

## **Rethinking Love, Reexamining Society: Femi Osofisan's *Love's Unlike Lading* and its Implications for Social Discourse**

### **1-Abdulmalik Adakole Amali**

Department of the Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin  
Telephone: 08033682168, 0805080010 [amali.aa@unilorin.edu.ng](mailto:amali.aa@unilorin.edu.ng)

And

### **2-Victor Akogwu Omeje**

Department of the Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University of Lafia  
Telephone: 08033257163 [v.omeje@yahoo.com](mailto:v.omeje@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

*Nigeria is grappling with pervasive social issues, including corruption, lovelessness, political apathy, and exploitation. Despite government efforts to address these problems, they persist. This study examines Femi Osofisan's drama, *Love's Unlike Lading* as a catalyst for personal and societal transformation. The qualitative research design was adopted in the work as data was collected using the content analysis method. The study adopted Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre as the theoretical framework. This is because the thrust of Epic Theatre is to re-awaken the consciousness of the audience. This research explores how the play's narrative arcs and character actions promote self-awareness and challenge societal norms. The objectives of this study are to analyse the drama as a social discourse, highlighting its potential to inspire change, and to demonstrate how theatre can be a powerful tool for restoring love and promoting social transformation. The study's findings underscore the capacity of drama to confront and address pressing societal issues, sparking necessary awareness. To amplify the play's impact, this research recommends staging performances in various settings to raise awareness about the destructive consequences of lovelessness and wickedness in society.*

**Keywords:** *Love, Society, and Discourse.*

### **Introduction**

Drama is an important social institution that is believed to have evolved from rituals, religious festivals, storytelling and other communal experiences. According to historiography, in the beginning, human race found themselves in an environment they could not understand, they faced challenges of hunger, harsh weather, etc. This made them engage in their environment to be able to find solutions to their problems. They engaged in collective exploration of their environment; they grunt as they worked and this accompanied their body movement rhythmically and as they rested in the evening, they retell their experiences to entertain themselves by re-enacting those activities (Okwori, Jenkeri. 12-14). They were also engaged in other religious practices such as rituals, and festivals. These practices were used by humans to understand their existential reality; therefore, it is right to say that drama is as old as the society.

On the other hand, Social in generic term can be seen as the way a group of people relate, behave and interact with one another. Social according to the *Dictionary of Sociology* is from a latin word ‘socius’ meaning ‘composition’ (Marshal, 628). It involves the relationship of a group of people who meet and spend time together. Most social groups, if not all, often have goals which benefit their members. There are different types of social institutions or groups in every society; they range from religion to the family, to the state. Since they have common goals or interests, they are guided by norms and values that would guide them towards the achievement of their goals.

Discourse is from a Latin word “discursus” meaning “running to and fro”. The term could be seen in different ways and its meaning will vary according to the context it’s been used. It is a body of text meant to communicate specific data, information, and knowledge, which is either written or spoken. Oxford English Dictionary in addition, defines it as “a spoken or written treatment of a subject, in which it is handled or discussed at length; a dissertation, treatise, homily, sermon or the likes”. Social discourse is the act of communicating or treating a subject which deals with social issues. This paper will discuss drama as social discourse because drama can search or investigate the society and analyze them into stories or plays hence, creating a discourse.

Drama has always been a reflection of the society, Sanchez Adolf argues that “art is almost as old as man himself” (113) and it cannot be eliminated from the society because it does not only entertains but also helps to inform, educate and creates a balance in the society by representing the contradiction in the society and in addition helps to maintain or promote the existing status quo. A practical example is seen in the history of Western Theatre in Europe. During the Medieval era, drama was used to promote and maintain the ideology of the Church. Drama was used to tell Bible stories (Biblical pageants), stories of significant Church feasts like the *Corpus Christi* to communicate the accepted or required attitude every Christian should possess through the morality plays by personifying vices and virtues (Cawley, xv), *Everyman* is a good example of a play in this era. The Renaissance society on the other hand depicted issues of power, social class, professionalism, commercialization etc.

In the past, there was argument against the utilitarian function of drama as some are of the school of thought that “art is for art’s sake”. This school of thought believes that art does not have any social relevance. While the other school of thought believes that drama has utilitarian function in

the society, that is, drama is not only for entertainment but also has the power to instigate social change.

In addition, the formalist school of thought which is the Aristotelian and Hegelian aesthetic is a school of thought which is associated with the capitalist ideology, in the sense that it enforces the ideology of the ruling class or wealthy class. For example, in *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, the spectator is meant to believe that their class and fate are determined by the gods, and any attempt to change it by one will be invoking the wrath of the gods and that tragedy only befalls the aristocrats.

The radicalists on the other hand who are socialist believe in the utilitarian function of drama, in the sense that drama can be used to change the world. This school of thought is based on Marxist Theory. Marxism is a set of political and economic theory founded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel in order to lay the foundation of socialism, that there are conflicts in the human society and conflicts arise from the faults in the mode of production in which one class comes to gain ownership and control of the means of production i.e. land, buildings, machinery, capital, etc. thereby forcing the other class to work for them based on the terms and conditions dictated by them. That the conflict can only be resolved by overthrowing capitalism, placing all means of social production under social ownership and control, enforcing universal labour and ensuring full development of forces of production.

It is on this premise that the socialists write plays. Gbilekaa in *Radical Theatre* opines that “the socialist realist therefore identifies in the proletariat potentials for the destruction of capitalism. The defeat of capitalism would enhance the growth of a classless society and an unlimited development of humanity” (64). This means that the quest for social discourse has been with the dramatists for a long time. Brecht's plays, Boal's works, Osofisan's Plays, Sowande's plays, and many others are good examples. The socialists are often referred to as leftists because they are always against the social order, which is capitalism. Dramas which are creative and sometimes a fictional piece of artwork are drawn from the gamut of material around the playwright. This is because the dramatist does not create out of the vacuum but from his environment; meaning the dramatist reflects his or her environment through the piece of art by identifying with individuals, societies, cultures, etc. Chukwu-Okoronkwo opines that:

Art functions to mirror the society as an expression of the artist's perception of his society. Society on the other hand, emphasises social relations and influences among people. It suggests how people's lives are organised and conducted within their circle. Structurally, every society is meant to operate within certain social order and it is this order that makes human behavior in the society predictable. This order therefore, becomes the parameter that defines the kind of relationship that exists within the component units of such society, thus, resulting to increasing tendency to always count on people most of the time to meet the expectations of others (77).

This means that through drama, social issues like corruption, oppression, infidelity, injustice, class relation, among others, are expressed. These issues are treated to reflect and address the evident ills in the society to facilitate the emancipation of the people.

Furthermore, drama is a tool for social discourse because it communicates. It is a means whereby the playwright expresses himself on an issue or issues he wishes to address, to communicate his ideology or views on a certain social issues, ills or vices. In addition, the playwright can give insights to the audience to think or feel using dramatic aesthetics and devices.

Meanwhile, drama as a social phenomenon interrogates social vices, situations or even status quo. It presents issues through the medium of storytelling by actors to audience. It presents strands of relationships that exist in the society, the complexities, the hierarchies, the situations, the existing laws, and the oppression and so on for mediation. This is because when it is presented to the audience, they watch, reflect on the issues and strive towards the desirable social change.

With the aid of selected play, which is *Love's Unlike Lading* by Femi Osofisan, the utilitarian function of drama as social discourse would be discussed, elaborated and their currency in the unfolding Nigeria's social space interpolated and interpreted in context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research work is anchored on Brechtian Epic theatre. Epic Theatre is a theatrical and dramatic concept developed by German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht in the early 20th century. It represents a departure from traditional theatre, aiming to engage the audience intellectually, emotionally, and socially, rather than simply immersing them in a fictional narrative. The term

"epic" here doesn't refer to a grand, heroic story, but rather to its contrast with traditional "dramatic" theatre.

Key Elements of Epic Theatre include:

1. Alienation effect (verfremdungseffekt): Also known as the "A-effect" or "estrangement effect," this is a central concept in Epic Theatre. Brecht aimed to break the audience's emotional identification with the characters by using various techniques to make the familiar, unfamiliar. This encourages the audience to think critically about the events on stage rather than becoming emotionally swept up in the story.

2. Historification: Brecht often set his plays in historical or distant contexts to distance the audience from the immediate emotions of the characters. This encourages viewers to consider the events in a broader societal and historical context, prompting reflection on the parallels to their own time.

3. Didactic and Social Critique: Epic Theatre frequently carries didactic elements, aiming to educate and provoke critical thought. Brecht wanted his plays to raise questions about social, political, and ethical issues, motivating audiences to think about the underlying causes of events rather than just their surface appearance.

4. Montage and Fragmentation: Instead of presenting a linear narrative, Brecht often used non-chronological storytelling and fragmented scenes. This approach disrupts the traditional flow of the story and encourages audiences to actively engage in piecing together the narrative themselves.

Direct Address and Commentary: Characters in Epic Theatre might directly address the audience, breaking the fourth wall. They might provide commentary on the events, offering insights, perspectives, or even contradictory interpretations.

5. Minimalist Staging: Brecht preferred minimalistic sets and props to avoid creating an overly immersive environment. This choice reinforced the idea that the audience was watching a constructed representation rather than a seamless reality.

6. Collective Creation: Brecht often worked in collaboration with actors and other theatre practitioners to create the final production. This collaborative approach aimed to keep the creative process open and dynamic.

Epic Theatre was not meant to provide definitive answers; instead, it aimed to provoke questions and foster active engagement. Brecht's goal was to promote critical thinking and inspire audiences to consider the social and political implications of what they were witnessing on stage. This approach has had a lasting impact on theatre and has influenced various artists, directors, and scholars in the fields of drama and performance studies.

### **Synopsis of Femi Osofisan's *Love's Unlike Lading***

Osofisan's *Love's Unlike Lading* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The storyline presents Alhaji Fowosanu, a businessman, and Bassey a usurer. The conflict begins in the background of the abduction of Tariboh, an ardent man and change crusader who ventures into politics because of the feeble majority where he belongs. But his vision is met with disappointment as he is kidnapped and needs a huge amount as ransom. Basiru, Alhaji Fowosanu's brother who happens to be Tariboh's friend approaches his brother for money to get Tariboh released but is shocked as Fowosanu says his account has been frozen. Fowosanu however, suggested rescuing the situation by visiting the usurers, known as Sogun dogoji in Yoruba land, that is, double interest loan providers, (30) whom he hates with a passion, for loan pending the time his account will be unfrozen or his goods on the sea will arrive. Unfortunately, his son Lassy leads them to Bassey who has been waiting for such a day to rubbish Fowosanu for his hatred for the business of usury. Osofisan describes how kind-hearted Fowosanu is as his name connotes: "One that helps others with his money," when Basiru reminds him how he has always railed against usurers for the kind of interests they extort but he says he can't let the young man dies in the hands of kidnapers. Bassey the usurer agrees to lend Fowosanu the money but not without some questions to boost his ego of having the like of Fowosanu who has criticised his business coming to his rescue.

Fowosanu like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* eventually falls prey to Bassey as he fails to return the money on the stipulated date. The consequence is ominous while only an act of compassion from Bassey could save the situation; Bassey, however, declines mercy insisting on allowing the law to take its due course. Fowosanu had earlier given as surety his family house at Ebute-Meta, Lagos as requested by Bassey as the only property he is willing to take if he defaults and the implication by custom is that no one gives out his ancestral home and lives (36-37). Logically, Fowosanu is to die as the event unfolds. The money, however, is sorted out and even doubled thereafter but Bassey insists on taking over Fowosanu's ancestral home because the

money is not brought at the due date. However, at the court, a dramatic twist in the event suddenly brings justice to the favour of Fowosanu.

### **Social Context of *Love's Unlike Lading***

It's not uncommon to encounter the notion that ordinary citizens and followers bear some responsibility for their societal plights, contrary to the widespread view that leadership is solely to blame. In fact, the struggles of the common people have long been a recurring theme in African literary discourse. Moreover, the everyday person has become a focal point of study in the social sciences. However, this topic is too broad and critical to be left solely to social scientists. For example, Jide Aluko (2010) delineates the characteristics of the masses that hide under the caption of common men but perpetrate even more harm than the leaders. While the leadership problem is vital and dominant in academic efforts at salvaging society from its backward nature, some writers and critics have risen to contest this popular opinion and that the ordinary people therefore are not absolved from corruption and actions that have deepened the nation into a quagmire.

Femi Osofisan's "*Love's Unlike Lading*" skillfully shifts the blame from leadership to the ordinary citizen, pragmatically illustrating that everyone plays a role in the current situation in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa. By doing so, Osofisan astutely condemns the exploitative practice of usury, where individuals are lent money at outrageously high interest rates for business purposes. The playwright sees this as the cause of many failed businesses and suicidal acts whereas the lenders live large over the collateral and ceased items of the debtors who often default when they are to pay back such loans and the accumulated interest. Osofisan describes how kind-hearted Fowosanu who is a rich businessman is when Basiru reminds him how he has always railed against usurers for the kind of interests they extort, Fowosanu replies "I know. But I can't let that splendid young man down now, can I? Or his poor wife in there! Not if I can help it. So, I'll take the risk. Here, this is my card. Call Lassy to take you and Boma to the Kariola market to look for one of these money lenders, and when you get there, call me. We must get your friend out today!" (31). Basseyy the usurer agrees to lend Fowosanu the money but not without some questions to boost his ego of having the like of Fowosanu who has criticised his business coming to his rescue. In his words: "We both remember what you have said about us and our kind of trade on many occasions. So why have you suddenly changed your mind?" (33). Buttressing the authorial standpoint, Fowosanu retorts:

You know I can never change my mind. This trade you practice is wicked. No God-fearing man should make his living by exploiting the misfortune of others the way you do...I've never lent out money using the guise of friendship and trust to make people sign all sorts of dubious contracts. Knowing all the time that it is all just a sordid trick to bring ruin on them in the end...you make people commit themselves to bonds that seem totally harmless. But just let the repayment be late for a day, even an hour, and you pounce on the hapless debtor and seize all his property! Everything he has spent his whole life putting together, without compassion! Ah, I tell you, your greed and your heartlessness, you usurers, will take you to hell! (33-34).

Osofisan further dissects the mind of the average man who is distorted with greed, lovelessness and selfish acts to show how perilous such can be. This is revealed as Bassey drags his debtor to the customary court to invoke the wrath of the law. Fowosanu after many pleas upon which Bassey refuses to budge reveals the deep-rooted reason why Bassey wants him dead: Fowosanu says "It's my life he wants, and I know why. On many occasions in the past, people to whom he lent money would run to me for help, when they could not pay back on time. And I would give them money to bail themselves out and stop him from seizing their properties. That's why he hates me." (74). Osofisan's examination of this trend is apposite with contemporary developments as according to Ademeso (2009), Osofisan "strongly believes that the oppressed exhibits the trait of 'dog eats dog' because they do not fight for true causes but selfish needs" (60). He further points that "what some oppressed people try to avoid is the immediate pain afflicted on them by their oppressors, they too want to oppress the people below them" (60). Bassey is quintessential of this. In his case, he aspires to be in a position of affluence so that he can control the lives of the people below him not because he loves them. Osofisan buttresses this act of wickedness through his dramatic persona in a heated conversation with Bassey: Fowosanu says "Yes, I confess I loathe people like you, but you know it's not because you are poor as you claim, or because of where you come from! It is rather because you make your poverty an excuse to rip off other poor people and ruin their lives without regret. Only evil people will choose to live that way. Go on, do your worst! I am ready to hand the house over to you and face the consequences!" (86). Bassey has earlier confirmed this wickedness in a conversation with his daughter Tumini who is now in a love relationship with Fowosanu's son, Lassy. Bassey reminds Tumini of how Fowosanu has on many occasions bailed out his debtors, tending towards destroying his trade of usury and sending him on hunger strike (57). While Fowosanu helps Bassey's debtors when they run to him by lending them without interest to pay off their debt and more so to alleviate the plight of the common man, Bassey does not care and of



course, takes delight in ruining fellow common man as he confiscates their property when they are late in paying back their loans. Bassey thus leaves them worse than they are when they approach him in the first instance.

Bassey is a perfect example of the people who exhibit the 'dog eats dog' syndrome, those who take joy in the fall of other common men more so that it raises their social status or brings in money to their pocket. Bassey further boasts over a kind man's good gesture that in the open court, before everybody, Fowosanu is going to grovel and crawl and beg for mercy, according to Bassey "he'll weep blood! And then, in my magnanimity, I'll let him go— in total disgrace." (63). we could see the wickedness and lovelessness in this play.

Another aspect of lovelessness as portrayed in Osofisan's *Love's Unlike Lading* is political apathy which is lack of love for one's country. A lot of works has been repeated to arrive at the same conclusion that leadership has continually failed Nigerians as leadership in Nigeria is characterised as being corrupt, self-serving, politically personalizing, policy illiterate, and mostly clueless about how to provide political good. However, the general citizenry whom these scholars and their works strive to liberate are disenchanted and present a strong feeling of political indignation as demonstrated through political docility and apathy. Osofisan in *Love's Unlike Lading* inspects apathy to politics and docility on the part of the ordinary man/ follower as part of his doings. Basiru and Boma are quintessential of this oddity in *Love's Unlike Lading*. Basiru who is apolitical is the best friend of the crusader and gubernatorial candidate, Tariboh; while Boma, Tariboh's wife is also disenchanted with anything politics, but both are always quick to complain and blame the leaders. Tariboh despite all odds dabbles into politics, risking his life because of those he describes as "feeble majority...other animals in the forest...those who don't want to be eaten by wolves, who just want to live a decent life" (23). Basiru and Boma, however, decisively abandon Tariboh because of the interest he has in politics. Osofisan in this sordid but realistic slice of contemporary society, shows how those capable of transforming society avoid their responsibility and at the same time discourage the courageous.

Moreover, Osofisan's aesthetics of love for societal development is best appreciated in his subversion of a heated court proceeding to a wedding ceremony in *Love's Unlike Lading*. Bassey's lawsuit against Fowosanu ends in the marriage between Tumini (Daughter of Bassey) and Lassy (son of Fowosanu), and Tosan and Basiru, a situation that resolves the rancor between both the plaintiff and defendant. This structuring of hot acrimonies resulting in strange matrimony is a

unique aesthetic feature of Osofisan's dramaturgy that allows a reworking of the materialist dialectics where love is placed over law. This is the underlying philosophy of *Love's Unlike Lading* as Osofisan preaches love among the ordinary people as the solution to their disenchantments.

### Conclusion

Femi Osofisan's plays, "Love's Unlike Lading" and "One Legend, Many Seasons", demonstrate the effectiveness of drama as a tool for social change. By subtly addressing pressing social issues, the play raises awareness about the need to liberate the oppressed from their exploiters, often from the same social class. Furthermore, they advocate for the restoration of love and compassion in society, emphasizing the importance of active political participation by the common man. Despite its challenges, drama has the potential to drive positive transformation by confronting social ills, making it a powerful mediator and catalyst for the rethinking and reexamining the importance of love for one another and the society at large.

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