

Brutes and Inequalities in African Society: Appraisal of Femi Osofisan's *once upon Four Robbers* and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

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Received:
February 03, 2025

Revised:
February 28, 2025

Accepted:
April 03, 2025

Online:
April 08, 2025

Abstract

Brutality and inequality in African society are common afflictions that have ravaged the continent irrespective of moral and religious inclinations. This study explores how Africans are maltreated and deprived of their rights and privileges by their leaders and political elites. The research focuses on two African plays from distinct regions where these issues resonate: Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972). Both plays share common themes and adopt comparable dramatic techniques. Osofisan's work examines the injustice and brutality that the Nigerian government inflicts on many households. Robbers in the play are publicly executed without regard to human dignity, and Osofisan questions both the rationale behind these executions and the root causes of theft. Fugard was disturbed by the inhumane treatment of Black South Africans during the apartheid regime. He explores themes of oppression, death, poverty, racism, hypocrisy, and other social vices to underscore the inhumanity. *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* mirrors the monstrosities of apartheid, portraying the bitterness experienced by Black Africans characterized by repressive labor policies, insecurity, slavery, and other reprehensible laws. Fugard's dramatic techniques are outstanding; he employs symbolism, irony, monologue, and collaborative efforts to communicate his message effectively. This paper aims to enhance the evaluation of these dramatic works and provide insights into issues of collaboration, revolution, treachery, injustice, and determination. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is postcolonial theory, which is relevant to the evaluation of literary representations in Nigeria and South Africa respectively.

Keywords: Brutes, Inequality, Revolution, Treachery, Collaboration

1. Introduction

The African continent is vast with diverse culture and ethnicity. The people enjoyed their culture and tradition in terms of laws, morals, belief system, knowledge, arts and other social cultural attributes (Fearon, 2003). In fact, the Africans lived in peace and harmony until the advent of the Europeans. During the pre-war period around the 19th century, there was fundamental refusal to accept the European occupation of Africa through the resistance of leaders such as Samori and Mahdi.

When the second world war broke out, the question of superiority of the Europeans were doubted (Mandel, 2011). Unfortunately, the Europeans had their way and its influences spread over Africa continent with lots of political domination by the metropolitan powers of Europe. According to Pieterse, N and Munro, A (1969) in the introduction; *Protest and Conflict in African Literature* the scholars opine that:



"The lines of the partition of Africa naturally affected the literature of the colonized Africans. Writers from English speaking territories initially copied Britain.... African communities in different twentieth century stages" (P. viii)

The European imperialism is a distraction and a major setback to the African culture especially in the area of knowledge. Different kinds of literature were written and each writer or groups draw their inspiration from their political climates according to his situation in which he found himself voicing the protest and conflict of his place and time. This is how the modern African literature of social commitment evolved and there was protest and resistance of different issues at different regions. Obiechina (1990) supported this claim by saying:

"That African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europe, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great dept and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples, all but lost in the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain..." (P. 83)

The perception of colonialism was weighed by African writers and it was a disservice to African culture and tradition. Achebe (1994) illustrated the virtues in African culture and tradition. The novel is a recreation of traditional values and culture before the colonial attack. It shows that Igbo people are worthy people, full of admirable qualities. Although, there could be some deviants in the society and where this is observed, such person is tried and punished by the kinsmen. In fact, Achebe (1958) painted a picture of Igbo society without over exaggeration. The Igbo in this case is a microcosm of the African continent where there is law and order before the incursion of European civilization. The Igbo society is a well-organized society with good religion, politics, colourful ceremonies and legal systems until things fell apart and the center could no longer hold. The white colonialist turned things upside down in their bid to set up their imperial order. The missionaries and colonial administrators brought religion and education to the people and incidentally, the Africans were divided because of the new faith.

In a nut-shell, colonialism in Africa is a surgical blade that tears the African society into disagreeable position with its concomitant result in bloodshed, betrayal, immorality, brutality, slavery, hopelessness etc.

2. Methods

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine brutality and inequality in African society through Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972). Using close reading techniques within a postcolonial theoretical framework, the research identifies and analyzes five key thematic elements: brutes, inequality, treachery, revolution, and collaboration. A comparative approach explores these themes across Nigerian and South African contexts, supported by primary textual evidence and relevant secondary literature on African drama and political theater.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Brute

Brute ordinarily means a savagely violent person or animal. It also suggests a senseless, rough and insensitive person or persons. The word brute therefore can be applied to African society where socio-political administration of the people are infringed and dispensed by the colonial masters without due consideration of the public in terms of justice, egalitarianism and freedom.

The Africans before independence had series of stories to tell against socio-political domination by the colonial masters. The ideology of traditionalism was broken and the political structure became powerless. This is because of the institutionalized kind of government set up by the European colonialism.

The traditional chiefs, priests and others were relegated to the background and any resistance to the dictates of the white man is tantamount to exile or imprisonment. Oppression and intimidation therefore become the order of the day. Consequently, there was a total change in the political arrangement which altered the values of traditional African society to the extent that from the 1940s according to Obiechina (1990), maintains that there was a clamour for independence, a situation that would provide succour to the people in terms of equal opportunities, equality in the standard of living, development of opportunities in education. In fact, the expected change could not come rather the burden of life became heavier on the poor, the masses were neglected and there was rural urban – migration and the young semi-illiterates were dissenting villages to towns in search of greener pastures.

These scenarios can be deduced from Athol Fugard 's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972) where life is made more miserable for the Blacks during the apartheid regime in South Africa. The issue of rural-urban migration of people in search of job is brought to bare where Athol Fugard mirrored the excesses and brutality of apartheid government on the blacks. Sizwe is described as being stranded without a work permit in Port Elizabeth. He needs a job in the city, but because of the apartheid policy, he could not move around without a pass in search of the job. The police and other law enforcement agencies would not allow him. So Buntu as a friend suggested to Sizwe to go back to the village, King William Town and joins his family in their condition, Sizwe Bansi's problem is more compounded because he does not know any white man to start with. The excerpt below testifies the injunction as Buntu says:

"There is no way out, Sizwe, you're not the first one who had tried to find it. Take my advice and catch that train back to King William town. If you need work so bad go, knock on the door of Mines Recruiting Officer. Dig gold for the white man....(P. 26)"

The inability to get a job for lack of pass book in this environment is discriminatory and frustrating. This is evidence of callousness and brutality. Furthermore, the Black South Africans are worthless and treated unjustly. For instance, Fugard draws our attention to the manner in which the Blacks are used for the production of wealth for the multinationals and wealthy white South Africans. They are made to work under risky conditions where safety precautions are ignored. They are also required to sing and put up a smiling face as Mr Ford is visiting. In this mood, the owners of the factories do not get a true picture of the hardship meted on the Blacks.

The level of injustice and hypocrisy is alarming and the moment the visitor is gone, the portion of work is doubled to make up for the lost production. The African experience in the Ford Motor company is so bitter and worrisome that Styles could not withstand it as he says:

"You must understand one thing we own nothing except ourselves this world and its laws allow us nothing except ourselves. There is nothing we can leave behind when we die except the memory of ourselves (P. 16)"

The level of brutality and inequality in apartheid South Africa is so glaring to the extent that one can attest to the fact that Fugard derives his theme from the dilemma of the people in South Africa. Osofisan (1980) expressed his displeasure towards the apathetic response to the issue of armed robbery and public execution. He frowns at the brutality and distress the execution of armed robbers would bring to so many homes. He argues that the cause of armed robbery should be investigated in order to stop armed robbery and cheating in the society. He argues that almost everybody are stakeholders in the nefarious business including the rulers and their cronies, the poorly paid civil servant, the police personnel who make earns meet only by graft, the business men who inflates contracts etc.

"These are 'pen-robbers' who do more damage to the economy than the armed robbers (P 16)"

The brutality and callousness of the military regime is demonstrated during the mourning session of one of the leaders who was executed and because of fear, one of the gangs contemplates to quit. The excerpt below shows the vulnerability and the apprehension of the robbers as shown below:

MAJOR: *"Face the truth man! Ever since this new decree on armed robbery, we've been finished! You can only walk that far on the edge of a blade. Sooner or later, the blade cuts in".*

ANGOLA: *"And so you'll run, isn't it? Like a cheap half kobo pick pocket pursued by women. You think..."*

MAJOR: *"Listen, Angola, Hassan, Alhaja! Listen to me, this is the end. The guns will get us in our turn, unless we quit" (OUFR-P8-9,15)*

The dialogue in the above suggests that the robbers are not heartless as such but that they are hardened by circumstances. The audience on the other hand feels for them as members of the underprivileged class, forced to take to crime due to the prevailing economic reality. In conclusion the bestiality of the military prompts the audience into a fresh re-evaluation of Nigerian society that lacks morals and ruined by injustice and corruption.

3.2. Inequality

Inequality shows disparity in status, rights and opportunities. The concept is usually a controversial term as it relates to economic and social condition. The former however sees people as not being equal before the law, it sees man as having unequal political power. Alkire et al. (2015) argues that the state of well-being should be measured in terms of the 'beings' and 'doings' valued by the people and the freedom to choose and to act. (P.1-2). This presupposes that there should be freedom for everyone to choose a type of life or the other rather than dictating standard for the people. Athol Fugard in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972) laments Sizwe's degraded status in the hands of the ruling bourgeoisies. He needed a change to stop racial discrimination especially as it affects Black urban workers who toil for nothing than a pair of gold wristwatch. This kind of inequality is callous and retrogressive.

Sizwe's hardship was unabated despite his patience in the face of oppression and slavery. He wonders why the Blacks in the Ford motor plant could be treated unfairly. Thus, he exclaims:

"What's happening in this world, good people? who cares for in this world? Who wants who? who wants me, friend ,what's Is wrong with me? I am a man. I've got eyes to see, I have got ears to listen when People talk. I have got head to think good things ,what's wrong with me?"(P. 35)

The same oppression and injustices are also expressed in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980). The playwright reveals social inequality between the down trodden and the privileged individuals who escape the wrath of the law in spite of their shady deals. He therefore creates an awareness about the way the society should think. He opts for the re- organization of the society where equality ,law and justice reign supreme. Awodiya (1995) in *The Drama of Femi Osofisan: A Critical Perspective*, argues that if social transformation must take place, there must be a radical rejection and denunciation of political treachery, corruption and tyrannical leadership (119). To actualize his dream of a new Nigerian society, he made one of his characters to enact the impending revolution that would usher peace in "Red is the Freedom Road" as he explains it in:

1st Soldier : "First, you have the revolution, the revolts, or coup d'etat. The killing to end all Killing, oppression to punish oppressors. Detention to banish detention and everyone prepares for peace.
2nd Soldier : "Yes, darkness will fall" (P. 133).

It is obvious that the anticipated change can only come through the gun or referendum as indicated above. Another feature of inequality is also displayed when Major betrays his gang of robbers. He confiscates all the money they collectively looted from the market women. He dispossesses his gang of the money at gun point as he says:

Major : "Stop! Don't move any of you. (kicks out a sack) Alhaja, take this sack and collect all the money. You heard me! (Reluctantly, she does so) and I warn you, no one else is to move. I love all but I won't hesitate to shoot any of you." (P. 37)

The action displayed in the above excerpt depicts callousness and betrayal of trust. As soon as he succeeds, he hands the money to Alhaja, Hassan was weak and disappointed as he declares:"This is treachery"(P.37)Major was bold to go away with the money but Soon afterwards, nemesis catch up with him and he was shot and arrested by the soldiers.

Osofisan's pursuit for social change in favour of the oppressed in the society attests to the fact that he is a Marxist writer. Awodiya (1995) explains the character of Angola and argues that the four robbers take to stealing because of class inequality which makes "too many people ride their cars along the sore ridden backs of the poor" and that "many citizens must be made to account for their wealth and poverty of their workers" (P.52)

Inequality from every indication is a form of slavery where the undermined may one day demand for his rights and privileges through a pound of flesh if the leaders are callous and lacks moral integrity.

3.3. Treachery

The problem in Africa is orchestrated by treacherous leadership and inundated elite, whose interest is worse than the colonial masters. The elites and their cronies exploit the wealth of the land thereby leaving the majority in abject poverty. This is why Africa is crawling in terms of developmental strides. As a result of these, the majority of the citizens live in primitivism and carnage in order to withstand the treacherous nature of the society.

It is therefore imperative for Africa as a people to get rid of this wickedness and scavenging elite and ensure that the right people are presented for leadership positions. This can only be possible through surreptitious tactics according to Osofisan (2016). He maintains in this work that:

“The voice of protest in a one –party state cannot be pressed to the public ear when the state in question is in addition, under the iron grip of military dictatorship....” (P. 83)

He offered possible solution to artists by using metaphor and magic, parody, parable and mimicry. With these devices, the terror of the state can be confronted and demystified. In *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) for instance Angola as a character expresses the treacherous nature of the soldiers on his gang as they live in pariah with their hearts on the sleeves as he says:

“... and buy chieftaincy title as life Insurance! No, let our obituaries litter the public places” (P. 24)

This is a determined voice bent to avenge the death of their leader and express dissatisfaction against the biased government who sees armed robbery as the only criminal profession in Nigeria. The robbers transferred their aggression by using their magic boon on the market women to rob them of their ill acquired money from the sales. This goes to show that power has different levels and “the poor robs the poor” in their state of helplessness. Hassan demonstrates further the worthlessness of life among the downtrodden as he says:

“...corpse is what we all become in the end; Yes, I know the sergeant. But how he has changed” (P.36)

The market women on the other hand, tried to brace up to the challenge by using the soldiers to forestall the operations of the robbers on them and as part of the corrupt society, they boast that the profit made will be used to buy drinks for the soldiers. The dialogue below attest to this fact :

- Bintu : *“Sergeant, Today’s my lucky day, you can have wine free. You and your men have been wonderful...”*
- Mama Alice : *“You’re right. we’re already packing up. Our problem is going to be how to carry our profits home, some of us need porters!”*
- Sergeant : *“I’m glad. I need a promotion.”*
- Mama Alice : *“If they asked for recommendation, come to me, all the market women will sign for you. Ah! the goddess of the market woke with us today.” (P. 37-38)*

The market women begin to dance in honour of the soldiers. At this point, the robbers strike with their magical song and sweep away all the profits. It’s indeed a grim struggle just as Major begins to celebrate as he says:

“This is money ! money! A new life. No more scurring in the smell of back street”

“Angola understand Major’s move and urges him, thus you cannot escape, no act of betrayal will alter your kinship major ordered him to stand back or he will shoot. He says there is no kinship, I have crossed to the other side of the street.” (P 52-53)

Inadvertently, Major was arrested and tied to a stake and he says:

“Major... Serg, today the law is on the side of those who have and in abundance, who are fed and bulging, who can afford several concubines. But tomorrow that law will change. The poor will seize and twist its neck. The starving will smash the gate of the super market, 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”

Sergeant: *“Enough! You ‘ll not repent I see company, take position.” (P. 78-80)*

The end of it all is a plea from Alhaja and others asking for judgment and evaluation of the issues that led to the execution of the robber and possibly to denounce the unjust economic structure.

3.4. Revolution

Revolution is the removal and replacement of a government which is often accompanied by violence. A society that undergoes a revolution expects a rebirth. Wake (1969) in his article “The Political and Cultural Revolution” argues that revolution is a fundamental refusal to accept the European occupation of Africa. According to him, there was a stiff resistance from prominent African leaders which lead to second world war. It was tumultuous and gruesome. Other kinds of revolution exist in subtle manner and this can be found in protest literature. This is what Pieterse (1969) states in the article “Conflict in the Germ”. They posit that revolution can be achieved through protest and conflict in African Literature. The African literature is a medium where socio-political issues are tackled without bloodshed. The protest and conflict in this instance differ from one region of Africa to the other. The protest and conflict in East and West Africa are mild while it’s serious in South Africa which is the cradle of protest tradition.

The issue of revolution in Osofisan’s drama points to the political ideology in Nigeria. As a socialist writer, his revolutionary document will sweep away corruption, ineptitude, oppression, injustice and usher in a transformed society. Femi Osofisan’s article titled *“Formal Strategies and Social Commentary in the Plays”* as contained in Biodun Jeyifo’s *Modern African drama* (2002) maintains that:

“Our nation committed a fundamental error when we allowed soldiers into the seat of power and let them to stain our land and our hands with blood. But it is not an ineradicable sin. As long as they remain in the saddle of course, our wounds cannot heal.... Thus, they must be dislodged in order for terror to cease.” (P. 618)

Osofisan’s opinion in this statement points to his radical perspective on the contemporary issues in Nigeria. The play *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) seeks for alternative solution to the military dictatorship and corruption emanating from mismanagement of oil boom of 1970. Osofisan uses literature as a weapon of social change and proposes an ideal standard for all. Awodiya (1995) also supported the use of literature as a revolutionary stance for a better society as he says:

“...to use the weapon we had –our pen, our zeal, and our eloquence –to awaken in our people the song of liberation. With our writing, we would wash away the stigma of inferiority, rouse our dormant energies, unmask the pest and traitors among us...” (P. 34)

On a general note, Osofisan's drama calls for a concerted effort from the poor and the down trodden to shake off the shackles of any tyrannical government and rebuff the oppressors and his cohorts in order to make up a new society.

Athol Fugard was also obsessed in the revolution against apartheid in South Africa. He fought gallantly to dismantle apartheid along with other South African writers who expressed their anger and protest against the monster. These writers include Alan Paton, Alex La Guma, Nadine Gordimer and Arthur Norje. Life in South Africa has no meaning to the impoverished Blackman who works under the dictates of the white oppressors. These are the reasons why these writers call for a social reform that will usher a new society devoid of oppression, slavery, corruption, immorality and poverty.

The average Blackman in South Africa is worthless, he is stripped of every dignity and pride, he enjoys not even the fundamental human right of free movement. No wonder why Sizwe Bansi is referred to as a 'just' man throughout the play. Styles in the description of the Blackman's worthlessness is depicted in this way:

"You must understand one thing. We own nothing except ourselves. This world and its laws allows us nothing except ourselves. There is nothing we can leave behind when we die, except the memories of ourselves. I know what I am talking about friends. I had a father and he died." (P. 16)

The same frustration made the drunken Sizwe to smear with the remains of an orange, drop his trousers to grip his genitals and he exclaims thus,

"Look at me! I'm a man. I have got legs. I can run with a wheel barrow full of cement! I'm strong. I'm a man. Look! I have got a wife, I have got four children. How many has he made, Lady? (The man sitting next to her) Is he a man! What has he got that I haven't?" (P. 182)

These are the pains and agonies that the blacks are subjected into until efforts are made to liberate the people from the shackles of oppression and helplessness.

3.5. Collaboration

Collaboration is the act of working jointly, though it has a variety of interpretation. However, Fugard and Osofisan carefully employed the word for positive reasons. The playwright devised the word to enhance their political theatre. Political theatre according to Mitchell (1976) refers to plays about (usually middle class).

"Intellectuals arguing about what they Should be doing to further an entirely Improbable revolution. (P. 131)"

From the above quotation, it means that collaboration is about people working as a team to bring about positive result. It is not an individualized or about theoretical situation rather it is a performance between people with great understanding. This is why Athol Fugard choose two actors: John Kani and Winston Ntshona to act his plays at Royal Court Theatre in London. Fugard was prompted to team up with the duo after his observation and the spirit of working together was rekindled as replicated in Sizwe Bansi Is Dead and The Island (1972). This performance depicts proletarian way of life. Fugard became outstanding than John Kani and Winson Ntshona because of the skills and ingenuity he had acquired from Ben Kingsley and Yvonne Bryceland

In simple terms, these great actors and playwrights are famous because they worked together as a team to tell a story and add art to the telling of it in order to deal with issues relating to socio-political governance in South Africa and this is what Fugard's Statement Plays encapsulates in a collaborative way.

Collaboration according to Awodiya (1995) claims that Femi Osofisan does not only see collaboration as a word meant only to cooperate and work together, it's also the willingness to sacrifice and accommodate the individual differences of opinion, views and beliefs in the overall interest of the group (P. 102) He argues that collaboration is a desirable attribute for the masses to enable to fight and unseat political oppression, economic exploitation and social injustice.

This postulation is also illustrated by Alhaja in Once Upon Four Robbers (1980) as a woman among the robbers, she understands the problems that affect the masses and the robbers in the society. She therefore acts as a mediator between the recalcitrant robbers and the ailing society. As a member of a group who is seriously hit, she disguises herself as a corn seller to appear before the soldiers in order to save Major by seducing the soldiers. Alhaja's effort is also aimed at exonerating Major's ill behaviour by presenting the harsh socio-economic conditions faced by the masses and the soldiers, this plot made the soldiers to regain their consciousness against the spate of corruption, oppression, and the misery that bedeviled the society.

The market women in the play also used collaborative effort to criticize the capitalist system that exploit the wealth of the nation and impoverish others who are not privileged. The criticism is found in one of their songs as in:

"The lure of profit has conquered our souls and changed us into cannibals. We make inflations hoard away essential commodities like sugar and salt like milk and oil..." (P. 34)

From the above discussion, it is important to note that the plays collaborative effort is needed in life for positive result as it is evident in the plays of Athol Fugard's Sizwe Bansi Is Dead (1972) and Femi Osofisan's Once Upon Four Robbers (1980) The term is employed to show that 'Unity Is strength' and a sin – qua – non to fight all forms of social malaise. The word 'collaboration' not only add to the simplicity of the work but also helped to provoke attention to the wriggling issues in the texts.

4. Conclusion

Brutes and inequality in general terms are serious impediments that should not be allowed to thrive in any society. This is because it endangers life and retards growth and development. Osofisan's quest for a radical political alternatives for changes in the social structure is well deserved. In Once upon Four Robbers (1980) the call for change of orientation and restructuring of the socio-political system is informed by the few privileged individual who lavish and expropriate wealth of the entire society to the disadvantage of the poor and the downtrodden. Osofisan is also aghast following the ways in which the four robbers were executed at the bar beach with fun fare whereas other 'criminals' are enjoying grandeur and opulence in the society. Through this master piece, there is a call for moral debate purposely to change the status – quo.

Athol Fugard on the other hand, is disgusted by the inhumanity to man in South Africa. His attack against racism is direct and blunt in his story. He is bold to bear witness despite all odds. Fugard's story is technical as he employs collaborative work with performers across racial divisions to buttress black experience during apartheid years. In fact, Sizwe Bansi Is Dead (1972) is a reflection of the evils, brutality and social inequality, the black man had suffered in the hand of white oppressors. This

exposition of Fugard coupled with other struggles led to the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. From the foregoing, it is clear that Fugard and Osofisan are socio-political crusaders who are compassionate with human feelings and poised to entrench a just, free and egalitarian society.

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