

## **Neither the *Iliad* Nor the *Odyssey*: Exploring the Epic Tradition in Arab and African Theater**

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### **Abstract**

In both Arab and African cultures, the epic is the stepping stone between myth and culture. The indigenous experience of the epic is quite similar to the Greek experience where myth and folklore turn into a national literature, a history, which playwrights then use as a source material to create drama. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, epic theater came to be used to justify alternative communities. It began to offer oppositional narratives which challenged prevailing orthodoxies, and celebrated minorities. It did this by challenging dominant dramatic forms.

The epitome of this challenge was manifested in the works of two significant playwrights. Epic theater technique constitutes the vehicle of plot and dramatic action in the Nigerian Playwright's Femi Osofisan *Once Upon Four Robbers*. The storytelling technique is also used by Osofisan to achieve what Brecht called the alienation effect (*Verfermdungs Effekt*) in epic theater—a device that enables the characters on stage to elicit audience participation in both plot and dramatic action. Likewise, the Egyptian playwright, Naguib Sorour, uses the same technique in his play *Yasseen w (and) Baheya* exploring the central conflict of an old ballad about the oppression of peasants by foreign rulers. In the end, both plays serve as a commentary on political and social conditions in contemporary African and Egyptian societies.

This paper attempts simultaneously to engage two different cultures (Arab and African) as they represent themselves in the epic theater form. Both plays are a celebration of the expressiveness of self and are an experiment in developing a new type of 'authentic' Arab and African drama which consciously departs from the European model and invokes in its form and content, an oral folk tradition. The overall goal of this study is not only to examine the plays using a single theory or a line of approach, but also to study the rich tapestry of thought, theory and cultural contact which informs them.

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لا الإلياذة ولا الأوديسة: استكشاف التقليد ملحمة في المسرح العربي والافريقي

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الملخص

وفي كلتا الثقافتين العربية والأفريقية، وملحمة هي نقطة انطلاق بين الأسطورة والثقافة. التجربة الأصلية لمحنة مماثلة تماما لتجربة اليونانية حيث الأسطورة وبدوره الفولكلور في الأدب الوطني، وهو التاريخ الذي المسرحيين ثم استخدم كمادة مصدر لخلق الدراما. في القرن 20th، وجاء المسرح الملحمي لاستخدامها لتبرير المجتمعات البديلة. وبدأ تقديم الروايات المعارضة التي طعنت معتقدات السائدة، واحتفل الأقليات. فعلت هذا من خلال تحدي أشكال درامية المهيمنة.

تجلى مثالا لهذا التحدي في أعمال اثنين من الكتاب المسرحيين كبيرة. تشكل تقنية المسرح الملحمي السيارة من مؤامرة وعمل درامي في الكاتب المسرحي النيجيري فيمي Osofisan مرة واحدة عند أربعة لصوص. يتم استخدام تقنية القص أيضا Osofisan لتحقيق ما يسمى بريخت تأثير الاغتراب (Verfermdungs Effekt) في المسرح الملحمي على الجهاز الذي تمكن من الشخصيات على خشبة المسرح لانتزاع مشاركة الجمهور في كل من مؤامرة وعمل درامي. وبالمثل، فإن الكاتب المسرحي المصري، نجيب سرور، يستخدم نفس الأسلوب في مسرحيته ياسين ث (و) بهية استكشاف الصراع المركزي لأغنية قديمة حول اضطهاد الفلاحين من قبل الحكام الأجانب. في النهاية، سواء المسرحيات بمثابة التعليق على الأوضاع السياسية والاجتماعية في المجتمعات الأفريقية والمصرية المعاصرة.

تحاول هذه الورقة في وقت واحد للدخول ثقافتين مختلفتين (العربية والإفريقية) لأنها تمثل نفسها في شكل المسرح الملحمي. كلا المسرحيات هي الاحتفال التعبير عن النفس وهي تجربة في تطوير نوع جديد من "authentic'Arab" والدراما الأفريقي الذي يحيد عن وعي من النموذج الأوروبي ويستحضر في الشكل والمضمون، والتقاليد الشعبية عن طريق الفم. ويتمثل الهدف العام من هذه الدراسة ليس فقط لدراسة مسرحيات باستخدام نظرية واحدة أو خط النهج، ولكن أيضا لدراسة نسيج غني الفكر والنظرية والتواصل الثقافي الذي يبلغ لهم.

In the 1920s when Brecht and Piscator coined the term *epic theater* to distinguish their practice from what they called the *dramatic theater*, they meant to stay away from replicating the view of a single individual at one point in time and space, a tradition that has dominated Western theater since the Renaissance. This tradition, which Brecht traced back to Aristotle, rendered theater incapable of representing larger realities beyond the illusory world of the play. Both collaboratively and individually Brecht and Piscator sought alternatives rejecting the doctrine of the three unities and drawing inspiration from a variety of art forms: film, puppet theater, Berlin Dada, Russian constructivism as well as a legacy of dramatic works. Thus, epic theater came to be used to justify alternative communities. It began to offer oppositional narratives which challenged prevailing orthodoxies, and celebrated minorities. It did this by challenging dominant dramatic forms.

The principles of the epic theater continue to draw politically engaged artists and writers who want to stage or write about history as “eminently changeable, a continuing human work capable of being re-written” (Bryant-Bertail 5). Examples of contemporary playwrights who took up the principles of the epic theater in their work are: Caryl Churchill, Tony Kushner, Susan Lori-Parks and Louis Valdez.

Since the 1970s artists and scholars in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have also embraced the plays and stage practices of epic theater, incorporating them with indigenous performance traditions. Thus, the epic legacy could never be seen to follow one formula practiced by all but a set of basic principles and a tradition of texts that carry on a dialogue with each other and with their audiences.

In both Arab and African cultures, the epic is the stepping stone between myth and culture. The indigenous experience of the epic is quite similar to the Greek experience where myth and folklore turn into a national literature, a history, which playwrights then use as a source material to create drama. The epitome of this challenge was manifested in the works of two significant playwrights. Epic theater technique constitutes the vehicle of plot and dramatic action in the Nigerian Playwright’s Femi Osofisan *The Chattering and the Song*. The storytelling and the play-within-the play technique are

also used by Osofisan to achieve what Brecht called the alienation effect (*Verfermdungs Effekt*)<sup>1</sup> in epic theater—a device that enables the characters on stage to elicit audience participation in both plot and dramatic action. Likewise, the Egyptian playwright, Naguib Sorour, uses the same technique in his play *Yasseen w (and) Baheya* exploring the central conflict of an old ballad about the oppression of peasants by foreign rulers. In the end, both plays serve as a commentary on political and social conditions in contemporary African and Egyptian societies.

**Aim of the Study:**

This paper/presentation attempts simultaneously to engage two different cultures (Arab and African) as they represent themselves in the epic theater form. Both plays are a celebration of the expressiveness of self and are an experiment in developing a new type of ‘authentic’ Arab and African drama “which consciously departs from the European model and invokes in its form and content, an oral folk tradition” (Seleiha). The overall goal of this study is not only to examine the plays using a single theory or a line of approach, but also to study the rich tapestry of thought, theory and cultural contact which informs them.

**The Epic Tradition as represented in Naguib Sorour:**

Naguib Sorour is considered one of the few artists who practiced the theater in all its various forms: as an actor, director and playwright. It was through such integration that he was able to expose himself to a variety of theatrical components. Sorour reflected on his admiration of Brecht by saying that “those who want to combine the expertise of both drama and its directorship, has to have the genius of Brecht” (1) (translation mine). Brecht’s influence on Sorour resulted from the period that Sorour spent studying in the Soviet Union and Hungary (1958-1964) –the product of which was

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<sup>1</sup> Brecht’s key notion of *Verfermdung* is usually translated as “alienation”, which in English could carry negative connotations meaning isolation, hostility, estrangement, etc. It is important to note that “alienation” is also the usual translation of Marx’s term *Entfermdung*. But Brecht’s *Verfermdung*, in contrast with *Entfermdung*, gives a hopeful sense through its prefix *ver--*, which connotes *movement towards a static central entity*.

Thus, a more accurate translation of *Verfermdung* could be “defamiliarization”.

an adaptation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* into a comedy with the name of ملك الشحاتين (The King of Beggars). Both Brecht and Sorour share the ideology of the theater being a revolutionary tool used for social reform defending the rights of the suppressed segment in the society.

*Yaseen w (and) Baheya* (written in Budapest in 1964) is more of a narrative poem than a drama which instantly became a success setting many controversies. He used the title, the main characters and the central conflict of an old ballad about the oppression of peasants by foreign rulers and landlords. Sorour's original *Yaseen* (in the *Mawwal*) is treacherously shot in the back at night by the pasha who covets his beloved, *Baheya*, who is developed here into a popular hero and entices the peasants to revolt against their exploiters and consequently dies fighting for freedom and justice. *Baheya*, thus, becomes a symbol of Egypt.

The play or narrative poem seemed perfectly in tune with "the revolutionary rhetoric, its championing of unwritten history of the people and their oral literature and its conception of the ideological function of art." (Seleiha ). *Yaseen wi Baheya* was more than a political statement; it was an effort to rehabilitate the image of the long abused and ridiculed Egyptian peasant. In doing so, Sorour borrows from the epic theater its emphasis on the sociopolitical context rather than the emotional content or aesthetics of the play. He does this while invoking, in his dramatic form, content and verbal texture, the oral folk tradition of storytelling (already established by the popular *sira* and *Mawaal*).

Most of the characters in Sorour's play are simple and realistic, trying to fulfill their own dreams while they represent national dreams. Sorour resorted to directly introducing his characters before or during their appearance on stage, a Brechtian technique (the V-Effekt or the alienation effect) used to discourage the audience from identifying with the character and so losing detachment.

Characters in Naguib Sorour's trilogy *Yaseen*, *O Night O Moon*, and *The Eye of the Sun*, are repeated, whether directly, like in using the character of *Baheya* in all three plays, or indirectly, like the male heroes *Yaseen*, *Amin* and *Atteya* who are, after all,

representations of the same person. Despite acquiring different names, Amin is Yassin with all his looks and dreams, and Atteya is the natural extension of Amin. This repetition was also used by Brecht as one way of applying the V-Effekt except that Brecht used it differently. Those repeated character patterns existed within the one dramatic work and were not represented in divided works like in the case of Sorour.

**The Epic Tradition as represented in Femi Osofisan:**

Femi Osofisan, a well-known Nigerian playwright explores in his craft of playwrighting a number of dramatic forms and effectively combines wit and comedy with the seriously intended social criticism. He, like Sorour, is both a playwright and a theater director, as well as a literary theorist and newspaper columnist (Richards xv). Chris Dunton in his book, *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian drama in English since 1970*, mentions two major features present in most of Osofisan works: first, framing devices, play within the play, disjointed flow and other Brechtian techniques used to generate a sense of metatheatricality, through which Osofisan always reminds the audience of the power of the theater. The second feature is his relentless probing of Nigerian society to find the causes and solutions of economic injustice (67). Osofisan, a committed Marxist (another common feature that he shares with Sorour), is concerned with corruption within the system, the exploitation of the workers, and the betrayal of the people by those who rule over them. His plays use Nigerian culture to offer a radical critique of both society and socioeconomic and political realities of the regime. Osofisan has structured his play, *The Chattering and the Song*, to demonstrate a critique of the Nigerian social reformation, but through a group of highly individualized intellectuals. The play depicts a movement in society towards revolution, as well as “the attempts by the established order in society to contain and neutralize this revolutionary tendency” (Etherton 285). It is concerned with the claims of the traditional beliefs upon the minds of the people. These beliefs are seen as potentially positive, but in the present time distorted. The play, therefore, looks back, while at the same time looking forward to the future (as mostly seen in the plays of Wole Soyinka).

The play is set in the middle-class house of the main character, Sontri, a playwright and a song-writer. He is involved in protest against the bourgeoisie, to which he and other characters belong. Sontri is a member of the subversive and outlawed “Farmers’ Movement”, which aims at the government’s overthrow. The events of the play take place on the eve of Sontri’s wedding to Yajin.

The significant action of the play is presented as a rehearsal of a play devised by Yajin for the eve of her wedding. Another character, Mokan, formerly Yajin’s fiancé, turns out at the end of the rehearsal to be a member of the secret police. He used the rehearsal as an excuse to arrest Sontri and Yajin for subversive activities. Metaphorically, the play-within-a play is the rehearsal for the revolution. There is a great deal of role-reversal in the play-within-a-play, where they assume other roles beyond their basic characterization. Sontri and Yajin play Abidun and Olori, the reactionary rulers. Mokan plays the role of Aresa, a palace guard in revolt against Abidoun’s authority. When he arrests Sontri and Yajin, Mokan is quite specific that it is not the play, or the rehearsal of it, which has indicted him, it only informs the arrest which had been planned for some time. So the play is only metaphorically a rehearsal of the revolution.

Metaphor succeeds metaphor in the play and through this metaphorical behavior, Osofisan perhaps hopes to show the dialectical relationship between characters, and how, through their oppositions, they come to resolve themselves into new phases of the struggle. The play begins and ends with the same way. The play begins and ends with the same game; the players are different but the struggle goes on.

*The Chattering and the Song* ends (although Osofisan tells us in the stage direction: ‘The play does NOT end’) with the Farmers’ Anthem, and the audience are encouraged to join in the chanting.

When everyone’s a farmer  
We’ll grow enough food  
In the land  
No insurrection  
When all are fed  
Less exploitation

Dalia El-Shayal

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You eat all you need  
When everyone's a farmer  
We'll wipe out the pests  
In the land  
No more injustice  
Labour's for all  
No more oppression  
All hands to hoe

**Conclusion:**

Bertolt Brecht, whose influence on some Arab and African theater we have already seen, constructs his plays in such a way that audiences were able to think how the social order, and therefore people, may change for the better. Such an influence allows for the integration of a new set of aesthetic features that break the illusion of the dramatic theater and be the means for integrating a socio-political dimension. In the particular cases of Sorour and Osofisan, both dramatists come from a similar background in countries that suffered injustice and oppression, possess rich indigenous folk cultures including the epic – a seminal source for literary expression –, and have a long history of artistic representation akin to the theatrical. Their plays, therefore, lent themselves lucidly to the Brechtian model creating intense performances that enrich the experience of their audiences.

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