

## Narrative Strategies in Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Salah Abdel-Sabur's *Ba'd an Yamut al-Malik*

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### Abstract

In the postmodern era, the boundaries of drama have become rather flexible due to the manipulation of oral tradition, storytelling, monologues and narration as integral parts of the dramatic fabric. In his seminal work "Voice and Narration", Brian Richardson rightly contends that "Narration has long been a basic feature of the twentieth-century stage, and one that ought to be more fully appreciated and extensively theorized". The fusion of narrative techniques into the dramatic action adds to the idea of experimentation and self-reflexivity on stage. This study proposes to analyze and compare the elements of narration and storytelling in African and Arab drama. The selected texts are Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* that deals with the moral and

legal definitions of armed robbery and the inability of the government to solve this problem; and Salah Abdul-Sabur's *Ba'd an Yamut al-Malik* (*Now the King is Dead*) that deals with political oppression and spiritual deprivation. The choice of these works is based on the fact that both dramatists make extensive use of a rich oral tradition and storytelling in an attempt to weave oral tradition and drama. Much emphasis is placed upon narrative techniques as a means of dramatizing societal issues, offering an indirect political commentary on modern Nigerian and Egyptian history and involving audience as well.

**Keywords:** Postmodern drama, folktales, narration, Femi Osofisan, Salah Abdul-Sabur

## Narrative Strategies in Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Salah Abdel-Sabur's *Ba'd an Yamut al-Malik*

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Despite the technological developments in the print-dominated modern era, the oral tradition of storytelling is not on the brink of extinction. The function of the storyteller has undergone a vital transformation during various historical eras. The traditional storyteller usually narrates a story of a hero faced with a dilemma while the role played by the modern storyteller on stage lies not only in transmitting and interpreting stories, preserving past legacies and preventing cultural annihilation, but also in discussing current social and political problems and involving the audience. Both the African and Arab theatres have proved to be an appropriate cultural milieu for reviving the art of storytelling through the presentation of oral traditions such as myths and folktales. Oral traditions in general and storytelling in particular play a crucial role in fostering educational as well as religious ends in African and Arab cultures.

Narration can be defined as the recounting of a sequence of mythical or real events by means of mediation. Although it is conventionally assumed that drama is a mimetic genre, new developments have been introduced to the dramatic texts, such as combining narration with the performative aspect of theatre. As a result, the narrator's voice is heard to address the spectators explicitly. Recently, research has suggested a distinction between mimetic and diegetic

narration; and utilizing narrative aspects in drama have become the subject of considerable research in this direction. The narratological aspect of drama has been able to offer new perspectives on interpreting the text and enhancing the audience's participation. The overlapping relation between the dramatic and narrative modes has helped in sustaining the African and Arab cultures over centuries.

This study proposes to examine and compare strategies of narration and storytelling in African and Arab drama. The selected texts are Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Salah Abdel-Sabur's *Ba'd an Yamut al-Malik* (Now the King is Dead). The choice of these texts is based on the fact that both Osofisan and Abdel-Sabur place much emphasis upon mythology, folktales and narration as a means of dramatizing societal issues, offering an indirect political commentary on modern Nigerian and Egyptian history and involving the audience as well. Unfortunately, previous research done on each one of the chosen plays tended to overlook their narrative value. In the analysis of both plays, I try to prove that by adapting narrative and storytelling to the contemporary theatrical context, Osofisan and Abdel-Sabur have become able to address stifling socio-political issues currently affecting their societies. This study sheds light on the merge between mimetic and diegetic narrative strategies to reveal how both

plays are based on the interference of performance and narrative. The theoretical framework of this study is influenced by seminal works such as Monika Fludernik's "Towards a 'Natural' Narratology", Marie-Laure Ryan's "On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology", Brian Richardson's "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama" and Walter J Ong's "Orality and Literacy" (1982). The major concern of this paper is to define narrativity, explore the types of narrators and the goals and objectives of the narrative episodes in the plays under study. The paper also attempts to analyze the dramatization of social issues through the hybridized form of theatrical performance and narration, and to highlight the mimetic and diegetic narrative strategies employed by both dramatists to ensure a collaborative theatrical experience where the audiences are participants.

Significantly, as a Nigerian dramatist, Femi Osofisan makes extensive use of the Yoruba heritage to explore socio-political predicaments prevalent in his society. He has always been conscious of the economic, political and social problems that plague his African continent. Therefore, numerous problems such as hunger, poverty, political corruption, unemployment, crime, violence and insecurity have been discussed in his dramaturgy. His choice of the dramatic vehicle enables him to profoundly approach the underprivileged in Nigeria as he seeks demolishing oppression imposed on them by deceitful politicians and tyrannical rulers through social revolution. Most often, Osofisan weaves his themes around the struggle and resistance of the exploited laymen to the ruling class and the unequal distribution of wealth in society.

Like Osofisan, Abdel-Sabur has a strong grasp of his Arabic history and Egyptian folkloric heritage of which he makes subtle use to address significant local events and contemporary topical issues such as injustice, spiritual deprivation, corrupt authority and the role of the intellectual in spreading awareness and enlightenment. Abdel-Sabur has revived Arabic poetic drama after a long history of realistic prose drama. His publication of *Alnas Fi Beladi* (People in My Country) marks a break from the rigidity of classical Arabic poetry. He contributed with five poetic dramas to the Egyptian stage; and *Now the King is Dead* concludes his philosophical and spiritual quest which he started with *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*.

Both playwrights purposefully utilize storytelling strategies and the world of folktales in the platform of drama to wage an indirect attack against ruthless political authority in their countries and to ridicule political dictators. Moreover, both texts overlap between the dramatic and narrative modes to divert the audiences' attention from the actual performance to the spoken word. In both plays selected for this study, narrators interrupt the sequence of events in the story with their comments, thus challenging realistic stage conventions, reminding the audience of the theatricality of the events and enhancing their intellectual involvement. The rich folkloric background of the stories, the number of thematic parallels that exist in both plays and the controversial ends suggest a common ground for this study. The research attempts to answer the following questions: First, how could the dramatists incorporate their folkloric heritage and popular storytelling into the fabric of their plays? Second, how is

political drama weaved with popular storytelling in the plays under study? Third, what is narrativity and who are the narrator(s) in both plays? Fourth, why do both dramatists manipulate narrativity on stage? Fifth, what are the mimetic and diegetic narrative dimensions of the selected plays? Sixth, how are the audience turned from passive spectators into active participants in the debate?

Michael Wilson asserts that: Storytelling “exists alongside theatre, occasionally rubbing shoulders and even sometimes co-habiting with it” (4). Contrary to Walter Benjamin’s assumption that “the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears” (90), oral storytelling is integrated in the long African and Arab oral heritage and literature. *Once Upon Four Robbers* addresses the causes of the increasing rate of armed robbery in Nigeria during 1970s. At that time, convicted robbers were executed by the military in public places to the massive dismay of a great number of people. Osofisan responds to this practice by presenting a moral debate in his play. He questions whether these defaulters should be executed or not because he believes that crime is the outcome of corrupted rulers and politicians who steal the wealth of their country and neglect the needs of poor people caring only about the pursuit of money. By weaving political drama with popular storytelling, he turns his spectators into participants in that controversy. The dramatist states in the notes to the first production: “Armed robberies, in the scale we are witnessing, are the products of our unjust society” and he adds: “I hope it helps to change our attitude from passive acceptance or sterile indignation into a more dynamic, more enraged determination to confront ourselves and our lives”.

The play’s title, which suggests a story about four criminals, links the play to the world of folktales that both instructs and entertains the listeners. The play is among what Osofisan calls “the magic boon plays” whose main theme is adapted from folklore or dilemma-trickster tale in which a group of people face their dilemma by learning the power of magic from a mysterious person. It starts with the storyteller, Aafa, functioning as the narrator of the play singing a traditional song about the nature of his “ancient and modern” folktale about “dangerous highwaymen/freebooters, source of tears” (74). Then, in a Brechtian style, the stage becomes crowded with actors trying to choose their own roles and costumes in the story while the audience repeats the song’s refrain. The song is provided in Yoruba language to link the Africans to their own heritage.

The group of robbers robs women traders in the market using Aafa’s magic song. When the soldiers come, the robbers run away but their leader is executed in public. Then a number of narrative episodes are presented by the dramatist to question the conditions of women traders, the public execution of robbers and the low salaries of police officers in Nigeria. With these questions comes a dramatization of political and social problems in Osofisan’s community. In his article “The Revolution as Muse”, Osofisan writes about his belief in the need for transforming his society. He insightfully remarks that “The really vital battle is to be waged by the educated class, a committed middle class that properly mobilized can form a decisive revolutionary army that will arrest the present drift of our society and, in the manner of the Asian Tigers, transform it

into a flourishing modern and industrial economy” (14-15).

*Ba'd an Yamut al-Malik* (Now the King is Dead) exhibits the folktale of a tyrannical impotent king who captivates the queen of the river and the poet and imprisons them in his palace until death attacks his body. After the king's death, his spirit remains in the palace and casts an evil spell on everybody there. The queen and the poet escape the spirit of the dead king to the river but, unfortunately, they are followed by the executioner who wants to get rid of them. After some confrontations, the poet kills the emissary of the court and is able to give the queen the child she was in need of. The play has three alternative endings and the audiences are asked to make up their minds in order to come to their own conclusions. The play seems like a parable unfolded by multiple voices in the form of three women narrators who transmit the action to the audience.

The play addresses some issues recurrent in Abdel Sabur's poetic drama such as oppression, freedom, lawlessness and the value of one's word. The title suggests that the incidents of the play begin after the king's death. As an oppressor, the king himself represents death because whenever he touches anything, it turns into a dead body. Abdel Sabur dramatizes the story of a tyrannical ruler who denies his people freedom and justice. Eid points out that: "It is not easy to say that Salah has been inspired in writing this play by a specific historical event, nonetheless, he is inspired by heritage making use of popular folktales and mythology in his character portrayal. He also benefits from the traditions of modern theatre; and he opposes conventional Aristotelian theories" (79).

The King stands for any despot who claims the right to sentence to death innocent individuals.

### Types of Narrators in both plays:

The term 'narrative' has challenged many narratologists to work out a suitable definition. In his *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*, Gerald Prince defines narrative as: "The representation of at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (4).

Prince's quotation cited above refers to the logical relation of the sequence of events. According to Fludernik in her *Introduction to Narratology*, A narrative is "a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure)(6). In her "Towards a Natural Narratology", Fludernik regards narrativity as "a function of narrative texts [which] centres on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature" (26). Fludernik places much emphasis on the presence of at least one human at the centre of the narrative to produce narrativity. She asserts that drama is a "verbal-visual narrative" (7). She offers a definition of narrativity and includes drama as a narrative genre not only because of its plot but also because of the vital role of narrative in drama. In addition, Marie-Laure Ryan offers a cognitive definition of narrativity that has three main features: First, it entails the presentation of a world that has a spatial dimension and populated by characters. Second, the events are presented through the framework of a

temporal dimension. Third, the events are logically and intelligibly developed in the plot (2).

According to Brian Richardson: a generative narrator “generates a fictional world in a manner similar to that of an omniscient narrator” (685). In other words, a generative narrator is a character who tells a story and then the spectators watch it enacted on stage. Based on the above premises, I argue that as a metatheatrical device, the storyteller in *Four Robbers* serves as the generative narrator of the play. He constructs some narratives deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural and historical background reflecting upon contemporary social ills in postcolonial Nigerian society. Walter Benjamin presents a mythical configuration of the storyteller as someone who has a revered aura and the voice of wisdom. In *Four Robbers*, when the characters appear on stage, they express their desire that Aafa be a Muslim preacher and they give him beads, a kettle and a praying mat.

Nevertheless, Aafa, the transmitter of events in this play, seems to contradict the glorified image of Benjamin’s storyteller who represents “counsel woven into the fabric of real life” (86). With regard to the reliability of narration, Aafa seems to be an unreliable narrator due to his suspected personality and disturbed value systems that make him untrusted character. Aafa “violates valid social norms in word or deed” (Fludernik 27) due to his magic song that teaches the robbers how to steal with no violence. To embody spiritual exploitation, Aafa is depicted as a Muslim preacher and at the same time as someone who encourages robbery if it is unaccompanied with violence. The audience always suspects his accounts of the story. This gives them the chance to

figure out what really happens. Since Aafa is the first person narrator and a character in the play, he represents ‘homodiegetic narration’ – to use Genette’s terms. He also represents an ‘internal focalizer’ as the view or perspective from which the story is told, is restricted to a single character.

*Now the King is Dead* begins with a prose-prologue narrated by the three women chorus. They would be considered ‘heterodiegetic narrators’ according to Genette, as they give an account of the story without being its protagonists. The idea of the chorus as mediators between the mimetic actors and the spectators comes from Greek drama. The play is divided into three acts and the narrators frame the whole play giving it a subtle circular structure. In her initial entry, the first woman welcomes the audience then she ironically states: “We get paid just the same whether you come or stay away, whether we have a full house or an empty one, whether it is your breath that fills the auditorium or the smell of its wood and stone” (383-84). It is noteworthy that the play is written in free verse form except the narrators’ comments that are communicated in prose. In a Brechtian style, the second woman complains that they play only the minor parts in the show and the praise always goes to the author and director of the play. But she informs the audience that the three women will come on the stage every now and then and direct their speech to the audience. As for the third woman, she starts narrating the story of a king describing it as a worthy story that deserves to be framed in a poetic drama. She confirms that the author has found this tale in a rare old book which he has read. The other two women narrators begin to unfold the story of a king who

rules a country situated by the river. They assert that they know about this story from the manager who had asked the director who had quoted the author.

Arguably, the three women narrators correspond to what Genette calls 'zero focalization' as they are "above the world of the action, look down on it and [are] able to see into the characters minds as well as shifting between the various locations where the story takes place" (Fludernik 38). In this play, the narrators tell us "quite explicitly what is what,... know the past, present and future of [their] characters, can move between locations at different ends of the fictional world, and have unlimited access to characters' minds" (124). Contrary to the sole narrator in Osofisan's *Four Robbers*, Abdel Sabur's innovative reworking of his story lies in the multiple narrative voices. The women narrators discuss with the spectators Aristotle's definition of a tragedy and the concept of imitation arguing that gloating is one of the passions aroused in this play. Abdel Sabur starts his play with scenes that reflect the king's dictatorship and hegemonic power and then scenes of his death and finally scenes showing the dead king who wants to take all meanings of goodness and livelihood to his grave. The king is not portrayed as a pathetic figure or a tragic hero who deserves our sympathy when he downfalls but as a tyrant who deserves gloating.

In his "Unnatural Narration in Contemporary Drama", Richardson contends that: "Like contemporary fiction, modern drama has for some time transcend the simple, humanist narrator figure and has gone to create 'unnatural' narrators who exceed and subvert the limits of individual consciousness" (133). In *Now the King is Dead*, Abdel Sabur is offering

an untraditional form of narration .The entry of the chorus of storytellers is followed by the entry of a hunch-back pigmy herald who announces that the royal tailor asks for admission. The presentation of this figure serves in undermining the dignified aura surrounding the traditional storyteller.

Moments into the play, the women narrators play the role of characters when they talk to the king and dance with him whenever he orders them to do so. We discover that the poet has taught them seductive words to satisfy the king's eagerness for sexual pleasure. Significantly, the three women are generative narrators who sometimes become actors and sometimes they assume the choral role of commentators on the incidents of the play. In act two, they come on stage to address the audience directly describing death rituals in the dead king's country. The second woman says:

They dressed their dead in their best clothes and for forty days let them lie on their soft or hard beds while their friends and relatives, their nearest and dearest, went round them, and in the sweetest, gentlest words urged them to recover their ebbing strength and drive out of their bodies the black bird of death. (427)

The dead king wants the queen to lie beside him in order to be able to conquer the black bird of death and come back to life. This mythical and ritual atmosphere based on oral heritage runs through the whole play. In act three, the chorus of storytellers sustains the dramatic tension by speaking directly to the audience about the three alternative endings of the play. This multiplicity of narration endows the structure of the play with flexibility.

Both *Four Robbers* and *Now the King is Dead* avidly make use of mimetic and diegetic features. Nunning and Sommer offer a distinction between mimetic and diegetic narration:

Mimetic narrativity could be defined as the representation of a temporal and/or causal sequence of events, with the degree of narrativity hinging upon the degree of eventfulness. Diegetic narrativity, on the other hand, refers to verbal, as opposed to visual or performance, transmission of narrative content, to the representation of a speech act of telling a story by an agent called a narrator. (338)

This definition of the elements of narrativity is the cornerstone of my analysis and narratological reading of the plays chosen for this study. I contend that mimetic features in the two plays are used to shed light on social dilemmas confronting both the Nigerian and the Arab societies, whereas diegetic features of narration are used as a powerful means through which the audiences are tempted into speculation and active participation is enhanced. By employing diegetic narrative strategies, new ways of communication between performers and spectators are highlighted.

### **Mimetic Narrative Strategy and Dramatizing Societal Issues:**

Mimetic narrative features refer to the sequence of events presented directly on stage without mediation (i.e. spectacles or scenic presentation). Spectators directly observe this mimetic world or the sequence of events in the story. The very telling dialogues and action in both plays take us directly to mimetic narration as the

narrator's voice disappears. Mimetic narration emphasizes 'the story frame' rather than 'the telling frame' (Fludernik 341). In *Four Robbers*, the play shows that the criminals are the products of the civil war. The three male robbers were ex-soldiers and the female robber was a trader. Therefore, the government is held responsible for turning some Nigerians into criminals and for fostering the conditions of armed robbery in society. Moreover, Osofisan unmasks the corruption and greed of soldiers in his society. Instead of bringing justice to the people, the sergeant and his soldiers keep the money recovered from the thieves for themselves:

Sergeant: As far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money!...  
We found nothing...Let us meet later tonight, at my brother's house.

Ironically, the sergeant and Ahmed (a robber) are brothers; although they are apparently different, they have chosen the same way of lawlessness. Another example of moral corruption in society is when Al-Haja, a robber whose name ironically contradicts her behavior, offers the soldiers some corn, gin, and a promise of sexual pleasure if they set Major free. Although this was an unsuccessful attempt, it highlights a crucial fact in society, that is, the privileged do benefit from their social positions at the expense of the downtrodden majority. Significantly, the song of the market women exposes their selfishness and greed for money:

The lure of profit  
Has conquered our souls  
And changed us into cannibals.(50)

Nevertheless, the market women express many reasons behind their greed such as the harassment from robbers, high taxes, family obligations and bribes they must pay for soldiers in order to be protected. The lust for profit seems to be the primary factor behind the subordination of the market women despite their justification of their actions. The rich display their wealth arrogantly without paying any attention to the social ailments of the poor. Influential people, like politicians who enjoy wealth and privilege, are envied by members of society who rob because of the lure of money. Major expresses the idea that the poor have needs like the rich in the following words:

Major: This is money! Money! A new life. No more scurrying in the smell of back streets. A house the size of palace! The law, tamed with my bank account! And children!... I'll own the main streets, six, no,... ten Mercedes, the neon lights, the supermarkets...(39)

Almost all the characters in the play use various ways for robbing each other. Osofisan criticizes the dominance of materialistic aspects in his society at the expense of spiritual aspects. Due to economic exploitation, the people have turned into creatures mercilessly devouring each other. Hassan clearly expresses this idea in the following quotation:

The world is a market, we come to slaughter one another and sell the parts...[...] Ask these women. They'll chop each other to bits at the jingle of coins. (51)

Osofisan deplors the fact that his society lacks ethical judgment and moral obligation caused by the inadequacy in the

application of religion. He is more concerned about the causes of armed robbery in his country. He wants the government to address the needs of the poor:

the ridiculous salary structures, minimum wage, the squalid spending habits of our egregious "contractors" land speculators, middle men of all sorts, importers, exporters etc, slums and ghettos, congested hospitals, crowded schools, impossible markets, proliferation of motor cars, insurance agencies, supermarkets, chemist shops, boutiques, discotheques etc" .(viii)

Poverty, unemployment and hunger breed crime as Major says: "Forgive us. It is hunger that derives us"(14). The stringent socio-economic factors that breed crime in society must be tackled. Ropo Sekoni rightly contends: "storytelling should be viewed as a performative social discourse between narrator and audience designed to explore and communicate the dominant concerns of the community" (139). I argue that these 'dominant concerns' of the Nigerian community are well-addressed by Femi Osofisan.

In *Now the King is Dead*, Abdel Sabur addresses the issue of social justice unmasking the repercussions of oppressive ruling authority on the underprivileged laymen. The battle of the poet, who impersonates the protagonist in the play and who stands for the intellectual in society, is with a corrupt king. The poet is admired as he represents the power of the word that surpasses the power of the sword. In this sense, he becomes the hero and the savior that constitutes a remarkable aspect of Arab storytelling.

The action performed on stage provides us with a satisfactory example of Nunning and Sommer's mimetic narration. The play's story world is mediated through the discourse provided by the chorus of storytellers. The play is presented in the "teller mode"- to use Stanzel's words.

Abdel Sabur satirically depicts an oppressive king who assumes a larger-than-life size when he addresses the men at his court:

I own the state,  
Therefore, I am the state, everything  
and everyone,  
The court, the treasury, and the seat  
of wisdom;  
I am the temple, and the hospital,  
and the jail,  
The cemetery too;  
I am the one and all.(394)

The king boastfully announces his control and domination over everything. He even orders the executioner to cut the tailor's head as he inspires the king to change the slogan of the state. But after several pleas, he decides to only pluck the tailor's tongue by the roots. The king passes absurd laws and his despotism is uncovered in his dialogue with the queen:

That night, I got your dowry with  
my sword,  
A kingdom that stretches the whole  
length of your river.  
And then I carried you off to my  
palace in full honour,  
And shut you away so that no  
human eye could so much  
As glimpse the hem of your robe.  
(422)

Abdel Sabur ridicules the king and strips him of his power. The king has a contradictory nature due to his external

power and internal weakness. He is impotent and unable to give the queen the child she wants. With regard to the queen, she is depicted as a desperate woman who was taken by force. After the king's death, his men are still affected by his power and influence as they imagined that they heard him ordering that the queen must be buried beside his body. Al-Sa'dany hails it thus "The queen's future is not made by authority or history or even by the word; it is rather made by freedom... Enslavement means death; and freedom resurrects the dead. Freedom means that man should not lose his ability to say his word or to carry the sword" (30- 31).

Through a number of successive dramatic episodes, the narrators' voices disappear to leave the audience watch the king's power abuse in dealing with the queen, the poet, the tailor, the historian and the judge. Al-Essaily argues:

By showing how the king treats the masses and the courtsmen, the play's scenes confirm the king's oppression and despotism and their hypocrisy and submission. By being submissive, they have increased the king's tyranny. The king has spoiled them by the way he treats them. The historian distorts history, the judge has no conscience, the vizier is a hypocrite and they all fear the king.(Translation mine 203)

The dramatist implicitly criticizes the people's defective socio-political affairs that create despotism. These dramatic episodes alert the spectators to contemplate their status quo. Despite the fact that all the characters in this play have no specific personal names, a device used to universalize the situation, they are

similar to the characters whom we meet in folk tales.

According to Walter Ong, one of the basic characteristics of orality (i.e. a story based on oral heritage) is favoring physicality and somatic features at the expense of abstractions. It can be argued that just as physicality and the somatic characteristics of the folktale are manifest in *Four Robbers*, they are also present in *Now the King is Dead* to highlight the king's misuse of his political power. In *Now the King is Dead*, concrete and physical expressions are dominant in the texture of the play. In act one, for example, Abdel Sabur depicts the king's physical deprivation when he dances with the first woman:

King: Your body breaks under my touch and softly sways;

In melting rhythm it responds and undulates

Like a field slumbering in cosy warmth of a

Bleached winter morn. (389)

This bodily activity is prioritized over motionlessness and stillness to constitute a somatic aspect in the folktale. Ong asserts: "Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body" (67). When the king summons the three women, they come to life suddenly and when he pushes them away, they become motionless. Ong states: "In oral verbalization, particularly public verbalization, absolute motionlessness is itself a powerful gesture" (67). In the confrontation between the poet and the executioner at the end of the play, the body language provided seems to offer a good example:

Executioner (Advances to the poet who suddenly darts his flute and plunges it into the Executioner's eyes. The Executioner screams and staggers back, one hand clapped on his bleeding eye, the other beating about with the sword aimlessly). (458)

The above scene can be seen as a mimetic projection of the power of the intellectual (in this case the poet) in overcoming corruption. Through 'visual or performative transmission of narrative content' (Nunning 338), Abdel Sabur has chosen to explore a folk tale from his own cultural heritage to expose and confront the oppression of the ruling classes in his county and the dehumanization of the poor masses.

#### **Diegetic Narrative Strategy and Audience Involvement:**

Orthodox playwriting has assumed that drama is confined exclusively to the mimetic element, i.e. imitation of an action in the Aristotelian sense. Keir Elam, for example, notes that drama is "without narratorial mediation" (119). Nevertheless, the diegetic narrative features could also be successfully employed in drama. Nunning explains that: "Plays not only represent series of events, they also represent acts of narration with characters serving as intradiegetic storytellers" (337). The narrative paradigms that occur at the intradiegetic level are based on characters' utterances, whereas the narrative structures corresponding to the extradiegetic level are based on prologue, epilogue, choric speeches and overt narrators. Nunning summarizes the strategies of narration at the extradiegetic level as: prologue, epilogue, choric narration, soliloquy, aside, stage directions, a play-within-the-

play, modern narrator figures and metanarrative comments. He adds: “The list of diegetic elements in drama can be expanded by transgeneric narrative strategies and storytelling techniques which can be used by both playwrights and novelists, such as montage techniques, scenic narration, and reversal of chronology” (34). These diegetic elements help in covering the temporal and spatial limitations of the setting.

Chatman convincingly argues that “a story can be transmitted through a teller or a shower or some combination of both” (113). In this sense, Chatman is referring to both the mimetic and the diegetic strategies in drama. Brian Richardson, a narrative theorist who wrote articles that deal with narrativity and drama, asserts that: “drama, like the novel, is and always has been a mixture of mimetic and diegetic representation” (193). His article “Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama” investigates the use of narrative voice and mediation in drama. Moreover, Fludernick points out that: “it is ...customary to analyze not only the novel and the film as narrative genres but also drama, cartoons, ballet and pantomime” (4).

In the light of the aforementioned arguments, I postulate that both Osofisan and Abdel Sabur incorporate narrative form, folktales and storytelling as part of their innovative dramaturgy to criticize contemporary events and convey political messages to audiences. Both plays overlap between ‘telling mode and reflector mode’ (Fludernick 35). The two playwrights have been keen on making their audience never forget the fact that they are in a theatre watching a play. The diegetic features in both plays, particularly the narratological aspects, help to empower the narrativity of the drama and ensure the highest level of

interaction with the audience. The structure of *Four Robbers* is divided into a prologue, three parts, an interlude and an epilogue. An entrance song precedes the play. The storyteller greets the audience and then he starts singing with them until the actors gather on stage. In *Four Robbers*, Osofisan wants his audience, and by implication, members of his society to revolt against oppressive state structures.

Throughout the play, the narrator is present amongst the play’s characters to provide narrative passages. These passages or rather songs mark the transition from part one to part two and three and introduce the topics of these parts. In the prologue, the storyteller exchanges greetings with the audience, plays his instrument and starts his song in Yoruba. The song’s refrain is repeated by the audience:

An ancient tale I will tell you  
Tale ancient and modern  
A tale of four armed robbers  
Dangerous highwaymen  
Freebooters, source of tears  
Like kites, eaters of accursed  
sacrifice. (98)

Aafa, the storyteller, then steps down into his fictional world and emerges with his praying mat asking the four robbers to join him in praying. In fact, this provides a good example of Fludernick’s “narratorial metalepsis” because Aafa becomes a part of his recitations. Alhaja says to him: “Release these men from your diabolical spell” (19). When two of the thieves start praying, Aafa says: “Foolish! Get up you two, Allah is not likely to hear your prayers. Fools, all of you”(21). Aafa wants them to quit theft but they seem to be obstinate. He responds: “Your pride! Is that it! The eloquent pride of the masses!

Will that feed you? Clothe you? Shelter your children? Will it halt the bullets when your backs are tied to the stake? (23). A group of thieves- Angola, Major, Hasan and Alhaja- are armed robbers who attack people everywhere, steal their money and kill them. Aafa, the narrator of the play, suggests giving them a present that turns them into rich people if they learn a magic song that casts a spell over the listeners. He wants them to steal without weapon, to cause no physical injury to their victims, not to steal from poor people and to steal only in public places using his magic song. He tells them that it is enough to use this power only three times to be rich. He adds: "The power will work only if all of you combine and each speaks his verse, in his own voice" (30). If the robbers sing the formula/verse, traders and clients in the market who hear it will join them in singing and dancing and they leave their properties. Aafa's magic formula works well. Throughout the play, Aafa's diegetic discourse alternates with the mimetic action performed by the four robbers in their interaction with the soldiers and the market women traders.

Repeatedly in the interlude, Aafa sings and dances; and both actors and audience sing the refrain:

I am still telling my tale  
 The tale of four armed robbers  
 Who came to meet me one day  
 Whom I gave a power to magic  
 .....  
 Money-grabbing has made you mad  
 Money, empty money  
 Money-hunting, evil-doing. (104)

The interlude's songs and incantations confirm that avarice and greed will ultimately lead to death and destruction. Aafa's interaction with the audience is

created through his songs, music, and dance; and through his control over the incidents of the story he narrates and his walking on and off the stage.

In the epilogue, Aafa again interacts with the audience and addresses them directly:

Aafa: (Walking round the auditorium). A stalemate? How can I end my story on a stalemate? (...) No, I need your help one side is bound to win in the end. The robbers, or the soldiers, who are acting on your behalf. So you've got to decide and resolve the issue. Which shall it be? Who wins? Yes, madman? Your reasons, please, And you, gentleman? Should the robbers be shot? Please, do not be afraid to voice your opinion, we want this play to end. Okay, I'll take five opinions and we'll let the majority carry the day...Yes? ...Ladies and gentlemen, the robbers win!

The above mentioned metanarrative comment displays an example of diegetic narrativity in *Four Robbers*. It is manipulated to create a distancing effect. The audience has been provoked by Osofisan to respond to the narrator's questions and to decide whether the robbers should be set free or should be executed. If the robber is freed, defiance of the law reigns; and if he is executed, brutal military rule is the outcome. In this sense, a moral debate about public execution is deeply raised in the play and the audience is prompted to interact with the story world. The stage directions at the end of the play are extremely suggestive: "The stage vibrates with the clashing orders of soldiers and robbers. In that conclusion, everything suddenly comes to a freeze"

(71). As a crime, armed robbery is in itself a form of rebellion against tyranny and oppression. There is no use in executing robbers and leaving corrupt politicians, corrupt soldiers, and profiteers. The message Osofisan wishes to convey to his audience is that suitable social conditions must be created to stop violence and wipe out criminality.

In the programme notes to the first production, Osofisan asserts: “the legalized slaughtering of the erring members of our society for whatever offence will certainly not bring the restoration of our society to its primordial sanity”. By direct address, Osofisan wishes to check the spectators’ interpretation of his play and the meanings constructed by the fictional world he has created. Fludernik asserts: “Communicative level is also active during storytelling whenever the narrator addresses explanatory remarks or comments to his audience” (48). The spectators have turned from being passive recipients into active participants in the story. Aafa pauses the story to address the spectators directly and get their responses. This type of narration is referred to by Fludernik in her “Scene Shift, Metalepsis, and the Metaleptic Mode” as “rhetorical metalepsis”. In an interview with O.T. Oloruntoba, Osofisan explains his intention about this dialectic ending of the play: “When I wrote *Once Upon Four Robbers*, some audience members say kill the robbers; others say don’t kill the robbers and you argue it out and then you take a decision. When you are going away from the theatre you are still thinking about it. Is this right?” (267). Obviously, Osofisan’s aim is to make his audience think critically about the play’s end and

assume responsibility for their own decisions.

Walter Ong rightly contends: oral literature “is not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat”. He adds: “the celebration of physical behavior, oral cultures reveal themselves as agonistically programmed” (44). As the spectators in *Four Robbers* have been addressed by the narrator, the multiple storytellers in *Now the King is Dead* stimulate audience response too. The rational argumentation taking place in both plays forms an agonistic voice or several conflicting points of view with regard to the conclusion of the folktales or rather the plays’ end. Similar to the choices offered by the narrator in *Four Robbers*, in Abdel Sabur’s play, the first woman narrator asks the audience to choose one of the three alternative endings of the play. In a sort of “rhetorical metalepsis”, she promises the spectators that the ending they choose will be the only one they play tomorrow. The second woman narrator announces that they will act out the first ending that represents “the human tendency to refer one’s problems to the higher powers of fate and ask them to solve them. But before we begin, we have to pave the way with a bit of narration” (464). Then she starts her “verbal transmission of narrative content” (Nunning and Sommer 338) that includes how the poet pleads to the court of justice to return his beloved to him. This is a vivid example of generative narration where the narrator is shaping the fictional world for the spectators.

It is noteworthy that the rest of the story is manifest in action rather than narration. The characters continue to act; and the poet turns to the three women narrators and says:

Gentle ladies,

If you'd direct me to where I  
can find the lords of fate,

I should always remember and  
value your kindness

Above all else. (467)

The overlapping between the narrative mode and the dramatic mode endows the play with dynamicality. The role of the three women shifts from narration to participation in the play's action. Their speech is mimetically enacted by the characters on stage. The action of the first ending in *Now the King is Dead* is generated by the women narrators when the poet tries to save the queen who is lost in the underworld but he could not rescue her. He then resorts to the lords of fate who seem to be the same Vizier, Historian and Judge who were in the court. They absurdly suggest dividing the queen between the king and the poet; a decision denounced by the poet who sincerely loves the queen. In this scene, the audience is presented with a staging of the narrators' consciousness. Moreover, the three women narrators play their role in alerting the spectators to the coming performance and in commenting on this ending. They remind the audience of the story of King Solomon the Wise and Brecht's modern version of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. This significant part of the play demonstrates the impact of Brecht's epic theatre and distancing effect. The playwright expresses his condemnation of tyrannical rule without restrictions and spectators become discontent at social oppression. The second alternative choice narrated by the chorus is when the poet and the queen delay returning back to the palace until the child is born and he is twenty; and the audience then are called

upon to see what happens. With this direct address and discursive metanarrative comments, the audience is involved in the story world. Unfortunately, this is not the best solution to the folktale's dilemma due to destruction, ruin and decay of everything in the palace. The second woman narrator addresses the audience saying:

That, ladies and gentlemen, was the second alternative ending. We do not know whether it has appealed to you or not- dramatically speaking of course, for as you know, we make no pretense of telling you a true story. (480)

These two endings represent loss, gloom and regret, but there is some hope in the third ending in which the poet and the queen return back to the palace to dispel the evil spirits and to turn the palace into a place for all the masses not merely for the tyrannical rulers. This multiperspectivism comes to an end when the third option is mimetically enacted rather than narrated in the play.

The third ending represents resistance to corruption and revolution. The poet confronts the court's men with his sword, orders them to bury the dead; and they finally surrender. After the third option is performed, the three women narrators come out and face the audience to confront them with questions. The second woman narrator asks them:

Which of our three endings do you choose? What did you say? What? Louder please, I can't hear you. Well, all right then. Tomorrow, this is the one we play and nothing else. And we will go on playing it until the show is over and is replaced by another, posing a different question,

making a new demand on your intelligence. (487)

In these highly controversial questions, the embedded message conveyed by Abdel Sabur is that people should not surrender to despotic rulers. Confrontation is needed for eliminating poverty and dictatorship. Thoraya Al-Essaily comments on the queen's role in supporting the poet "The queen's power emerges as she could encourage the poet and endow him with power and enthusiasm to fight oppression with her. She teaches him that a word can be turned into an action; and that a flute can fight like a sword" (202). In both *Four Robbers* and *Now the King is Dead*, the narrator(s), to borrow Jahn's words:

Introduces himself as a narrator figure on the communicative level of fictional mediation,...he addresses the audience ...advertises the story's didactic purpose as well as its proven entertainment value, adds some verbal décor which establishes story-Here and story-Now, and finally asks the spectators to see and judge for themselves" .(671)

Sustaining a narrative-centered theatre invoked from popular culture to address current socio-political issues confronting their societies constitutes a creative endeavor on part of Osofisan and Abdel Sabur. The combative aspect of the plays, presented in the form of multifarious voices and alternative endings, motivates the audience to enthusiastically respond to them. Osofisan's and Abdel Sabur's theatre has become a place for communication and sharing ideas rather than mere entertainment.

To conclude, the analysis of mimetic and diegetic strategies of narration and

storytelling in *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Now the King is Dead* has demonstrated that both Osofisan and Abdel Sabur have been keen on merging narrativity and mediation with theatrical performance to make theatre a powerful medium. In other words, they have proved that the act of narration has a performative quality. They both merge the dramatic and narrative modes to add mimetic and diegetic dimensions to their theatrical pieces and activate their audience's minds. Their experiment with narrativity in drama is not confined to mimetic narration alone as they develop innovative diegetic narration as well that enables them to transform the audiences from being passive observers into being active participants in the debate. By using their creativity in fusing diegetic narrative techniques with mimetic strategies, they have demonstrated the faultiness of the supposition that drama is entirely non-narrative and unmediated. Moreover, they have incorporated their folkloric heritage and popular storytelling into the fabric of their plays for expressing their political views and social criticism that could not be uttered openly. The controversial ends of both plays with questions asked by the storytellers raise problematic questions rather than offer satisfactory resolutions to enhance spectators' intellectual response.

The narrator figure in *Four Robbers* frames the whole story world, takes control over the play and addresses the spectators directly. The interaction of multifarious narrative voices in *Now the King is Dead* holds the audience captive and makes room for them to respond. The chorus of storytellers frames the events of the play and generates its action. The sacral and centralized position of the Nigerian storyteller is contrasted to the secular and

agonistic position of storytellers in the Egyptian play. With mimetic narrative features, the two dramatists could draw a bleak image of the socio-political ills prevalent in their communities. With diegetic narrative features, on the other hand, the audience has become critical observers who question the issues discussed in the stories recited by the narrators. The dramatists have succeeded in writing narratologically inspirational plays that express their dissatisfaction with the status quo and urge us to penetrate into the story world to interpret it and at the same time confront our problems.

**Notes**

Quotations extracted from Salah Abdel-Sabur's *Ba'd an Yamut al-Malik* are based on Nehad Selaiha's translation of the play in her *Contemporary Arabic Literature: Salah Abdul Saboor the Complete Plays*, whereas quotations extracted from Arabic sources are translated from Arabic into English by the researcher.

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