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# **Women in crime: A reader-response analysis of Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers***

## **Abstract**

This study examines female characters as agents of criminal activities in Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers*. The study relies on insights from Wolfgang Iser's Reader-Response Theory (RRT). Drawing data from twelve purposively selected excerpts from the text, the study argues that Osofisan connects the reader's knowledge in constructing women as agents of crime. Women's involvement in crime is constructed through their activities in organised and strategic robbery, engagement of sexual ploys and illicit market transactions. The depiction of women's criminal activities in the text portrays the connection between Osofisan's art and his literary commitment.

**Keywords:** women's criminalities, crimes in Nigeria, armed robbery, Reader-Response Theory (RRT), Femi Osofisan

## 1. Introduction

Femi Osofisan engages the theatre as a viable weapon for representing the changing socio-cultural, political, and religious realities in Nigeria. Existing studies (Akinrinlola 2011, Ajidahun 2013, Sunday & Akinrinlola 2017, Akinrinlola 2019a, b) have established the revolutionary contents in Osofisan's works. Osofisan is devoted to interrogating Marxist orientation in his plays (Akinrinlola 2011). Evident as the representation of Marxism is in his plays, the subject of crime has not enjoyed sufficient scholarly enquiry. *Once upon Four Robbers* (henceforth *OUFR*) is a play that presents a critique of Osofisan's view on the subject of crime in Nigeria. Except for Akinrinlola (2011) and Sunday and Akinrinlola (2017), information on the subject of crime in Osofisan's plays remains underreported. Although these two studies articulate Osofisan's engagement of corruption in *Moruntodun*, such representation of crime does not depict women as agents of crime. While previous studies (Ajidahun 2013, Eben & Oyewo 2018) on Osofisan's plays have attested to allocation of dignifying roles to women, this study contends that Osofisan equally constructs women as perpetrators of crime. Our choice of drama is informed by its resourcefulness in portraying the subject of crime via the characters' dialogue, actions and reactions to prevailing situations in the text. The preference for Osofisan's *OUFR* is hinged on the paucity of scholarly works on crime-related activities in the text.

Osofisan's *OUFR* captures the theme of armed robbery. The play examines the justification behind the promulgation of the decree against armed robbery in Nigeria in the 1970s. Crime could be described as any act that contravenes established legal provisions of any society (Akinrinlola 2011, Piquero & Brame 2008, Ayodele 2015). While existing literary investigations (Ogunleye 2004, Udengwu 2007, Yeseibo 2013, Akujobi 2014, Ukwem 2015, Nwosu 2015, Nnanna 2016, Odi 2018, Nwaozuzu 2019) on the role of women have articulated the diverse representations of women in African literature, sufficient studies have not investigated Osofisan's engagement of women as perpetrators of crime, especially in *OUFR*. Existing literary studies (Abasi 2012, Afolayan 2012, Ajayi 2012, Ajidahun 2012) on *OUFR* have only articulated the play's engagement of corruption as an endemic social reality in Nigeria. Apart from the fact that the studies are not empirical in orientation, the role of women in armed robbery is not sufficiently explored. Against this backdrop, this study pursues the following questions: How do women navigate crime in *OUFR*? What does Osofisan's portrayal of women in crime reveal about his attitude towards women in crime? To answer these questions, this study draws insights from Wolfgang Iser's Reader-

-Response Theory (RRT), considering its emphasis put on the role of the reader's impression in text analysis. This study maintains that an analysis of the role of women in crime is hinged on the reader's ability to interpret the relations between the text and the reader (Akinrinlola 2015, Sunday and Akinrinlola 2017, Akinrinlola 2018a, b).

### **1.1. Femi Osofisan and the synopsis of *OUFR***

Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan was born in Erunwon, Ogun State, in 1946. He is a prolific Nigerian critic, poet, novelist, and playwright. The award-winning writer was educated at the Universities of Ibadan, Dakar, and Paris. He is a professor emeritus of theatre arts at the University of Ibadan. His literary works attack social problems, ranging from political corruption, to injustice, to class difference (Sunday & Akinrinlola 2017, Akinrinlola & Williams 2019, Akinrinlola & Sonde 2022). He has produced over fifty plays which have been performed across the globe. He articulates Nigerian socio-political and cultural challenges through the use of African traditional performances (Akinrinlola 2011, 2015). He is a didactic writer who consciously weaves artistic devices to correct societal ills. He has contributed significantly in projecting the Yoruba culture. He has won a number of outstanding awards, among them the Distinguished Writer's award by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in 2004, the Nigerian National Order of Merit (NNOM), the highest academic prize in Nigeria. He is described as a revolutionist and a Marxist.

*OUFR* presents armed robbery as a thematic thrust in Nigeria during the General Yakubu Gowon's regime. The Federal Government at that time issued a decree that anyone caught in the act of robbery would face public execution. The decree, instead of decreasing armed robbery, encouraged it. Through Aafa, who equally doubles as the narrator, we are introduced to the public execution of Alani, the head of the robbers. After Alani's death, four other robbers (Alhaja, Major, Angola, and Hasan) continue the outlawed act. Aafa assists the robbers with a charm that enables them to rob the market women at will. In one of their escapades, soldiers intercept them, and dispossess them of their loots. Instead of reporting to their head, the soldiers convert the loots to their personal gains. Major, one of the robbers, is eventually arrested. Alhaja tries deceptive means to free Major, but her efforts fail to yield the desired results. The soldiers plan to execute Major publicly. At this juncture, the play ends in a stalemate as Osofisan invites the audience to act in the role of the jury: he asks the audience to determine the fate of the robbers. Should they be pardoned or executed?

## 1.2. Contextualising the armed robbery decree in Nigeria

Between 1970 and 1976 in Nigeria, the international criminal statistics show a nine hundred percent rise in armed robbery cases (Rotimi 1984, Akinrinlola 2016, Sunday & Akinrinlola 2018). While 12,153 cases of armed robbery attacks were recorded in 1970, 105,859 cases were reported in 1976. To stem the tide of the dramatic rise in armed robbery cases in the late 1970s, the then Nigerian Federal military government repealed the section of the Criminal Code of 1958 to address armed robbery offences by replacing it with the Armed Robbery and Firearms (Special Provisions) Decree 1977, Number 4 as a deterrent measure (Nwankwo, Agboeze & Nwobi 2018). The 1970 decree recommended death penalty by a firing squad (Tade & Adeniyi 2017). The said decree is now known as Robbery and Firearms Act, chapter R11 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004. This decree probes the offender, the weapons used during and after the offence, the accomplices, injuries inflicted on the victim, and the appropriate punishment. The law also applies to anyone who parades any firearm in public places.

Studies by Akinrinlola (2019a, b, 2021) have traced this staggering statistics in armed robbery cases to a number of factors which include ineffectiveness of the Nigeria police, decayed infrastructure, urbanisation, decayed social values, unemployment, and poverty. After the Nigerian Civil War, some sophisticated weapons were left in the hands of some Nigerian soldiers who later became criminals (Akinrinlola 2021a, b, c). The Nigeria Police have also been found wanting in their task of tackling robbery cases in Nigeria. The Force have not been able to tackle robbery cases as a result of poor funding, inadequate manpower, poor equipment, low morale, corruption, and lack of public trust. Both Federal and State laws provide for the execution of armed robbers, but the prescribed capital punishment has not deterred robbers because the proceeds from the robbery outweigh the risk of apprehension. Rotimi (1984) suggests that improved police training and welfare, provision of sophisticated equipment and improved community policing could address the challenge of armed robbery in Nigeria. Literary artists have responded to the decree on armed robbery in Nigeria by reawakening the consciousness of the people to the realities that ensued during the Armed Robbery Decree in the 1970s. One of such artists is Femi Osofisan. In *OUFRR*, he presents armed robbery as a cankerworm that should be nipped in the bud in Nigeria.

## 2. Literature review

Studies on *OUFRR* have established the play's engagement in the question of corruption. However, studies have not interrogated how Osofisan deploys literary

resources in depicting women's role in crime. In this section, we categorise the literature into three groups; we examine the studies on women's reportage of crime in police-suspect interrogation, we explore the existing studies on the text under study, and we equally report studies on the positive and negative representation of women in African literature. Studies (Akinrinlola & Farinde 2018, Akinrinlola 2018a, b, 2019a, b, 2020, 2021a, b, c, Ajayi & Akinrinlola 2020, Akinrinlola & Ajayi 2022) have investigated socio-cultural issues in women's reportage of crime at the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department (SCIID), Iyagankú, Ibadan, Nigeria. The studies adopt qualitative research design to investigate how socio-cultural issues influence women's narration of crime. The studies note that the patriarchal configuration of African society compels women to assume the role of victims in crime reports. Ajidahun (2012) interrogates theatrical peculiarities in *OUFR* and *Arigindin and the Nightwatchmen*. He concludes that unemployment, hunger, and poverty are responsible for crime in the plays. Ajayi's (2012) examination of *OUFR* reveals that Osofisan is a social activist. The social activist ideology is also projected in Abasi's (2012) study of *OUFR*, *Morountodun* and *Who is Afraid of Tai Solarin?* Afolayan's (2012) reveals that Osofisan is a playwright who is committed to using the elements of theatre to effect social change in Nigeria.

On the representation of women in African literature, Awogu-Maduagwu (2018) notes that African women are presented as individuals capable of changing existing socio-economic and political structures in Nigeria. She notes that the African male authors accord dignifying roles to women. Akinrinlola's (2011) study corroborates the Awogu-Maduagwu's (2018) position. The study notes that heroic roles are allocated to women in Osofisan's plays. He observes that the heroic role allocated to Titubi in Osofisan's *Morountodun* is a typical example of Osofisan's celebration of womanhood. However, Udengwu (2007) submits that African male authors construct derogatory roles for women. The study concludes that malicious fabrications and metaphors are used as narrative devices to suppress women. She, however, observes that women should see such categorisation as a wake-up call to reconstruct their being. For Odi (2018), African female writers have begun identity reconstruction tasks by harping on women's empowerment. From the theatrical angle, Ukwem (2015) points to the need to engage the plights of Nigerian women by advancing their inclusiveness in socio-political and economic spheres. Nnanna (2016) admits that African male writers constantly demonise women in their writings. She tags such unhealthy representation as a misinterpretation of history. Akujobi (2014) maintains that despite the gallantry roles of women in African religion and economy, their representation remains negative.

Yesibo (2013) submits that African male authors paint a negative image of women. He, however, notes that a few male authors represent women in good light. He identifies playwrights like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande and Olu Obafemi as examples of male writers in that category. Ogunleye's (2004) investigation of the portrayal of women in Adesina's *A Nest in a Cage* and Chioma Utoh's *Who Owns this Coffin* reveals that the patriarchal societal structure necessitates women's identity question. For Osita (2005), the negative representation of African women could be redressed via the theatre. Nwaozuzu's (2019) study of market metaphor and women unveils, through literary mechanisms, demonstrates the resourcefulness of the African woman. Engaging Soyinka's *Death and the King Horseman*, Nwabueze's *The Dragon Funeral* and Bakar's *The Gods and Scavengers*, she articulates the need to embark on massive awareness of the economic and entrepreneurial strengths of the African woman.

From the foregoing, it is clear that through women's reportage of crime, their representation as victims in crime is contextually echoed. The existing literary investigations on Osofisan's *OFR* examine Osofisan's social activism; the studies identify Osofisan's critique of the social ills in Nigeria. We agree that studies (Abasi 2012, Ajayi 2012, Afolayan 2012, Ajidahun 2012) on *OFR* articulate Osofisan's interrogation of the social ills in Nigeria. However, the studies are silent on the role of women in crime. Apart from the fact that these studies do not address the role of women in crime, the methodologies adopted in them do not reveal how the reader could come to terms with the portrayal of women and crime in the text. In other words, existing studies do not articulate the place of the reader in making contextual inferences from the texts. The studies on the negative representation of women by African male authors reveal the derogatory perspective from which women are constructed. While Ogunleye (2004), Udengwu (2007), Yeseibo (2013), Akujobi (2014), Nnanna (2016), and Odi (2018) refreshingly harp on women's negative identity, Osita (2015), Ukwem (2015), and Nwaozuzu (2019) seek identity reconstruction for the African woman via the theatre. The present study is in consonance with the existing studies in that the previous studies engage the depiction of social ills in Nigeria. However, this study contends that Osofisan engages the representation of female characters as agents of criminal acts in *OFR*, hence it points to the need to examine how female characters are portrayed in crime related activities in the text.

## 2.1. Reader-Response Theory

Wolfgang Iser is regarded as one of the prominent proponents of the Reader-Response Theory (RRT). This theory makes a case for the place of the reader

in the writing process. RRT gives room for a reader's mental engagement with a text by accommodating the reader's impression. Iser (1989: 23) maintains that, "RRT provides a framework for understanding text processing, revealing the way in which the reader faculties are both acted upon and activated". The theory works by dwelling on the response of a reader via the internal structures of a literary text. Through the appreciation of a text's literary features, the interaction between the reader and the text is revealed.

RRT holds that the meaning of a text is hinged on the creation of the individual reader, hence the meaning is not static. The theory argues that the ongoing mental processes and the response of the reader are used to interrogate meaning. It assumes that the psychological makeup of a text is essential in describing the meaning. This implies that meaning has no independent existence outside the reader's responses. Meaning cannot be separated from its effects on the mind of the reader; meaning is not dependent on external assumptions. Since meaning does not exist alone, it maintains that RRT recognises the role of the reader in the interpretative process. It harps on the reader's interaction with the text. It maintains that the linguistic structures of a text control a reader's construction of meaning. The reader is seen as an active participant in the production of meaning. The reader assumes authority and dominance over a text. RRT explains a process of text appreciation which is geared towards discovering the hidden meaning in a text.

This paper posits that Osofisan's *OUFRR* portrays the endemic state of crime in Nigeria. This study adopts RRT to examine the representation of women as agents of crime in the text under study.

### 3. Method

Osofisan's *OUFRR* constitutes the data for the study. The study adopts the qualitative research design. Twelve excerpts from Osofisan's *OUFRR* were extracted after a close reading of the text. Out of them, ten excerpts were purposively selected for analysis. The motivation for the choice of the sampled excerpts lies in their demonstration of women's role in an armed robbery in the text. Character analysis of the women in the text is done to ascertain their roles in crime. The selected excerpts are dialogues of Alhaja, Mama Alice, Yedunni, Mama Toun, Bintu and Mama Uyi, who are female characters. The dialogues of women portray their involvement in crime. The thoughts, emotions, feelings, acts, inactions, and motivations of the women characters in relation to crime are identified and described via RRT. RRT has been adopted as the theoretical framework in

the study. RRT is deployed to describe how women are depicted as agents of crime. Specific literary devices are described in terms of how they are used to describe women as perpetrators of criminal acts. We engage RRT to examine how language functions in describing the connection between the reader and the play's portrayal of women. RRT enables a description of how the textual resources combine to reveal hidden meaning in the text. The specific strategies adopted by women in engaging in crime are identified and described with respect to RRT. The study takes a radical departure from Osofisan's perspectives on women adopted in some of his other plays. In the play under study, we argue that women are not only portrayed as heroines; the negative tendencies of women are projected via literary devices adopted as tools of engagement in the play. The specific crime-related roles of women are identified and described with reference to RRT. We also draw on feminist criticism to explore how women are contextually constructed in the play.

## 4. Representation of women's criminalities in Osofisan's *OUFR*

This section presents the play's depiction of women's activities in crime. Osofisan argues that women perpetrate crime through organised robbery, strategic robbery, adoption of sexual ploys in robbery, and illicit market transactions. Women's perpetuation of organised robbery is described below:

### 4.1. Women's perpetuation of organised robbery

#### *Excerpt 1*

*ALHAJA: All, all mown down in one single night.*

*MAJOR: Listen, Angola, Hassan, Alhaja! Listen to me, this is the end. The guns will get us too in our turn, unless we quit.*

*HASAN: But for what? Where do we go?*

*ALHAJA: Nowhere. They've trapped us with their guns and decrees. (p. 27)*

#### *Excerpt 2*

*ALHAJA: I have known conflicts, old man. Look in the police records. Violence, I feed on it. Don't think you can frighten me. (p. 33)*

Excerpts 1 and 2 capture women's active involvement in organised robbery. Alhaja's inclusion in the gang of robbers justifies the denigration of womanhood in the text. Alhaja's character in the text stands in sharp contrast with the perceived

innocence, modesty and grace that characterise the depiction of women in Osofisan's plays. In *OUFRR*, Osofisan portrays women as individuals who perpetuate criminal activities. After Alani's execution, the robbers, Alhaja included, are held in awe as to what becomes their fate. With the promulgation of a decree against armed robbery, the robbers meditate on what would be their lots. Alhaja's words "All mown down in one night" capture the reaction and disposition of the robbers toward government's response to robbery.

Using RRT, we argue that Alhaja's words portray her as a syndicate of robbery. She is involved in organised robbery in the text. She notes that the decree of the government has put paid to their robbery ambition. Her use of the words "trapped", "gun" and "decree" not only identifies her as a prominent member of the gang, but it also describes how the government has overpowered them (the robbers). The contextual use of "they" and "us" in Excerpt 2 establishes a dichotomy between the government and the robbers. RRT resources are adopted in the lexical choices to enact a struggle between two social groups: the government and the robbers. The reader is made to see the struggle between the government and the robbers through textual vocalisation of RRT's features. However, the use of the word "trapped" portrays the supremacy of the government as a more powerful social actor. The use of the words "guns" and "decree" identifies the instruments of enforcing obedience. Through the choice of the word "decree" the reader is made to engage with the constitutional powers of the government. The decree promulgated by the government is seen as a means of using the long arm of the law to quell robbery. The gallantry role of Alhaja is portrayed in Excerpt 2. Alhaja's statement "I have known conflicts, old man. Look in the police records. Violence, I feed on it" identifies Alhaja as a criminally-minded, violent and nefarious individual. Her use of "I" attests to her criminal status and tendencies. An application of RRT establishes Alhaja's robust crime history occasioned by her nefarious activities. The reader is made to visualise how Alhaja activates robbery. While extant studies (Yesibo 2013, Akinrinlola 2011, Sunday & Akinrinlola 2017) submit that African male authors represent women as appendages, this study argues, from the perspective of the reader's response, that Osofisan does not represent women as heroines in *OUFRR*; he equally portrays them as perpetrators of robbery.

## 4.2. Women's involvement in strategic robbery

Excerpts 3 and 4 reflect women's active role in robbery. Using RRT, we could infer from Excerpts 3 and 4 above that women are active participants in robbery. The strategies involved in navigating armed robbery are initiated by women. The excerpts below present women's involvement in robbery:

**Excerpt 3**

HASAN: *All that's gone. Now we will just wait till they've finished the haggling and hustling and are ready to go home with the profit. Then we pounce.*

ALHAJA: *A tune and a song. And we rake a fortune.* (p. 50)

**Excerpt 4**

ANGOLA: *Look at this. Who would believe this woman made so much even in a whole month?*

HASAN: *Fools! Guns to catch a song!*

ALHAJA: *I particularly liked the sergeant. It was a delight to watch his dance. (Dance in imitation. They all laugh, except HASSAN).* (p. 50)

In Excerpt 3, RRT devices are deployed to articulate specific stances of the robbery gang. Hassan's words in Excerpt 3 contextually reflect the features of RRT. The choice of the words "we" and "they" identifies two specific social groups: the robbers and the victim (market women), and Hasan's choice of these pronominal references serve rhetorical purposes. In the first place, the reader is made to see the robbers as tormentors while the market women are seen as victims. So, an act of victimisation is expressed through the reader's lens. Again, the reader comes to terms with the activities of the struggling market women who toil endlessly to make ends meet. Hasan captures the struggle of the market women as *haggling and hustling*. Through the lens of the reader, we see a social group who is disadvantaged in the scheme of things. Although Hasan knows that the women deserve some profit from their labour, he orchestrates the process of dispossessing the women of their hard earned money. The reader identifies with the resolve of the robbers in Hasan's use of the words "Then, we pounce". The choice of "pounce" reveals the resolve of the robbers to wreak havoc on the market women. Hasan devices a strategy to rob the market women. Through RRT, the reader sees how strategic robbery is carried out. While Hasan emphasises timing, Alhaja harps on methodology. While Hasan opines that the robbers should retreat and wait till the women are ready to leave the market before they strike, Alhaja is of the view that the charm given to them by Aafa should be strictly adhered to. The charm is meant to aid the robbery; it was meant to induce the market into uncontrollable dance to their respective homes, thereby enabling the robber to strike. In Excerpt 4, the reader is made to see the effect of Alhaja's strategic method of robbery. Having sung the tune, the market women and soldiers dance home unconsciously. From a reader-response perspective, we engage how women participate in strategic robbery. Alhaja's accent, on using songs to steal, presents women as agents of criminal activities.

### 4.3. Women's deployment of sexual ploy in robbery

Osofisan identifies women's deployment of sexual ploys to perpetuate robbery in *OUF*. The excerpts below justify the negotiation of sexual crime in the text:

#### Excerpt 5

AAFA: *Alihamdulilahi. Your husband, was it? (ALHAJA and MAJOR are startled. AAFA chuckles.) Alhaja! Yes, I recognise you. At the war-front, when you traded across the lines, selling to both sides, it was convenient then, wasn't it, to call yourself Alhaja? But your pilgrimage as we all know was to the officers' beds, not Mecca!* (p. 30)

#### Excerpt 6

ALHAJA (*Serving with a folk. They take it with their hands.*): *Tasty, officer?*

SOLDIER 1: (*Eating*): *Delightful! And are you as... as available?*

ALHAJA: *Depends.*

SOLDIER 2: *On what? I'm interested.*

ALHAJA: *On how sharp your tooth is.*

SOLDIER 3: *Ah, you've lost! She wants me!*

SOLDIER 1: *She's not talking of wisdom teeth, you old rag. She means strength, like mine.*

SOLDIER 1: (*Reassured*): *It's the execution. We get man to kill this morning.*

ALHAJA: *Ah, the armed rubber/robber?*

SOLDIER 1: *That's right.*

ALHAJA: *And you. You're the soldier going to... to do it?*

SOLDIER 2: *Yes. It's our job.*

ALHAJA (*Leaping on their neck in turn*): *Let me... let me hug you! Ah, I'm glad, so happy to meet you! What lucky today! Take, eat more corn, my account! I never suspected that! Oh, I'm so glad I don't know how to express it! Such courage! I mean, to stand and shoot a man can do it!* (p. 60)

#### Excerpt 7

ALHAJA: *Eat! Please eat more! At my expense! To think that... Ah, I too, I am going to be a hero today. When I tell people I actually met, actually spoke to, no, no, that I even touched you! Touched the soldiers who'll carry out the execution! I can imagine the envy. I'll strut, like this, watch me. I'll be like Emotan! Ah, I am going to become a legend! (she dances and sings).*

ALHAJA: *I just love you! You've made my day today! I will offer you something in return.* (p. 60)

#### Excerpt 8

ALHAJA: *Good for them, these vermin. They pillage our homes, our offices, our markets.*

SOLDIER 2: *They rape women, psshio! (hissing)*

*SOLDIER 3: They steal children!*

*SOLDIER 1: They kill in cold blood.*

*ALHAJA: So wipe them out completely! Like this boy today! Ah, when I use to know him –*

*ALHAJA: Yes, unfortunately. He was not like this then. Edumare alone knows when he changed. For until quite recently, even until his arrest, everyone spoke well of him. He was so gentle, so nice.*

*ALHAJA: The mother was a... the paragon of a virtue herself. It's said frequently that she had gone to paradise.*

*ALHAJA: She was almost a saint! Went to church regularly, taught Sunday School. She wanted to serve the country so much that when the war started. (p. 61)*

Excerpts 5, 6, 7 and 8 present women as perpetrators of sexual crime. Through the reader's lens, we connect how Osofisan textually satirises womanhood. The reader is made to interpret the contextualisation of womanhood in the text. Relying on RRT, Osofisan uses Alhaja's role to depict how womanhood is subjugated on account of sexual ploy. In Excerpt 5, Aafa, the narrator, informs the reader about Alhaja's sexual escapade during the war. Alhaja is given the role of a mediator in war between fellow armed robbers and the soldiers who represent the government. One would expect such a mediatory role to embrace modesty, decency and accountability, but the reverse is the case. Through a Reader-Response Theory, the reader connects how Osofisan castigates womanhood by asserting the role of Alhaja in sexual immorality. Aafa informs the reader that Alhaja's role is not that of mediator, but that of a sexual criminal. Aafa's use of the words "traded", "lines" and "selling" are lexical choices that portray Alhaja's involvement in illicit sexual activities with soldiers during the war. Such nominal items connect the reader and create imagery of sexual inducement. The reader is able to identify with Alhaja's high-powered prostitution in a bid to secure the release of fellow armed robbers. Aafa further submits that her pilgrimage is not to Mecca. Aafa's response could be interpreted within shared religious knowledge as a means of connecting RRT. The Muslim faithful embark on pilgrimage to Mecca to seek the face of Allah while Alhaja has her own "pilgrimage [...] to the officers' beds". Aafa castigates Alhaja's indecent sexual acts. Excerpt 6 presents Alhaja's sexual ploy in a bid to ensure the release of Major, one of the arrested armed robbers. Alhaja affirmatively responds to the sexual advances of Soldier 1. She, however, identifies Soldier 2's sexual vibrancy as a condition for acceptance. Her metaphorical use of "depend on how sharp your tooth is" creates an imagery of her sexual recklessness. Such imagery helps the reader to identify with the message of the text. In a bid to know the soldier that would execute Major, she feigns ignorance of the missions of the soldiers so as to

know their plans for her fellow robber. She expresses readiness to hug Soldier 2 and offer him corn. Although she expresses joy on hearing of the soldier that would execute Major, she only feigns such expression to secure the affection of other soldiers.

Excerpt 7 captures Alhaja's feigned generosity to the soldiers. She gives the soldiers her corn. Osofisan's use of dramatic irony to tease out readers' responses is worthy of mention in Excerpt 7. She expresses confidence when she identifies the soldiers who are set to execute Major. She expresses admiration, recognition, fame, and respect for standing with the soldiers. She likens herself to the legendary *Emotan*, a Yoruba heroine, who saved her race during a war. However, Alhaja's courage here is perceived in a negative light. Using the Reader-Response Theory, we argue that Alhaja exudes boldness to make up for her sexual recklessness. Comparing herself to *Emotan* is an unforgivable historical mistake. The reader is made to see how she constructs barbaric identity for womanhood. In the last line, she offers the soldiers *something* in return. The *something* emphasised in the conversation is the sexual benefits she intends to offer the soldiers. In Excerpt 8, Alhaja continues her intercessory role by framing positive narratives around Major to facilitate his release. When the soldiers castigate the robbers, she joins in casting aspersion on the robbers by identifying their terrible deeds. She orders the soldiers to wipe them off. However, she engages a positive description of Major when he was younger. She claims that he has degenerated into a full-blown robber. Alhaja commends Major's mother. According to her, the late woman lived a righteous life. Alhaja's recourse to the virtues of Major's mother is aimed at influencing the soldiers to pardon Major. This study agrees that scholarly works (Ajayi 2012, Ajidahun 2012) have investigated Osofisan's *OUFFR* from the theatrical perspective. However, it holds that such studies only articulate the strategies employed by women in perpetuating criminal acts.

#### 4.4. Women as perpetrators of illicit market transactions

Apart from portraying women's sexual crimes, Osofisan, through the lens of reader response theory, captures women's involvement in illicit market transactions. Women engage in a robbery by cheating prospective buyers and conniving with Price Control Officers to inflate the prices of goods.

##### **Excerpt 9**

*MAMA ALICE (Angry): It is all right for you to talk. You stalked the streets drunken, and idle, and strike at night. But we have got to feed our families, haven't we?*

*BINTU: We've got to pay the rent, pay the tax*

*MAMA UYI: For the tax man has no friends. (p. 72)*

**Excerpt 10**

*YEDUNNI: And the headmaster wants his fees, threatens to send the children into the street.*

*MAMA ALICE: Brothers die and must be buried.*

*BINTU: Sisters have their wedding day.*

*MAMA ALICE: Children fall ill, needing medicine.*

*MAMA TOUN: Needing food. (p. 72)*

**Excerpt 11**

*BINTU: And even the simplest clothes wear out and must be replaced.*

*MAMA ALICE: So who will pay the bill, if the market doesn't?*

*BINTU: Where shall we return, if not to our stalls?*

*MAMA TOUN: How can we live, if profit lower or cease? (p. 72)*

**Excerpt 12**

*MAMA ALICE: How shall we survive, if the Price Control Officer refuses to be bribed?*

*SERGEARNT: You hear that? You've been robbing from victims!*

*MAMA ALICE: The market is our sanctuary.*

*HASAN: A slaughterhouse. Each hacking off the other's limbs. (p. 73)*

In Excerpt 9, Mama Alice, one of the market women, accuses Hassan of loafing around at day and robbing people at night. She, however, posits that, market women have to meet a number of financial obligations, hence the need for them to take their trade very seriously. Her choice to "feed families", and Bintu's choice of "rent" and "tax" establish the pressure on women. It holds that women are saddled with numerous responsibilities at the home front. The excerpt equally foregrounds abdication of statutory roles by their respective husbands. Ordinarily, the men should be the ones shouldering such responsibilities while women are expected to take care of the children. Mama Uyi asserts that "The tax master has no friend". From her utterance, we could deduce – from the perspective of the reader that – the market women pay handsomely for tax. As a result of their pressing needs, the market women device series of strategies to generate more money from prospective buyers. These funds are generated illicitly by increasing the prices of food items astronomically to the discomfiture of prospective buyers.

Excerpt 10 presents Yedunni's justification for increased prices of food items. To her, the market women need to send their children to school, and in most cases, the headmasters send pupils away on account of non-payment of school fee. Mama Alice also corroborates Yedunni by asserting that market women need to

spend money on the burial of relatives. Bintu equally identifies expenses on wedding celebration as another social project that gulps money. For Mama Toun, the list includes children's feeding and medical care. Although Excerpt 10 captures the growing needs of an average market woman, the needs do not justify astronomical increase in the prices of food items. In Excerpt 11, Bintu identifies clothing as one of the physiological needs that must be constantly met. One wonders why the market women decide to hold prospective buyers responsible for their (market women's) unending needs. Engaging RRT, the rhetorical import of Mama Alice's statement in Excerpt 11 presupposes that prospective buyers should be saddled with responsibility of meeting the needs of the market women. Her statement is a satirical representation of the capitalist ideology of the middlemen in a typical Nigerian market. The middlemen inflate prices of goods and services for personal gains, thereby inflicting financial pains on consumers. We interpret the market women's stance as a form of neo-colonialism in the words of Bintu "Where shall we return, if not to our stalls?". "Market" is represented as a platform for siphoning the consumers. Their stalls are depicted as platforms for criminality; the stalls afford them ample opportunity to perpetrate nefarious business transactions. The use of "stall" is metaphoric, it depicts a "legitimate" avenue for the market women to earn their living by subjecting consumers to harrowing financial experiences. The rhetorical statement of Mama Toun in Excerpt 11 reveals that the market is not about rendering essential services to the people, but for profit making. She asserts that the market women's survival is dependent on profit making. We could infer that profit making is sacrosanct; the operations of the market are targeted towards making unjustifiable profits.

In Excerpt 12, Mama Alice corroborates the indispensability of profit making. The reader is made to observe how market women orchestrate corruption in the market. The women bribe Price Control Officer so as to manipulate the prices of goods and services to their own advantage. Mama Alice's use of rhetorical statement in Excerpt 12 captures the unbending resolve of the market women to continuously inflate the prices of goods to the detriment of the customers' interests. From the perspective of the reader, one could infer that the market women have been bribing the Price Control Officer to inflate prices of goods. From the response of sergeant, the reader is made to see the difference between agency and victimhood. The market women who take delight in inflating prices of goods astronomically represent agency while the consumers become the victims. Engaging RRT, one could interpret the contextual construction of victimhood as stated by sergeant. The use of the lexical item "victim" captures the psycho-social description of consumers as helpless, defenseless, and vulnerable individuals who are constantly at the mercy of the market women.

Besides, the failure of the state is reflected. The state government's inept handling of the forces of demand and supply enables market women to manipulate Price Control Officer in a bid to harm the Nigerian economy. Mama Alice refers to the market as their sanctuary. The metaphoric description of *market* by Mama Alice establishes that the market women see the market as a saving grace. A sanctuary is a place that offers protection against attack. Using RRT, the reader comes into contact with how the market becomes a source of protection for the women. Protection offered by the market could be interpreted in terms of the dubious, shady, and nefarious manipulation of market forces against the interests of the consumers. Unfortunately, the state price regulatory architecture fails to defend the interest of the consumers. From Hasan's comment in Excerpt 12, the reader is shown the harrowing effect of price manipulation by the market women. He likens the market to a slaughterhouse, where the largesse of the market is desperately competed for. The reader is made to identify with the imagery of aggression and mindless extortion by the market women. The slaughtering, according to Hassan, involves each of the market women hacks off the other's limbs. Hasan's use of the word "limbs" is a metaphorical representation of the interests of the consumers that deserve protection. Unfortunately, the interest of the consumers are attacked and compromised for selfish gains.

## 5. Femi Osofisan's attitude towards women and crime in *OUFR*

Osofisan's exposition of crime in *OUFR* is a testament to his commitment to interrogating inherent socio-economic and political ills in the Nigerian society. This study has investigated Osofisan's representation of women in crime with particular reference to *OUFR*. While Osofisan dignifies women in some of his plays, he portrays them as agents of criminal acts in *OUFR*. Osofisan argues that crime is an offshoot of social injustice in the text under study. He, however, contends that crime does not have a direct bearing with/on gender; he argues that crime and gender are two parallel variables. The act of criminalities is not gender-specific. The text under study demonstrates the fact that gender does not count in negative tendencies; both male and female engage in criminal tendencies. Previous studies (Akinrinlola 2011, Ukwén 2015, Nnanna 2016, Sunday & Akinrinlola 2017) maintain that Osofisan is sympathetic to the female gender in terms of role allocation; the studies note that Osofisan gives heroic roles to women. This study, however, argues the contrary. While studies (Osita 2005, Ukwén 2015) posit that African playwrights portray men as perpetrators of

crimes, it contends that the perpetuation of social vices in Nigeria is not tied to gender.

Osofisan argues, through the resources of the theatre, that female characters do only exhibit dignifying roles, they also perpetuate criminal activities as revealed in the text under study. The reader is made to visualise how women worsen the economic hardship by conniving with Price Control Officers to make life miserable for their prospective consumers. Through the RRT's resources, the reader engages in how women engage in organised robbery. The reader perceives how womanhood is denigrated through the character of Alhaja. One expects Alhaja to demonstrate some modicum of modesty, considering her religious status. Sadly, the reader is surprised to see her enmeshed in crime against the state. We see how sexual ploys are adopted as a device to negotiate with soldiers. As that is not enough, women engage in illicit market transactions to worsen the harrowing economic experiences of the poor. Taking a cue from Osofisan's representation of women in the text, we could infer that he uses the theatre to present other identities of women. We submit that women in Osofisan's *OUFRR* perpetuate organised sexual and business transaction crimes against the state. Through the RRT, the reader visualises how such crimes are orchestrated and portrayed. This study contrasts sharply with Osita's (2005) that African male authors represent women as appendages. We argue that women are not constantly portrayed as appendages. Women also engage in criminal activities to achieve selfish motives.

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