play undermines the spiritual realm which is acclaimed to possess the secrets of the world for positive ends. But the resolute loyalty to song and dance in the play transcends all other considerations because the focus is on the playwright's aesthetic commitments.

Conclusion

Aesthetics in art especially literature is comparable to a fountain on the hills of a natural summer rock. Aesthetics beautifies art. In literature especially drama, there is a robust room for the insertion of artistic elements which create beauty and improve reception by the audience. Osofisan is notably an ideological writer committed to enthroning an egalitarian society where social justice and equity can prevail. This is the thrust and kernel of his creative repertoire. However, from the two plays analysed above, it is apparent that beyond his ideological commitments, he is also aesthetically committed to promoting art, thereby creating room for its formalist interpretations. This study has re-established Osofisan's selected plays in focus from the tyranny of ideological interpretations restoring them to art and literature which is the immediate concern of the formalist critic. For example, it is difficult to see *Morountodun* interpreted from any perspective apart from being a revolutionary manuscript which seeks to provoke the poor to revolt against the rich. Such interpretations have over the years almost completely wiped away all the shreds and elements of artistic endeavour in the play. Also, by interpreting the plays from a formalist prism and isolating their aesthetic complexions, it helps to embolden other critics to direct their critical searchlight towards other Osofisan's plays since it is proven from the analysis of the two plays in this study that he is also committed to

promoting artistic beauty and aesthetic awareness. While the title of the first play *Morountodun*, a Yoruba word which literally translates as “I have found something sweet” may convey an aesthetic mindset, the title of the second play *Once Upon Four Robbers* lacks anything creative or aesthetic. Overall, there are enough indications to categorize Osofisan as an aesthetic artist whose love for literature is not restricted to social engineering. Art and beauty are indeed the first love of any artist. The difference is the critical approach of those who engage in their interpretations.

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