Iconic symbols in Femi Osofisan’s *Once Upon Four Robbers*

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**Abstract**

Femi Osofisan is a committed playwright who believes fervently in emphasizing the social responsibility of the playwright. He has sought in several ways to make the theatre reflect the problems of the Nigerian society and to make his plays a platform for exploring these social issues. His plays are replete with symbols which explore these social ills in Nigeria. Examples abound in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen*, *Many Colours Make The Thunder King*, *Red is the Freedom Road* etc. This paper seeks to examine, interpret the Iconic Symbols in *Once Upon Four Robbers* and how these symbols reflect the very concrete and biting socio-political statements. The paper submits, therefore, that Osofisan deliberately employ symbols in *Once Upon Four Robbers* to show the society for what it is and for the audience (readers) to have a fuller comprehension of his dramaturgy.

**Keywords:** Committed, cavalier, iconic symbols, social ills, uncommon sense.

**Introduction**

Femi Osofisan’s works demonstrate and give support to the view that political and social commentary is the epicenter of contemporary Nigerian drama. Olu Obafemi sees Osofisan as: “A dialectical materialist who consciously rejects idealism fraught with tragic recommendation that are fatalistic, deterministic and passive for the society” (Awodiya viii).

Osofisan’s dramatic oeuvre equally draws inspiration from traditional culture, but he uses devices of oral literature and songs as insignia of his alienation technique. He uses his plays as platform for exploring social issues. The world that Osofisan present in his plays is a real world, which according to Olu Obafemi and Ahmed Yerima are, “consistently involved in a process of change and manifestly observable from the conflict of struggle with oppressive hegemony in society” (135). Osofisan’s plays are permeated with dialectic and didactic elements. He is a playwright with an eye for the problems of his society. Muyiwa Awodiya says Osofisan’s dramatic works reply to:

The disillusionment of the masses arising from their disappointment at the insensitivity of the rulers to their plights after the euphoria of independence, stinking corruption, injustice and oppression, greed, selfishness and drift of political leadership that led to coups and counter-coups, the horror of the civil war, the post-civil war lawlessness and indiscipline of the military government and the mismanagement of Nigeria’s economy by our prodigal governments since the oil boom days of the seventies, through the eighties to the present (171).

Osofisan has remained defiant in deploring his art to elicit the consciousness of his audiences. For, he believes in the collective action of the people which is capable of engendering a new social order. Promise Nyatuame and Madinatu Bello say that Osofisan’s plays address themselves to:
“characters who he imbues with more assertive voices in their quest for progress and development” (59). Interestingly, Osofisan denies his audience what Tejumola Olaniyan describes, as “the expected pleasurable magic of art in which dreams come true, normality prevails and the scale of justice is balanced” (16). Osofisan always want his audience to leave the theatre with a goaded mind. Osofian, in his words, says:

I want an ending which tells them (audience) that the theatre doesn’t solve anything… because it is a fictional world. The problem has to be solved in the society… but it won’t be solved if we simply don’t discuss it; we must discuss the thing and work towards solution (Richards, 65).

He is a playwright who jolts his audience out of dormancy and provoked to think with “uncommon sense”, which according to Olaniyan is: “… a thorough analysis and assessment of situations in order to arrive at the way the situation should be not how it is perceived by society, a provocation of the audience to a critical re-examination of their social circumstances” (76).

Femi Osofisan is a theatre alchemist who, in spite of being a “leftist” of the theatre, demands a theatre where the audience is both “responsive and flexible” engendering an intercourse involving the performance (actors), the message and the audience. In the end, there is an entanglement of the audience, message and performance (actors) in a pleasurable harmonious bonding.

Andrew Onokerhoraye says that Osofisan’s theatre:

…Reflects both his sympathy for human suffering and his outrage at human absurdity, alternating between moods of wistful pathos and flashes of ironic humour which disqualify his play from being mere slices of life. As a playwright who possesses a deep humanity, Osofisan brings drama to a higher realization of its human role of compassion. (14).

Subsequently, Edde Iji refers to Femi Osofisan’s style as “Post Brechtian direction”, which is a directorial style characterized by “a theatre that calls attention to itself and deconstructs itself in order to refocus the audience’s attention on social issues and values” (15). Iji caps Osofisan’s theatre with a perusal that elicit plaudits as follows:

Thus, it can be argued that despite the fall of the Berlin walls vis-à-vis the putative death of practicable communism, the ideals of Marxist-Socialist ideology that tend to enrich Brecht’s and Osofisan’s pedagogy of the oppressed or theatre as a tribunal, to redress human relation’s flaws remain very valid (57).

This synthesis suggests that Osofisan has a complete feeling for theatre as a craft and cultural tool as he continues in his quest for the ideals of the “Total Theatre” aesthetics in which theatrical embellishment and endowment are used to the fullest. He always has the feeling and conviction that the coming together of the audience and players is one of the few opportunities in our society for a debate in live terms. Hear him:

…I write primarily for an African audience… Because of the way our audiences respond to songs they like… so that the audiences begin to sing with me, they begin to learn, in the
process, they begin to know the songs. The messages are very significant in the lines… (Iji 21-34).

African theatre is a festive experience which everyone must share in, a communal experience brought about by music, song, dance, costume and make-up. The performers and the audience are engrossed in this experience giving no room for audience aloofness and glacial disposition.

Osofisan’s deployment of songs and dance, rituals, ceremonies, myth, rhetoric, history and oral tradition as resonating dramatic condiments is an efficient method of reaching out and arresting the audience mentally and emotively. As Tracie Chima Utuh-Ezeajugh observes:

The effect of the union of drama, music and dance, is the resurgence of a participatory theatre which readily appeals to the African psyche. Through story telling techniques and other dramatic forms, Osofisan is able to elicit responses from his audiences and mobilize them to participate actively and imbibe the lessons contained in his works (382-385).

To Osofisan, “there are few things more marvelous than an audience which is actually being lit by a theatrical experience”, “using the words of Peter Hall (9).

It is on this template that we examine and interpret the iconic symbols in Osofisan’s Once Upon Four Robbers.

**Synopsis: Once Upon Four Robbers**

This play is the story of four hardened criminals - Major, Alhaja, Angola and Hassan whose leader has just been executed publicly. While Alhaja is in grief over her late husband (Leader of the gang), the other robbers ruminate on their present condition as well as reminisce on their past robbery escapades. Aafa, the narrator appears on the scene as an Islamic Imam cum a “Babalawo” – native doctor. Aafa reprimands the robbers for indulging in criminal activities. The robbers say it is hunger that has driven them into crime since there are only menial and demeaning jobs offering pittance available. Aafa offers to help the robbers to get rich. He gives them a dance inducing charm. He, however, tells the robbers there is a caveat. First, they should never rob the poor. Second, they should only rob public places and finally, they should never take human life – No shedding of blood. Aafa equally tells the robbers that they can only use the charm to rob three times and thereafter, it (charm) becomes impotent.

The robbers after acquiring the charm, attack the village market robbing the market women and soldiers on guard at the market. Later, Major double – cross the rest of the gang collecting the loot for himself. Major is shot by the soldiers who appear on the scene led by Sergeant. While Major is taken away as prisoner, Sergeant keeps the recovered loot to himself.

Alhaja appears later disguised as a corn seller and succeeds amorously in convincing the soldiers that Major is innocent. The soldiers abandon the execution platform they are building promising to set Major free. As Major is brought in for execution followed by the saboteur – soldiers all in chains, Alhaja comes on stage with the other robbers (Angola and Hassan) stopping the execution. While the crowd yearns for blood, Aafa as narrator, comes on stage to stop proceedings (action) asking for the audience’s opinions if the robbers should be shot or not.

**Iconic symbols in Once Upon Four Robbers**

The play has a single set depicting a market square centre stage while at the centre stage right: there is a platform and a stake constructed on top of the platform for the
execution of armed robbers. The stake is symbolic and thus represents retributive justice. As the Bible aptly puts it “The wages of sin is death” (Roman 6:23). The stake is symbolic of the punishment for the misdemeanor of the robbers.

Conversely, the platform and stake is equally a symbol of oppression and human degradation. The platform and stake is an indictment on the government because the rich and powerful politicians and the military junta who have stolen the commonwealth of Nigerians are never shot at the stake. As a result, the platform and stake is a reminder of the failure of the government as well as a sad commentary on the society – a society that slaughters its own. Hassan asks:

HASSAN: After his death, Yours, Mine. After our death? …the hammering of the boards together for the state-approved slaughter? What will be left? (Once Upon Four Robbers 59).

The platform and stake graphically symbolizes the cavalier disposition of those in authority. Femi Fatoba refers to the platform and stake as using terror to fight terror (18). The Yorubas refer to this as stemming a curse (Malady) with a curse “Kafepe w’ipe”-which means setting two negative forces against each other- like the proverbial two wrongs which don’t make a right. Most worrisome is the fact that it is only the poor and vulnerable that are shot at the stake. It clearly shows us how deep the society has sunk in morass. Finally, the platform and stake is a graphic symbol of a Hobbesian state of nature where life is nasty, brutish, lawless and short (Essi 78).

The market square is a symbol of a place of commercial enterprise as well as a place of survival of the fittest. The market is symbolic of the African world view of death. There is a Yoruba adage which says “Aye Ioja Orun nile” which when literally translated means “The world is only a market, heaven indeed is home”. (Azeez 1). The armed robbers in the course of their dialogue always refer to the market as a place where their journey (life) terminates. Angola, in anger tells Hassan and Alhaja that Major deserves the death of a traitor and makes reference to the market.

ANGOLA: We shall be here, when they bring him tossed up. They’ll walk him up that platform and shoot him. He’ll get the death all traitors deserve. In a common market, among the smell of stale meat and rotten vegetables (Once Upon Four Robbers 67).

In Yoruba cosmogeny, the market is a place where people of all spheres of existence come to buy and sell. Tunji Azeez says that it is believed in some circle that the dead even come at night to banter and haggle in the market. Thus, the market possesses a sort of spiritual power which can make or mar a person (32). For instance, it is believed that any mad person who gets to the market can never be cured as all eyes have seen him or her in that state of madness (Azeez 38). Tunji Azzez also holds that the market is important symbolically and socio-economically and that women dominate this powerful space (38) Ropo Sekoni opines thus:

Ropo Sekoni: The location of the market in the centre of Yoruba towns…constitute… a sanitization of the centrality of the market trading and exciting to the social dynamics of life (34).

Referring to the market, Mama Alice says:

MAMA ALICE: The market is our sanctuary (Once Upon Four Robbers 68).
The market space is a predominantly female space. Azeez is of the opinion that men are mere visitors to this metasemiotic sphere (38). Sckoni goes further to throw more light into the symbolic nature of the market thus:

Market life is laden with risks and uncertainty not amenable to rational control and scientific predictions because it is fundamentally saturated with divine irrationality, its disorderliness is an aspect of ambivalence (35).

**The bar beach.**
This is the terminal place for armed robbers. Hassan tells Angola that their leader’s death has left them vulnerable as there is no hiding place for them. He says:

HASSAN: All we have left is the Bar Beach. And then six feet in the ground (Once Upon Four Robbers 10).

Hassan angered by major’s betrayal, tells him:

HASSAN: You’re doomed, Major! One day we'll come gunning for you.

To which Major replies:

MAJOR: I’ll be waiting at the Bar. Beach (Once Upon Four Robbers 38).

Angola tells Hassan and Alhaja that Major, the traitor (betrayer) will meet his inevitable end in a most despicable way. He says!

ANGOLA:… in a common market among the smell of stale meat and rotten vegetables. He won’t even make the Bar Beach. (Once Upon Four Robbers 57).

Interestingly also, Angola replies Aafa’s advice to the robbers to look for decent jobs or else they would be arrested and executed for armed robbery:

ANGOLA: Right Aafa. So the journey ends. At the Bar Beach… (Once Upon Four Robbers 16).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the Bar Beach is symbolic of the execution ground for armed robbers. During the military era in Nigeria, Bar Beach in Lagos was dreaded as it is seen as the execution arena for armed robbers. Back then in Nigeria, the Bar Beach was notorious and symbolic as the slaughter ground for armed robbers.

**Mat, bead and a small kettle.**
These items are the paraphernalia of a Muslim faithful. They stand for purity and piety. **Martial music, military camouflages and boots.** These are symbolic of oppression and repression.

**Phalic symbol.**
In the play, sharp tooth is a phallic symbol as this dialogue attests:

SOLDIER 1: (eating) Delightful. And are you as… as available?.

ALHAJA: Depends

SOLDIER 2: On what I’m interested

ALHAJA: On how sharp your tooth is. (Once Upon Four Robbers 48).

**Ogogoro bottle.** (Native gin).
The soldiers are the ones seen here drinking the native gin (ogogoro). This obviously delineate their financial and social status. They clearly belong to the lower rung of the military cadre and more so, they are a bunch of disgruntled soldiers who are desirous of a better life, as this dialogue attest:
SOLDIER 1: Yes, miracles, as long as there are underdogs like me and you to make them happy; Ah, I am tired!
SOLDIER 3: Some of us are born to take orders, you fool, so shut up!
SOLDIER 1: Not me, I am going to be officer, you watch.
SOLDIER 3: And you complain about miracles! Do you think it’s the number of craw-craw on your body that they count for promotion? (Once Upon Four Robbers, 43)

Characters: The characters in the play are all symbolic. They are symbolically analyzed viz.

Leader of the robbery gang:
The leader of the gang is executed at the very beginning of the play. His execution has a great impact on the play, as his ideas (philosophy) underline the actions of the robbers. The robbers had so much faith in him as he had raised the robbers as an “army of warriors” to stand up and fight for justice. However, the leader’s death throws the other robbers (his disciples) in confusion. The leader made his disciples (gang) believe the whole army could not defeat him, but unfortunately, he was eliminated by the decree (execution). It is rather unfortunate that the robbers’ attempt to rescue the leader ended in a disaster which claims many lives in the process. The leader’s death created a leadership vacuum that was difficult to fill. The leader’s death renders the gang of robbers as sheep without shepherd.

Major:
Major was born and bred in the “Slum” and was trained by the late leader to fight for justice. Although he is a hard faced criminal, he so much desires a good and decent life. It is this desire to live a good life that goaded him to betray his comrades. This indeed attests to human greed. The death of their leader created a vacuum which Major would have stepped into. But his naivety and greed (betrayal) disqualifies him. This makes Angola to tell Alhaja and Hassan that Major no longer belong to the gang but on the other side of the street—the government forces (the oppressors and the hunters). However, Major’s bravery is shown as he is tied to the stake. He predicts a change in the socio-political order. For he says:

MAJOR: But tomorrow, that law will change. The poor will seize and twist its neck. The starving will smash the gates of the super-markets, the homeless will no longer yield in fear to your bulldozers. And your children, yes your dainty little children will be here where I stand now on the firing block (Once upon Four Robbers 63).

Alhaja:
Alhaja, like Yoruba women, do not see her role as foisted on her by her generic and psychological makeup as inferior to that of her male counterparts. Alhaja sees the roles of male and female as complimentary. As the wife of the leader, she has seen so much violence which makes her streetwise. Alhaja is undoubtedly a symbol of a consistent, persistent and pushful character. After the death of her husband (the late leader), she asserts herself as the pivot of the gang. Since nature abhors vacuum, Alhaja galvanizes members of the robbery gang (Hassan and Angola) for the rescue of Major. In Alhaja, Ososifan has subtly shown his disposition to gender equity. For, according to Ososifan:

This is why so many articulate young women through my stage each defiantly refusing to be silenced… (7).
 Angola:
Angola is stubborn, forceful and actively courageous. He is very eager to avenge the execution of their leader. Angola is very angry with Major for betraying the gangs that he refuses to take part in rescuing him. Angola insists that Major is a monster who should be disfellowshipped and marooned. Angola maintains that if their leader (Alhaja’s late husband) was alive, he (the late leader) would have personally eliminated Major for his act of betrayal. Angola angrily tells Alhaja:

ANGOLA: And our leader would have been the first to disinherit him: To have him wiped out (Once Upon Four Robbers 58).

Angola is a character foil of Major.

Hassan:
It is most interesting that Hassan is sergeant’s younger brother. Hassan became a robber much early in life because of his awareness that his early life had been founded on layers of lies and lashes from parents, priest and teachers. He desires a backlash of those lies and lashes on the criminal society because he is frustrated by the current socio-economic malaise. Hassan passionately believes in the bonding of the robbery gang in order to overcome any eventuality. Hassan wants to get even with the society for blowing the bubbles out of his dreams. He says it is unacceptable for him to be a slave in his own fatherland. Hassan could be referred to as a patient, moderate and thoughtful character. Hassan’s respect and love for the life of Major, a comrade, makes him (Hassan) ready to forfeit their last chance of getting rich by using the charm to attempt rescuing Major. Hassan tells Sergeant his brother that he (Sergeant) is on the side of the government forces, the oppressors and morbid killers of the defenseless. He says:

HASSAN:...You run with the hunters. I with the rabbit (Once Upon Four Robbers 64).

Aafa:
He is the narrator of the dramatic happenings in the play. He emerged first as a Muslim carrying a mat, bead and a kettle for ablution. This shows that he is a Muslim imam Aafa tells the robbers that if they steal only from the rich, there will be no hiding place for them since it is the rich that makes the law, train the lawyers, build the law courts and own the firings squad. Aafa transforms into a Babalawo (Native doctor) and make charms for the robbers. Aafa is familiar with human greed and that is why he discloses to each member of the gang a part of the formula (charm)s in order to engender the efficacy of the charm if only they come together and each one of them recite his own portion of the formula (charm). Aafa could be referred to as the conscience of a society steep in morass. He is also the arbiter of the dramatic event. Aafa is a dedicated, committed, humane and reasonable character.

Sergeant:
Sergeant is the elder brother of Hassan His name is Ahmed. The market women call him Baba Mayo. He is in charge of the execution of robbers. He is also in charge of the soldiers on guard at the market. Sergeant is a symbol of an oppressor. He has developed a “pot-belly” which is symbolic of his corrupt and extortionist demeanour. Sergeant’s opportunistic urge comes to fore when he arranges to share the loot of the robbers after his verdict that “the robbers ran away with the money”. It is ironic that Sergeant does not actually belong to the mainstream oppressive and repressive class. He remains on the fringe of the oppressive and repressive authority. This is because Sergeant belong to the lower rung of the society and as such, he too suffers
deprivation and neglect. He is no better than an armed robber himself. Sergeant panders to a thieving inclination.

The other soldiers.
They are archetypes of the Nigerian Soldier, for they are barely educated and do whatever they are told. They complain about corruption in government but can do nothing about it. Their jerky movements makes them look like robots. This is the major reason the late Afro beat King Fela Anikulopop Kuti call Nigerian soldiers “Zoombie”. Ironically, these soldiers equally suffer deprivation since they like Sergeant belong to the lower rung of the military. The Soldiers too are morally deficient and are worse than the armed robbers. They are a bunch of depraved Soldiers on the prowl.

The market women
The market women in their song “Song of the Market” expresses their opinion of this life as a market in which it is a survival of the fittest. These women see the market as their sanctuary. Interestingly, these women are determined and courageous. Azeez says that anyone who claims that African women are “Voiceless”, this play is enough to correct such impression (42). Furthermore, the market women and Alhaja are loud and courageous. Hence, Azeez opines thus:

This is contra-distinguished from the European conception of women as a mere domestic, docile, gullible, penis-envying gender (44).

The market women are flamboyant, shrewd and heartless.

Symbolic biblical allusions
Quite notable in the play is the prevalence of symbolic biblical allusions which raise very intriguing questions.

In Part Two, Major in the course of betraying his comrades says:

MAJOR: There was a Messiah, once, and one was enough! For all the centuries! One great monumental mistake and nobody since has been in any hurry to repeat it. The nails and blood, the crown of thorns, all is a charade... (Once Upon Four Robbers 37).

Inferred from Major’s speech above, is the reference to a Messiah (Jesus Christ) whose death for mankind seems to be a monumental mistake because Christians have learnt nothing from it. Major equally refers to nails, blood and a crown of thorns—these are all symbolic allusions to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross which Osofisan uses his actor’s voice (Major’s) to say it’s all a charade—because of the hypocrisy of religion.

Another example is in Part Three when Angola refuses to take part in Major’s rescue. He tells Alhaja:

ANGOLA: The lost sheep, eh? Don’t tell me. I know the parable (Once Upon Four Robbers 57).

Angola refers here to the Parable of the Lost Sheep in which Jesus says thus:

How think ye? If a man an hundred sheep and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray... (Matthew Chapter 18 verse 12-14).

In contrast, Angola does not agree that Major is a lost sheep that deserves bringing back into the fold. Angola seems to be saying here that Major’s act of betrayal
renders him unfit to belong to the fold, and as such, should be ostracized permanently.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that Femi Osofisan deliberately uses symbols in *Once Upon Four Robbers* and his other plays to unfurl his themes of injustice, oppression and stressing the need for Nigeria, for example to have better leaders. He repeatedly reflects on the ills of the society, drawing our attention to the way some people (the leaders and their cronies) are stupendously affluent while the “bottom millions” wallow in abject penury. Thus, Osofisan’s dramatic Oeuvre obviously demonstrate and lend support to the view that social and political commentary is the prime preoccupation of his craft.

Finally, Osofisan’s plays are replete with symbols and other essential elements of African communal aesthetics which makes his plays enjoy maximum production patronage in Nigerian theatres and beyond.

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