

THIEVES AS HEROES: THE SUBVERSION OF EXPECTATIONS IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S *ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS*

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Abstract:

The article Thieves as Heroes : The Subversion of Expectations in Once Upon Four Robbers explores how Osofisan subverts traditional roles in his play by presenting the thieves as heroic figures. Instead of being merely criminals, the thieves are depicted as agents of resistance against a corrupt authoritarian system. Through this subversion of expectations, Osofisan invites the audience to reconsider notions of justice and morality. The thieves, by defying a corrupt authority, embody an ideal of righteous rebellion. The article analyzes how the play questions the boundaries between good and evil and the ambiguity of the characters. Ultimately, Osofisan creates a space for the audience to reflect on the true nature of heroes. A sociocritical approach will be used to analyze the article more deeply, highlighting the relationship between the play's narrative and the broader social, historical, and institutional context.

Keywords: *Thieves – Heroes – Subversion – Resistance.*

Résumé :

L'article Thieves as Heroes : The Subversion of Expectations in Once Upon Four Robbers explore comment Osofisan subvertit

les rôles traditionnels dans sa pièce en présentant les voleurs comme des figures héroïques. Au lieu d'être de simples criminels, les voleurs sont dépeints comme des agents de résistance contre un système autoritaire corrompu. À travers cette subversion des attentes, Osofisan invite le public à recon siderer les notions de justice et de moralité. Les voleurs, en défiant une autorité corrompue, incarnent un idéal de rébellion juste. L'article analyse comment la pièce remet en question les frontières entre le bien et le mal ainsi que l'ambiguïté des personnages. En fin de compte, Osofisan crée un espace permettant au public de réfléchir à la véritable nature des héros. Une approche sociocritique sera utilisée pour analyser l'article plus en profondeur, mettant en lumière la relation entre la narration de la pièce et le contexte social, historique et institutionnel plus large.

Mots-clés : Voleurs – Héros – Subversion – Résistance.

Introduction

Once Upon Four Robbers is a play written by Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan, known for his social commitment and his ability to blend tradition and modernity. Through this work, Osofisan presents a radical version of the thief myth, transforming the four main characters, who are thieves, into figures of resistance and heroes in a postcolonial context. In African tradition, thieves are often depicted as marginalized characters, symbols of disruption, but also of rebellion against oppressive systems. However, Osofisan reverses this conventional image by making them heroes who challenge social and political structures. This process of transformation raises questions about the morality and ethics of the characters, questioning the classic distinctions between good and evil, and between the hero and the antihero. Therefore, we have decided

to explore the topic : Thieves as Heroes : The Subversion of Expectations in *Once Upon Four Robbers*.

Critical works address the play *Once Upon Four Robbers*. In his 2011 article *Once Upon Four Robbers : The Magic of Subversion*, Sola Adeyemi explores how the act of subversion can be a form of creative resistance and a way to challenge power structures. He focuses on the story of four thieves who, through their actions, subvert unjust systems while discovering the power of social transformation. Ultimately, the article illustrates that subversion, far from being merely destructive, can be a powerful tool for reimagining and rebuilding more equitable societies.

Another author who has worked on Osofisan's work is David Essi, who, in his article *Iconic Symbols in Femi Osofisan's Once Upon Four Robbers*, examines how the author uses symbolic elements to critique power structures and corruption in society. Essi emphasizes that the main characters, through their actions, embody symbols of resistance and social transformation, challenging established norms. Finally, the article shows how these symbols enrich the text, offering a profound reflection on the tensions between tradition and modernity in the African context.

Sola Adeyemi and David Essi both approach *Once Upon Four Robbers* by emphasizing resistance and social transformation, but their approaches differ : Adeyemi focuses on subversion as a creative means to challenge power structures, while Essi explores the iconic symbols used by Osofisan to critique corruption and social norms. Adeyemi places more emphasis on the potential of subversion to reimagine society, whereas Essi concentrates on how the symbols within the text embody this resistance. In summary, while Adeyemi highlights the subversive act as a transformative force, Essi focuses on the specific symbols that convey this same social and political critique.

In this article *Thieves as Heroes : The Subversion of Expectations in Once Upon Four Robbers*, we will provide an in-depth analysis of how Osofisan redefines the traditional figure of the thief by placing it within a framework of legitimate rebellion, thus subverting the audience's usual expectations. We will begin by examining the conventional role of the thief in African narratives, where he is often seen as a mere wrongdoer, before showing how Osofisan reinvents this character to make him a symbol of social resistance. This article will add value not only by exploring this reinvention but also by examining how the moral complexity of the thieves in the work transforms the audience's perceptions and enriches their understanding of justice, rebellion, and social change.

This analysis employs sociocriticism as its theoretical approach, as it is according to Pierre Zima « *une tentative pour expliquer la production, la structure et le fonctionnement du contexte littéraire dans son rapport avec la société ou le contexte social, historique et institutionnel.* » (Zima, 1985 :45). Sociocriticism provides the tools necessary to explore how literary works reflect and engage with societal power structures, ideologies, and collective social imaginaries. In the case of *Once Upon Four Robbers*, this perspective allows us to examine the ways in which Osofisan uses the figure of the thief traditionally viewed as a marginal and immoral character in African narratives to subvert conventional understandings of justice, resistance, and social order.

By focusing on the *social symbols* of resistance, we will investigate how Osofisan redefines the role of the thief and positions these characters as agents of social transformation rather than mere wrongdoers. This approach will enable us to understand how the play critiques oppressive systems and challenges dominant ideologies, particularly in a postcolonial context. The author's use of *subversion* becomes a key mechanism for questioning the legitimacy of established power

structures, offering a radical reevaluation of social norms. Through this lens, we will explore how Osofisan's work transcends mere moral distinctions between good and evil, hero and antihero. Instead, it presents a more complex understanding of justice, where resistance and rebellion become powerful tools for social change.

Ultimately, this analysis will highlight how literary narratives like *Once Upon Four Robbers* serve as both reflections of and catalysts for social transformation, revealing the tensions between idealized social values and the harsh realities of historical and political life. This revision emphasizes the relevance of sociocriticism to the study of power, social norms, and transformation in the play, linking Osofisan's use of subversion and resistance to broader social and historical contexts.

1. The Role of the Thief in African Popular Narratives

In African tales and myths, the thief occupies an ambivalent position. On one hand, he is seen as a figure of social disruption, challenging the established order and testing collective norms. On the other hand, he is often the hero, the anti-hero, or even the rebel, fighting against oppressive forces. The thief, far from being solely a negative character, is also a symbol of resistance. For example, in some stories, he steals to redistribute to the oppressed or to overthrow an unjust power. The role of this character oscillates between conventional morality and the example of the rebellious spirit, willing to challenge authority to reveal the truth or right an injustice.

The thief in African tradition thus represents a complex figure who faces a society that values order and justice. However, he is also seen as a counterbalance, sometimes necessary, to authoritarian and unjust structures. This ambivalence is crucial for understanding the rewriting of this

figure in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. This conversation between the characters Angola, Hasan, and Alhadja clearly proves it clearly :

ANGOLA : What do you think they will do with his body ?

HASAN : Eat it, the cannibals. Share the meat among their wives and children.

ALHADJA : (Sobling) My husband !

ANGOLA : Like a ram. They slaughtered our leader like a ramadan lamb.

HASAN : Or worse. With that cloth tied over his face, they denied him even the privilege of bleating.

ANGOLA : They must pay for this.

HASAN : (rising) They will pay. They or their children.
(Osofisan, 1991 :5)

In this passage from *Once Upon Four Robbers*, although the characters of Angola, Hasan, and Alhadja are thieves, they embody a model of rebellion that goes far beyond mere criminality. Their reaction to the death of their leader, Alhadja's husband, is filled with deep emotion and indignation, revealing a sense of moral justice that is much nobler than what one might expect from individuals deemed outlaws. The dialogue between Angola and Hasan shows their strong disapproval of the execution of their leader, which they compare to the slaughter of a "ram" sacrificed during Ramadan, but with a much deeper cruelty.

It is not only the loss of their leader that disturbs them, but also the systematic humiliation he endured before his death, with the image of his face covered by a cloth symbolizing the absolute contempt for his human dignity. By mentioning these details, the characters not only denounce the injustice of the violence but also the dehumanization of their leader, which intensifies the magnitude of their revolt. Their indignation

transforms into a call for justice and restitution, not only for their leader but also for the community he represented, and by extension, for all the oppressed under an unjust regime.

This revolt of the thieves highlights a profound subversion of the expectations one might have of them. Traditionally, thieves are perceived as morally reprehensible figures, seeking only their own interests, with no regard for others. However, in this passage, the thieves in *Once Upon Four Robbers* are anything but selfish. Their promise to make those responsible for their leader's death "pay, either themselves or their children" is not personal revenge, but a demand for the restoration of justice. It is not a simple act of blind vengeance, but a struggle against systemic violence, which allows these characters to transcend their status as criminals and become carriers of an ideal of collective justice.

Despite their marginalized social status, these thieves position themselves as defenders of a greater cause, that of equity and human dignity. Their commitment thus symbolizes a form of legitimate rebellion, fueled by a deep sense of social justice, transforming them into heroes within Osofisan's work. This dynamic reflects a critique of oppressive power structures and highlights that even those perceived as outcasts can carry a necessary rebellion against injustice and oppression. Instead of being merely criminals, these thieves become figures of resistance, reminding us of the moral complexity of the characters in the play and the difficulty of distinguishing the good from the bad in contexts of social struggle.

2. The Controversial Social Imagination of the Public Towards Thieves

In traditional narratives, thieves are almost systematically depicted as morally reprehensible characters, condemned to social disapproval or punishment. This view is

based on the idea that theft disrupts the social order and threatens the foundations of justice. The thief is thus considered a transgressor of norms, whose role is to provoke moral reflections on order and justice. In these stories, society typically triumphs over transgression through the punishment of the thief, which restores moral and social balance.

Thus, the audience expects to see the thieves punished for their actions, and balance is restored when figures of authority regain their place. However, *Once Upon Four Robbers* goes against this expectation and presents a more nuanced version of the thief's role. This can be seen in the following passage :

ALHADJA : I'am sorry, Hasan.

SOLDIER 2 : Yes that's the other one ! They are all in it together !

BINTU : You mean they're all robbers !

MAMA UYI : I recognize that one. He took my wallet.

MAMA TOUN : Yes, that woman led them

CROWD : Shoot them ! Kill them ! Don't let them escape !

HASAN : You hear them, Sergeant : What are you waiting for ?

SERGEANT : Stand back ! Soldiers ! (They form a protective cordon round robbers.)

MAMA ALICE : Give them to us, Baba Mayo ! Let's settle our score.

SERGEANT : Mama Alice... I can't. Hasan... (Osofisan, 1991 : 86-87)

In this passage from *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan subverts the audience's expectations by presenting a complex dynamic between the thieves, the crowd, and the authorities.

When part of the population, represented by characters like Bintu, Mama Uyi, and Mama Toun, demands the execution of the thieves, the expected response would be from the authorities, meaning submission to the popular will and the violent repression of the criminals. However, this expectation is contradicted by the intervention of the Sergeant and the position of certain characters like Mama Alice, who, although full of anger, faces a form of symbolic resistance. The Sergeant, rather than obeying the crowd and repressing the thieves, decides to protect them by forming a security cordon around them. This gesture, though surprising, illustrates the subversion of a traditional role. Instead of responding to violence with violence, he seeks to prevent popular justice, thereby questioning the very principle of retributive justice as expected by the crowd.

The Sergeant, through his protective gesture, offers a reevaluation of the situation. Where the public expects immediate punishment for the thieves, Osofisan creates a moment of tension between popular will and the actions of the authorities. This confrontation between official justice and popular justice exposes the complexity of the situation. The crowd, driven by a desire for vengeance, wants to administer justice in an expedited manner, without considering the legitimacy of the thieves' actions or the circumstances of their rebellion. The voices shouting "Kill them !" call for immediate justice, often seen as a way to restore social order. Yet, the Sergeant, by disobeying this demand, makes a symbolic gesture that highlights the moral ambiguities of the situation. He protects the thieves not out of affection, but to challenge the legitimacy of a justice system that merely replicates violence, ignoring the underlying reasons for their rebellion.

Finally, the scene underscores the tension between the values of rebellion and the expectation of immediate justice,

particularly in a postcolonial context where the notions of power and legitimacy are in question. The fact that the Sergeant prevents the crowd from taking justice into their own hands shows that the solution does not lie in vengeance, but in understanding the root causes of the rebellion. By highlighting this confrontation, Osofisan subverts the social expectations of the audience, who would normally see the thieves as outcasts to be punished without distinction. This reevaluation of justice opens up space for broader reflection on power relations, oppression, and legitimate rebellion. The thieves are not simply criminals, they are symbols of resistance against systemic injustices, which justifies, according to Osofisan, a deeper reflection before judging them.

3. Thieves as a Symbols of Resistance

In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan reinvents the figure of the thief, transforming them into an agent of resistance against a corrupt social and political system. The play takes place in a context marked by social injustice, the exploitation of the masses, and the contradictions of postcolonial power. The thieves become characters who oppose this oppression, each acting to denounce and overturn an unjust order. By subverting the traditional figure of the thief from conventional narratives, Osofisan highlights economic and political injustices, emphasizing the role of rebellion in the pursuit of justice. Far from being mere criminals, these thieves become the spokespeople of a frustrated society, pushed to the extreme by oppressive systems. Their theft is no longer an act of selfishness but a means of resistance against an unjust order, transforming them into heroes in the eyes of the public. This is evident in the following passage :

CORPORAL : They're gone ! They've run away !

SERGEANT : Too bad. We got only one of them. Recover that gun.

SOLDIER : (doing so, discover money) Look Serg !

SERGEANT : What ?

SOLDIER : The money, it's all here !

SERGEANT : (knocking him down) Shut up, you fool !

Can't you restrain yourself ? (Looks round rapidly) Couple take care of the money. And listen, you dogs who may have been cursed to eternal poverty ! As far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money ! Is that clear ? We found nothing. Okay ? Let us meet later tonight, at my brother's house. And if I catch anybody with a running mouth... (Osofisan, 1991 :55)

In this passage from *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan paints a picture where authority, embodied by the Sergeant and his men, is itself involved in dubious practices, reversing the usual dynamic between the authorities and the marginalized. The Sergeant and his soldiers, after recovering the money stolen by the robbers, attempt to conceal the truth by manipulating the facts. The Sergeant's reaction, when he orders his men to pretend they found no trace of the robbers and to hide the money, clearly shows that those in power are not above the law. On the contrary, they actively engage in immoral and illegal acts, such as theft and corruption, which implicitly critiques the hypocrisy of the power structures. This reversal of traditional roles turns the thieves into agents of resistance against an oppressive and corrupt power.

The thieves, although presented as criminals, become figures who, through their acts of resistance, seek to challenge an unjust system. They are not merely wrongdoers motivated by greed but actors who, by stealing the money, indirectly denounce

the injustice and corruption of the ruling authority. The Sergeant's attitude, rushing to hide the stolen money and prevent the truth from being revealed, echoes the way in which authorities abuse their power to preserve their privileges. In this sense, the thieves can be seen as agents of resistance, as their act of theft questions the legitimacy of a power that is itself complicit in acts of corruption. The soldiers' appropriation of the money and their attempt to conceal it show that they are willing to betray and manipulate the truth to maintain their dominant position.

Osofisan uses this reversal of roles to show that the line between those considered oppressors and the oppressed can be blurred. The thieves, although having stolen, act in response to a society where the figures of authority are themselves corrupt. This passage raises an important moral question : if those who are supposed to defend social order are themselves responsible for corruption, is it fair to consider their adversaries as criminals ? In such a context, the robbers' theft can be seen not only as a form of resistance but also as an act of subversion against a system that exists only to maintain injustice and inequality. Through this reversal, Osofisan invites his audience to reflect on the true nature of resistance and how acts of rebellion can sometimes emerge in response to a corrupted power.

4. Robbers as bearers of Legitimate Rebellion

In this context, theft takes on a symbolic dimension. It is not a meaningless or purposeless crime, but a form of protest against abuses of power. Osofisan portrays the thieves as figures who, despite their contested methods, are fighting for a just cause : the emancipation of the oppressed and the denunciation of corruption. The act of stealing becomes a legitimate means of contestation, thus transforming the figure of the thief into a hero

who embodies the necessary rebellion against an oppressive power. The theft thus becomes a metaphor for the struggle for freedom and justice, and the thieves are symbols of resistance against the oppression of the government and authorities. This can be justified through Imam Aafa, who encourages theft through this conversation with the thieves :

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

MAJOR : The first ?

AAFA : Never to rob the poor.

ANGOLA : But we've just told you

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

MAJOR : (licking the 'tira') Promised. (They do so in tum.)

ANGOLA : And the second promise ?

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

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

HASAN : Now let's hear the third.

AAFA : The most important. You must promise never again to take a human life. (Osofisan, 1991 : 27-28)

Sociocriticism according to Duchet's perception will allow us to better analyze this passage, insofar as, according to him : « Chaque élément du texte, un personnage, une heure, un lieu, une notion abstraite, existe dans le texte selon trois modalités. Une *information* sur le monde (...). Un *signe* d'autre chose que lui-même, qui désigne quelque chose qui est à la fois hors et dans le texte (...). Enfin, une *valeur*, quand le texte

construit son système d'oppositions et de relations faisant que chaque élément du texte prend sa valeur par ce système avec les autres éléments du texte » (Duchet, Maurus, 2011 : 26). This passage is full of signs through the promises of Aafa and they show the legitimacy of the thieves' rebellion.

In clear, Osofisan transforms the figure of the thief by assigning them a moral code that subverts the traditional image of the criminal. Through the dialogue between Aafa, Major, Angola, and Hasan, Osofisan elevates the thieves beyond mere lawbreakers, giving them a framework that challenges the stereotypical view of criminals as solely driven by greed and violence. The promises made by the thieves are not just survival tactics but reflect a deeper engagement with issues of social justice, morality, and resistance. By imposing a series of ethical vows, Aafa turns theft into an act of political protest rather than individual plunder, positioning the thieves as figures of rebellion against oppressive power structures.

The first promise, “never to rob the poor,” introduces a clear distinction between the wealthy and the impoverished, but it also implies a deeper critique of social inequality. This vow is not simply a criminal code of conduct, it is a moral stance against the exploitation of those who are already vulnerable. Osofisan's thieves, by refusing to target the poor, position themselves as agents of social justice who challenge the systemic structures that create and perpetuate poverty. The thieves' decision not to rob the poor also symbolizes a form of social solidarity, drawing a boundary between those who are economically disadvantaged and those who hold power. This promise reflects a commitment to a more equitable distribution of wealth, implicitly critiquing the social systems that allow the rich to thrive while the poor suffer.

The second promise, to rob only public places and not individuals, further develops the ethical rebellion of the thieves. By focusing their actions on public institutions rather than individuals, Osofisan's characters redefine the act of theft as a form of resistance against state power and corruption. The thieves' decision to target "public places" can be seen as a symbolic act of reclaiming public goods from the elites who misuse them. This promise positions the thieves as rebels against institutionalized corruption, offering a critique of a government or ruling class that hoards wealth and resources for its own benefit while the public suffers. In this context, the thieves' actions take on a revolutionary quality, as they target the very institutions that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. By avoiding private homes and not targeting women, Osofisan imbues the thieves with a sense of respect for individual dignity and personal privacy, which is often violated by those in power. This aspect of the vow suggests that the thieves, despite their criminal actions, hold certain ethical principles that separate them from the traditional image of a mindless criminal.

The third promise, "never again to take a human life," is perhaps the most crucial, as it adds a moral dimension to the thieves' resistance. In a society where violence and brutality are often used by those in power to maintain control, the decision to forgo killing is a significant rejection of the systemic violence perpetuated by the ruling elites. This vow not only challenges the conventional image of the thief as a violent, ruthless figure but also redefines resistance as something that does not have to be synonymous with brutality. Osofisan's thieves, by committing not to kill, assert that their rebellion will not replicate the violence of the oppressors they oppose. Instead, it emphasizes the humanity of the thieves, transforming them into figures who seek to fight injustice without losing their moral compass. The promise to avoid taking human life thus positions

the thieves as figures of ethical resistance, whose rebellion is rooted in the preservation of life and respect for human dignity.

In addition to the content of the promises, the ritualistic nature of the vow-taking adds another layer of significance. The repetitive and formal nature of the promises, each thief individually affirming their commitment, creates a sense of collective responsibility and ritualistic commitment. The act of pledging serves as a symbolic reaffirmation of their shared goals and values, reinforcing the idea that their resistance is not just an individual pursuit but a collective movement. This ritual is not only a mark of their unity but also an affirmation of their ethical stance. The promises they make represent not only a rejection of criminality but also a commitment to an alternative form of justice that challenges the norms of the society they live in.

In a more clear way, Osofisan's redefinition of the thieves through their moral code serves to subvert the traditional roles of criminality and justice. Through their promises, the thieves transform from mere wrongdoers into symbols of resistance against corrupt power and social injustice. The ethical framework they adopt challenges the dichotomy of good versus evil, hero versus antihero, presenting a more complex understanding of justice that transcends traditional moral boundaries. The thieves' rebellion is not simply an act of personal gain but a collective, politically charged act of resistance that critiques the social order and reimagines justice in a context of oppression. In doing so, Osofisan transforms the figure of the thief into a symbol of moral protest, offering a critique of both the social and political systems that perpetuate inequality and exploitation.

5. The Moral Complexity of the Characters

The internal dilemmas of the thieves are at the heart of the play. Each character is torn between the ideal they pursue

and their own human weaknesses, creating a play of moral and psychological tensions. Their struggle for justice is not simply a matter of a dichotomy between good and evil, but of compromises, internal battles, and existential questioning. This complexity makes the thieves characters closer to the anti-hero than the traditional hero, and their place in the work challenges the very nature of the hero in modern African theater. This complexity is seen in the conversation between the thieves Major, Hasan, and Alhadja :

MAJOR : Stop ! Don't move any of you. (kicks out a sack). Alhadja, 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 you all, but i won't hesitate to shoot any of you.

HASAN : (handing his share over to Alhadja) This is treachery.

MAJOR : Treachery ?

HASAN : The money belongs to all of us.

MAJOR : Bring it to me Alhadja. Slowly. (takes it from her) Thanks. The money belongs to me now. (Osofisan, 199 : 50-51)

This dialogue between Major, Hasan, and Alhadja reveals a complex reflection on the morality of the characters and the difficulty in categorizing them as heroes or anti-heroes. Through this dialogue, the author exposes the moral complexity of the thieves, deliberately blurring the lines between right and wrong, just and unjust. Major, who initially seems to be a dictatorial character governed by violence, reveals a profound moral ambiguity. Far from being limited to a simple tyrant figure, he also expresses a form of affection for his companions, saying, "I love you all." This statement creates a striking

contradiction with his violent and selfish actions. Osofisan seems to want to emphasize that, even in extreme situations where characters adopt condemnable behaviors, their humanity and internal conflicts make their morality complex and difficult to assess. Major, while despicable in his actions, is not solely a negative figure, which makes the classification of this character as a simple anti-hero problematic.

On the other hand, Hasan represents a form of collective solidarity and shared justice, but his reply, "The money belongs to all of us," also highlights a tension in his own moral position. Although he stands against Major and his selfish appropriation of money, the very nature of their act, theft, raises a fundamental question about the legitimacy of their rebellion. Theft is an immoral act by definition, but Hasan justifies it with the idea of an egalitarian sharing, raising the question of whether the end justifies the means. This ambiguity is at the heart of Osofisan's work, which questions the notion of rebellion and the struggle against injustice while showing that those who rise against authority can themselves be complicit in reprehensible behaviors. Osofisan invites the audience to reconsider traditional notions of good and evil, making his characters figures who oscillate between rebellion against systemic oppression and the realization of their own human flaws.

The case of Major and his companions, who initially stole together, also reveals an aspect of the play that deeply questions the ethics of solidarity and betrayal. While the thieves initially unite to carry out their criminal act, the power dynamic quickly evolves. Major, through his act of solitary appropriation of the stolen money, not only betrays his accomplices but also the very idea of solidarity they had shared. This turning point, where Major takes the money and asserts his dominance, highlights a central contradiction in the play: the characters,

although engaged in illegal and immoral acts, are also confronted with existential dilemmas that make their morality unstable.

The play does not allow for a simple reading of these characters as heroes or anti-heroes but presents them as individuals with ambiguous actions, torn between ideals of solidarity and betrayal, justice and selfishness. Through this dynamic, Osofisan challenges the audience to reflect on the nature of heroic acts and question the boundaries between good and evil. In this context, it becomes difficult to label these thieves as heroes or anti-heroes because their actions are marked by multiple moral dilemmas that prevent any straightforward assessment of their character.

Thus, Osofisan uses this scene to demonstrate that the boundary between hero and anti-hero is often blurred, and in reality, these characters embody a form of destabilized morality. Through Major and Hasan, the author invites the audience to examine the complexities of human nature, to understand that acts of rebellion and betrayal are often interconnected, and that personal motivations cannot easily be separated from collective action. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, the individual and the collective oppose, blend, and question each other, illustrating the idea that, in extreme situations, it becomes difficult to judge human actions in a simple and binary way.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this article redefines traditional portrayals of thieves, transforming them from criminals into symbols of resistance and agents of social change. By subverting conventional moral categories, Osofisan reimagines the thieves as heroes who oppose systemic oppression and corruption, positioning them as figures of rebellion in postcolonial contexts.

The analysis highlights key dimensions of the play : the evolving role of the thief as an agent of resistance, the ambivalent social imagination surrounding thieves, the use of thievery as a critique of power structures, the robbers as legitimate rebels, and the moral complexity that challenges traditional distinctions between good and evil. This work underscores the relevance of resistance in postcolonial societies, especially in the face of social and political injustice. By portraying the thieves' actions as legitimate forms of resistance, Osofisan calls for a reassessment of heroism and rebellion in the context of inequality and oppression. *Once Upon Four Robbers* serves not only as a critique of the social order but also as a reflection on how unconventional forms of rebellion can powerfully challenge systemic injustices.

Sociocriticism has been a pivotal tool in this analysis, facilitating a deeper exploration of the social, political, and ethical dimensions of the play's subversive approach. By applying a sociocritical framework, we have been able to examine how the figure of the thief, traditionally marginalized in African narratives, is reconfigured into a morally complex character of subversion, reflecting broader societal and ideological tensions.

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