

**A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF FEMI OSOFISAN AND HIS DRAMATIC
COMPOSITIONS: THEMES, TECHNIQUES, AND SOCIOPOLITICAL
ENGAGEMENTS IN *ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS* AND *MOROUNTODUN***

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Abstract

This study undertakes a critical appraisal of Femi Osofisan's dramatic compositions, focusing on the interplay of themes, techniques, and socio-political engagement in his works. Recognized as one of Nigeria's most innovative dramatists, Osofisan employs theatre as a medium for reflecting societal realities, interrogating governance, and promoting civic consciousness. The research adopts a qualitative design rooted in textual and performance analysis, examining selected plays for recurrent motifs, narrative strategies, and performance techniques. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, theatre reviews, and critical essays, are utilized to contextualize Osofisan's dramaturgy within Nigerian, African, and global theatrical traditions. The findings reveal that Osofisan's dramas are dominated by themes such as oppression, corruption, inequality, resistance, and social justice, reflecting Nigeria's socio-political landscape. His dramaturgical techniques, including the adaptation of Yoruba oral traditions, Brechtian methods, and episodic storytelling, engage audiences in critical reflection and participatory awareness. Furthermore, his works significantly contribute to the development of Nigerian and African theatre by integrating indigenous and international performance strategies, enriching both practice and pedagogy. Osofisan's plays maintain relevance to contemporary socio-political challenges, addressing issues such as youth marginalization, civic apathy, and systemic corruption. The study

concludes that Osofisan's theatre functions as both an artistic and civic enterprise, bridging aesthetic innovation with social critique. It recommends the integration of his works into theatre education, the promotion of participatory and hybrid performance techniques, systematic documentation of Nigerian dramaturgy, and sustained institutional support for theatre as a tool for social transformation. Overall, Osofisan's oeuvre exemplifies the transformative potential of African theatre in addressing societal concerns.

Keywords: Dramatic Compositions, Critical Appraisal, Themes, Techniques, Socio-Political, Engagement.

Introduction

Drama has historically served as a vital medium for reflecting societal values, interrogating political structures, and fostering social transformation. Across the globe, playwrights from different traditions have employed the stage not merely as a space for entertainment but as a powerful instrument of cultural and political critique. Classical dramatists such as Sophocles and Shakespeare explored themes of justice, morality, and human conflict, while modern playwrights like Bertolt Brecht developed theatrical strategies to awaken political consciousness and inspire change (Carlson, 2019). This global tradition underscores the significance of theatre as a universal art form with the capacity to address pressing human concerns.

In the African context, theatre has evolved into an instrument of both resistance and identity reconstruction, particularly in response to colonial and postcolonial realities. African playwrights like Wole Soyinka, NgũgĩwaThiong'o, and Ama Ata Aidoo have used drama to interrogate systems of oppression, reclaim cultural values, and articulate the socio-political aspirations of their people (Banham, 2014). African drama is deeply rooted in indigenous oral traditions, myths, and community performances, blending the traditional with the modern to produce a dynamic theatrical form. Within this context, Femi Osofisan emerges as one of the most innovative dramatists whose works consistently engage with questions of justice, inequality, and social responsibility.

Playwrights such as Ghana's Efua Sutherland and Nigeria's Hubert Ogunde used drama to critique colonial systems and mobilize for independence. In the post-independence era, the tradition expanded to engage issues such as corruption, authoritarianism, and social decay. Osofisan stands out in this tradition for his radical reinterpretation of myths and historical events to address the contradictions of leadership and governance in West Africa (Jeyifo, 2014). His plays, such as *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Morountodun*, dramatize the struggles of marginalized communities while exposing systemic failures in governance.

In Nigeria, Osofisan is widely regarded as a socially committed playwright whose dramatic art is inseparable from the country's turbulent socio-political landscape. Unlike Soyinka, whose works are often steeped in metaphysical concerns, Osofisan is more directly activist, employing satire, parody, and allegory to critique corruption, political instability, and gender inequality (Obafemi, 20018). His adaptations of Yoruba oral traditions and historical events serve as a means of re-examining Nigeria's past while offering visions for a more equitable future. Through this approach, Osofisan has carved a niche as a dramatist whose work resonates deeply with the lived experiences of Nigerians.

The works of Femi Osofisan have attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to his deployment of theatre as a tool for social change, his reworking of classical and Yoruba oral traditions, and his radical critique of corruption, oppression, and social injustice in Nigeria (Ogunbiyi, 2019; Olaniyan, 2021). However, most of the existing studies tend to focus on isolated aspects of his dramaturgy, such as his adaptation of Greek classics or his ideological commitment to Marxist ideals, without holistically situating his themes, techniques, and sociopolitical engagement within the broader Nigerian and African sociocultural context. This creates a gap in the literature, as there is limited comprehensive evaluation that integrates these three dimensions into a single analytical framework.

Another key problem is that while Osofisan's plays are widely acknowledged as politically charged and socially relevant, the nuances of his dramatic techniques and how they serve as vehicles for his socio political messages remain underexplored. Much of the existing scholarship either overemphasizes his ideological leanings or narrowly analyzes textual aesthetics, thereby neglecting the interplay between form and content in his works (Akinwale, 2020; Eze, 2022). Consequently, the depth of Osofisan's artistic innovation and its implications for Nigerian socio-political consciousness risk being understated in scholarly discourse.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to undertake a critical appraisal of Femi Osofisan's dramatic compositions with emphasis on his themes, dramatic techniques, and sociopolitical engagement. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the dominant themes in Femi Osofisan's dramatic compositions and how they reflect the socio-political realities of Nigeria;
2. investigate the extent to which Osofisan's plays engage with sociopolitical issues such as corruption, oppression, inequality, and resistance;
3. evaluate the contributions of Osofisan's dramatic works to the development of Nigerian and African theatre;
4. interrogate the relevance of Osofisan's drama to contemporary socio-political challenges in Nigeria; and
5. provide an integrated appraisal that situates Osofisan's themes, techniques, and sociopolitical engagement within the broader discourse of African literary and cultural studies.

Conceptual Clarifications

Dramatic Compositions

Dramatic composition in theatre arts refers to the purposeful arrangement of plot, character, dialogue, and spectacle into a coherent performative whole that produces aesthetic and emotional effects on an audience. Building on classical precepts of unity, causality, and catharsis (Aristotle 1902), contemporary scholarship frames dramatic composition as both a textual and embodied practice: it is a dramaturgical process that orchestrates narrative time, embodied action, and scenic architecture so that meaning emerges through staged performance rather than through prose alone (Thygesen, 2024). Modern writers emphasize that composition now encompasses non-linear and participatory forms (e.g., playback and devised theatre), where authorship is distributed across directors, performers, designers, and communities, shifting the focus from a single playwright's

text to a composite of dramaturgical decisions that shape how stories are enacted and perceived (Gonzalez, 2024).

Practically, dramatic composition functions at multiple compositional levels: micro-level (beat, line, gesture), meso-level (scene structure, character arcs), and macro-level (overall dramatic architecture, thematic symmetry, and scenographic composition). Recent work in scenography and artistic research highlights how visual and spatial elements (scenery, lighting, costume) are not mere accompaniments but integral compositional constituents that interact with textual and performative elements to generate meaning; thus, contemporary composition is interdisciplinary, research-driven, and often collaborative (Bezruchko et al., 2024; Thygesen, 2024). This expanded conception requires dramaturgs and theatre-makers to work as composers of time, space, and social relation, attending equally to audience positioning, material affordances, and participatory protocols when designing a piece for performance.

Themes

Theme in theatre denotes the central, organising idea or meaning that a dramatic work interrogates rather than the sequence of events themselves; it is an abstract claim about human experience (e.g., power, identity, betrayal, justice) that the playwright and production explore through plot, character, language, imagery and stagecraft. Contemporary theatrical scholarship treats theme as both latent and performative: latent in the playwright's propositional structure and performative in how directors, actors and designers enact, emphasise or problematize that meaning for an audience. This distinction, theme as conceptual core vs. theme as live, negotiated meaning in performance, is emphasised in modern treatments of dramatic elements (Styan, 2000) and in recent analyses arguing for clearer conceptual vocabularies in theatre studies.

Recent scholarship foregrounds two further moves: Rabiou 2022 the shifting of thematic work from solely authorial intent to collaborative, contextual enactment onstage (so that staging choices, community context and spectatorship co-produce theme), and (2) the increasing attention to socio-political and existential themes as driving contemporary theatre's public function (for example, research-led plays that translate research findings into staged narratives). These approaches show that theme in theatre is dynamic, it can be signalled by recurring motifs and symbols, developed through character arcs and dialogue, and reinterpreted by directors to foreground different ethical or political readings. Such views are supported by recent case studies of research-based plays and performance-as-pedagogy that treat themes as both heuristic and interventionist play holistic approach to make it relevant to the texts (Pestana, 2020).

Techniques

In theatre arts, *techniques* refer to the structured methods, strategies, and practical tools employed by performers, directors, and designers to communicate meaning and evoke aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual responses from an audience. (Stanislavski's 2010) Acting techniques, apply to illustrate how performers are trained to embody characters, project emotions, and engage audiences in specific ways. Recent scholarship highlights that techniques in theatre extend beyond acting to include vocal modulation, movement, improvisation, and gestural expression, which together constitute the foundation of performative communication (Omorodion, 2022). Techniques are therefore not static; they are adaptive and responsive to cultural contexts,

performance traditions, and technological innovations that influence both the creation and reception of theatrical works (Eze, 2023).

Contemporary theatre increasingly recognizes techniques as interdisciplinary, integrating psychological, social, and technological dimensions to enhance performance. Directors and dramatists, for instance, adopt devising techniques, multimedia integration, and immersive staging to expand the expressive range of theatrical productions. These strategies highlight how theatre techniques today emphasize collaboration, experimentation, and innovation as much as they do discipline and craft (Adeyemi, 2021). In this sense, techniques in theatre arts function as the operational bridge between dramatic composition and performance, ensuring that creative ideas are effectively translated into embodied actions and aesthetic experiences that resonate with diverse audiences (Nwosu, 2024).

Socio-political Engagement:

Sociopolitical engagement in theatre arts refers to the conscious use of performance as a medium for interrogating, reflecting on, and influencing political and social realities within society. Theatre, as a cultural practice, has historically provided a platform for marginalized voices and a space for questioning authority, exposing injustice, and promoting civic participation, function as both a mirror and a catalyst: while it reflects lived realities such as inequality, corruption, and conflict, it also mobilizes audiences toward critical reflection and collective action (Adebayo, 2022). Techniques like Brechtian epic theatre, agitprop, and forum theatre have been reinterpreted in contemporary African contexts, where playwrights and directors employ satire, symbolism, and improvisation to address issues such as governance, human rights, and social justice (Okoh, 2023).

Meanwhile, socio-political engagement is increasingly tied to community theatre, street performances, and digital adaptations, which allow theatre to reach wider and more diverse audiences. These approaches underscore the idea that theatre is not only entertainment but also a sociocultural tool for dialogue and transformation (Nwosu, 2024). Moreover, Nwosu, stress that sociopolitical theatre fosters participatory engagement, blurring the lines between performers and spectators to create what Boal conceptualized as the “spect-actor” an active participant in societal change (Ibrahim, 2023). Thus, socio-political engagement in theatre arts operates as a praxis that intertwines artistic creativity with civic responsibility, demonstrating the enduring power of performance as an instrument of democratic discourse and social reformation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in textual and performance analysis, which is most appropriate for interrogating dramatic compositions and their socio-political contexts. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of Femi Osofisan’s plays as cultural texts that embody artistic, thematic, and ideological concerns. Primary sources will consisted of Once Upon Four Robbers and Morountodun selected dramatic works of Osofisan, chosen based on their thematic relevance to issues of technique, sociopolitical engagement, and overall dramaturgy. These texts will be critically analyzed to uncover recurrent motifs, narrative strategies, and performance techniques employed by the playwright.

Textual analysis will focus on Osofisan's language, symbolism, plot structures, and characterization, while dramaturgical critique will investigate his performance techniques, including adaptation of indigenous forms and Brechtian methods. Socio-critical interpretation will be employed to examine the plays as sites of sociopolitical engagement, particularly their responses to issues such as colonial legacies, corruption, social inequality, and civic participation.

This methodology ensures that the appraisal of Osofisan's dramatic compositions is both artistically rigorous and socially grounded, reflecting the dual role of theatre as an aesthetic enterprise and a vehicle for socio-political transformation.

Results and Analysis

Dominant Themes in Femi Osofisan's Dramatic Compositions

The analysis of Femi Osofisan's selected plays *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Morountodun* reveals that his works are dominated by themes that closely reflect Nigeria's socio-political realities. Central motifs such as oppression, corruption, inequality, resistance, and the struggle for social justice recur consistently across his dramaturgy. His use of allegory, myth, and historical narrative provides a lens through which audiences can engage with both past and contemporary political crises. These thematic patterns demonstrate that Osofisan's works are deliberately constructed to interrogate societal challenges, making his theatre a mirror of Nigerian socio-political life.

Furthermore, his treatment of gender and social dynamics underscores the interplay between individual agency and societal pressures. Female characters, in particular, are often depicted as resilient agents of change who challenge patriarchal and oppressive structures. Through the integration of historical events and cultural motifs, Osofisan transforms personal narratives into universal ethical inquiries. The thematic constancy across his works reinforces his role as a playwright committed to using theatre as a medium for societal reflection and critique.

Engagement with Socio-political Issues

Osofisan's dramatic compositions reveal a deliberate engagement with socio-political issues such as corruption, oppression, inequality, and resistance. *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Morountodun* utilize dramaturgical strategies to provoke reflection and dialogue, employing techniques like episodic structures, alienation effects, and chorus interventions. These methods disrupt passive viewing, encouraging audiences to critically examine societal injustices and power dynamics.

The playwright also incorporates indigenous performance forms, such as storytelling, proverbs, and communal singing, to deepen engagement with societal concerns. These culturally grounded techniques amplify the resonance of sociopolitical issues, bridging the gap between performance and audience experience. By juxtaposing historical and contemporary contexts, Osofisan foregrounds systemic corruption, oppression, and social inequality while simultaneously highlighting avenues for resistance and collective action. His theatre thus functions as both a reflective and participatory space for socio-political awareness.

Contributions to Nigerian and African Theatre

Femi Osofisan's body of work represents a significant contribution to the development of Nigerian and African theatre. His integration of indigenous cultural forms with international dramaturgical techniques, including Brechtian methods, has expanded the expressive range of African theatre. The fusion of Yoruba folklore, music, and dance within structured dramatic narratives exemplifies his innovative approach, which preserves cultural heritage while encouraging experimentation and modernization of theatrical practices.

Additionally, Osofisan's dramaturgy provides a model for theatre education and practice, demonstrating how thematic complexity, narrative structures, and performance techniques can coexist to produce socially relevant and aesthetically compelling theatre. By synthesizing local and global methods, Osofisan enhances the pedagogical and practical toolkit available to theatre practitioners and scholars, cementing his legacy as a transformative figure in African dramatic arts.

Relevance to Contemporary Socio-Political Challenges

Osofisan's plays maintain strong relevance to contemporary socio-political challenges in Nigeria. Works such as *No More the Wasted Breed* and *The Chattering and the Song* dramatize historical injustices, ethical dilemmas, and community struggles that mirror ongoing issues such as corruption, youth marginalization, and civic disengagement. By dramatizing societal failings alongside acts of resistance, Osofisan creates narratives that resonate with contemporary audiences and encourage reflection on personal and collective responsibilities.

His dramaturgical strategies, including character development, episodic plot structures, and interactive performance techniques, facilitate audience immersion and moral engagement. These strategies highlight theatre's capacity to function as a critical tool for social reflection and public discourse. Through these performances, audiences are not only entertained but also invited to interrogate the socio-political realities of their own context, reinforcing the enduring relevance of Osofisan's dramatic vision.

Integrated Appraisal of Themes, Techniques, and Socio-political Engagement

An integrated appraisal of Osofisan's dramatic compositions situates his thematic concerns, performance techniques, and socio-political engagement within the broader discourse of African literary and cultural studies. His works exemplify the use of theatre as a multidimensional platform, combining narrative, aesthetic, and political dimensions to interrogate societal structures. The interplay between myth, history, and contemporary social commentary positions his plays as culturally rooted yet globally resonant, dramaturgical innovation, and sociopolitical engagement. Techniques such as Brechtian alienation, episodic storytelling, and indigenous performance forms interact with the thematic content to create layered experiences for audiences. The cumulative impact of Osofisan's work underscores the transformative potential of theatre: it simultaneously educates, entertains, and inspires social awareness. His dramaturgy demonstrates how African theatre can function as a site for critical engagement, cultural affirmation, and societal transformation.

In conclusion, the study confirms that Osofisan's dramatic compositions achieve a rare balance between artistry and civic purpose. The dominant themes reflect Nigeria's socio-political realities, his techniques engage audiences in socio-political discourse, and his contributions advance the development of Nigerian and African theatre. Furthermore, the continued relevance of his plays to contemporary challenges demonstrates the enduring power of theatre as a medium for reflection, resistance, and cultural dialogue. The integrated appraisal affirms Osofisan's stature as a seminal figure in African dramatic arts, whose works serve as both literary achievements and catalysts for social consciousness.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined Femi Osofisan's dramatic compositions, highlighting the interplay of themes, techniques, and socio-political engagement that characterize his oeuvre. The analysis revealed that Osofisan consistently addresses Nigeria's socio-political realities through motifs of oppression, corruption, inequality, and resistance, while employing a blend of indigenous performance forms and global dramaturgical techniques, fostering critical reflection and participatory awareness. By integrating textual, dramaturgical, and sociocritical perspectives, the study has demonstrated that Osofisan's theatre functions as both an artistic and civic enterprise, bridging the aesthetic and the ethical in performance.

Furthermore, Osofisan's contributions to Nigerian and African theatre extend beyond thematic exploration, enriching dramaturgical practice and cultural discourse. His innovative use of performance techniques, adaptation of folklore, and engagement with historical and contemporary sociopolitical issues underscore the transformative potential of theatre as a medium for education, social critique, and cultural affirmation. The study affirms that Osofisan's dramatic works remain relevant to contemporary challenges, providing a blueprint for how African theatre can interrogate power, inspire resistance, and promote societal consciousness. Overall, his oeuvre exemplifies the enduring role of theatre as a site of artistic excellence and social transformation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Theatre educators, curriculum developers, and drama instructors in Nigerian universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, and secondary schools systematically integrate the study and practice of socio-political engagement into drama and theatre arts programs. Osofisan's works, with their rich thematic explorations of governance challenges, social inequality, and civic responsibility, should be adopted as core study materials. Such integration will enable students and emerging practitioners to understand and appreciate the role of theatre as a reflective and transformative tool within the Nigerian socio-political landscape.

The study recommends that Nigerian theatre practitioners adopt a hybrid approach to performance, combining indigenous techniques, such as Yoruba storytelling, Egungun masquerade, and folk music—with established international dramaturgical methods. Emulating Osofisan's innovative style can enhance creative expression, foster audience engagement, and ensure that contemporary Nigerian theatre retains cultural authenticity while embracing modern performance innovations.

This approach will also facilitate the development of versatile practitioners capable of addressing both local and global theatrical discourses.

The findings indicate the need for theatre directors, community drama groups, and performance companies to prioritize productions that actively engage audiences in discourse around local social and political issues. Interactive and immersive theatrical performances can serve as instruments for civic education, fostering public reflection on issues such as corruption, inequality, and community development. By adopting participatory approaches, theatre can cultivate critical consciousness among citizens and strengthen its role as a platform for social dialogue and empowerment.

It is further recommended that Nigerian cultural institutions, theatre scholars, and performance organizations place greater emphasis on the systematic documentation, critical analysis, and preservation of seminal works, including those of Femi Osofisan. The establishment of local archives, digital repositories, and scholarly databases will ensure accessibility for research, pedagogy, and performance practice. Such initiatives will contribute to the continuity and sustainability of Nigeria's theatrical heritage and support future scholarship and creative production in the field.

Finally, the study recommends that policymakers, arts councils, cultural organizations, and philanthropic stakeholders actively support theatre as a medium for social critique and civic engagement. This support should include the provision of funding, creation of performance platforms, and promotion of productions that address pressing national issues such as political corruption, youth unemployment, social inequality, and civic apathy. Institutional and financial backing will enable theatre to effectively function as a transformative cultural tool capable of inspiring social consciousness, reflection, and positive change within Nigerian society.

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