

Negotiating Poetics in Translating Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* into French: Between Systemic Acceptability and Linguistic Fidelity

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Abstract

This study examines the negotiations of poetics in the translation of Femi Osofisan's play Once Upon Four Robbers from English to French as Il était une fois quatre voleurs by Nicole Medjigbodo. It integrates postcolonial and polysystem postulations to view translation as an intermediate process between systemic acceptability and linguistic fidelity. Drawing on qualitative and comparative analysis of the source text and target text expressions, this study reveals the strategies employed in the translation to handle the challenges of the unique poetic expression in Osofisan's work. It underlines the importance of cultural knowledge, tone, idioms and wording while trying to translate poetic expressions from other cultures, like Africa, to better achieve the target of loyalty and faithfulness in translation. Thus, it brings a new dimension to translation studies as well as literary criticism to offer a fresh perspective regarding poetic translation within the dramatic canon of Africa.

Keywords: African Poetics, Translating Nigerian literature, Polysystem theory, postcolonial translation strategy, Femi Osofisan

Résumé

Cette étude examine les enjeux poétiques liés à la traduction de la pièce théâtrale de Femi Osofisan Once Upon Four Robbers de l'anglais vers le français sous le titre Il était une fois quatre voleurs, traduite par Nicole Medjigbodo. En employant une analyse qualitative et comparative du texte source (TS) et du texte cible (TC), la recherche met en évidence les différentes stratégies de traduction utilisées pour rendre la richesse poétique et culturelle propre à l'écriture d'Osofisan. L'étude s'appuie sur les approches de la critique postcoloniale et de la théorie du polysystème afin de considérer la traduction comme un espace de médiation entre fidélité linguistiques et acceptabilité culturelle. Elle insiste également sur l'importance des réalités culturelles, du ton, des expressions idiomatiques et du choix des mots dans la traduction des expressions poétiques africaines. En mettant en lumière les défis et les possibilités de la traduction littéraire africaine, cette recherche contribue à enrichir les études traductologiques et la critique littéraire, tout en proposant une réflexion nouvelle sur la traduction poétique dans le théâtre africain.

Mot-cles: *poétique africaine, traduction de la littérature nigériane, théorie du polysystème, traduction postcoloniale, Femi Osofisan*

Introduction: Background and Context

The concept of poetics refers not merely to the study of verse but, more broadly, to the theory of literary composition; poetics is the principles governing the structure, form, and discourse of a literary work; it encompasses the broader mechanisms by which literary texts achieve aesthetic and semantic coherence (Jakobson, 1960; Attridge, 2015). In other words, poetics transcends a theory of poetry to denote the distinctive artistic and stylistic elements that construct meaning in a literary text. Poetics extends beyond the conventional study of poetry to encompass the artistic and stylistic principles through which literary texts generate meaning. It refers to the distinctive formal and expressive features that shape the structure, language and overall aesthetic character of a literary work. These features include elements such as diction, imagery, symbolism, tone, narrative organisation and cultural expression; all of which contribute to the interpretive and emotional impact of the text.

In this respect, meaning in literature is not conveyed solely through the content of the text, but also through the manner in which that content is artistically presented in a text. The writer's stylistic choices therefore influence how readers perceive themes, characters and cultural realities. This makes poetics central to literary interpretation. In postcolonial African literature, for instance, poetics often reflects the interaction between indigenous oral traditions and colonial languages, producing culturally grounded forms of literary expression. Consequently, poetics remains an essential concept in literary criticism and translation studies because it highlights the relationship between form, style, culture and meaning. This includes Osofisan's blend of Yoruba traditions, Nigerian English idiom and political discourse in the cultural context through the demonstration of his distinct language use.

As asserted by Osundare (2007), language is inextricably intertwined with culture, serving as a carrier of cultural values and traditions. Accordingly, poetics in translation involves the complex transfer of these embedded cultural understandings and experiences via language use. In other words, poetics becomes particularly significant because the translator is required to engage with the text as a structured aesthetic whole. Therefore, literary translation extends beyond linguistic substitution to include an interpretative engagement with the organisation of meaning within the source text. Elements such as tone, imagery, rhythm, narrative voice and culturally embedded

expressions all contribute to what may be described as the text's literary logic, and these elements must be carefully considered in the act of translation. As Jakobson (1960) notes, the poetic function of language foregrounds the formal qualities of the message, while Attridge (2015) emphasises literature as an inventive practice in which form and meaning are inseparable. For African literary narratives, successful translation must strive to maintain the melodic, rhythmic, cultural resonance, and emotional tone of the source text in the target domain while addressing the power dynamics inherent in the translation process (Adeyefa, 2023). In other words, poetic negotiations in translation refer to the complex and ever-changing relationship between the translation process, the source and target cultures, the source text itself as an artistic work, and the receptor audience. Thus, this research work investigates the distinctive linguistic poetics of the play *Once Upon Four Robbers* by Femi Osofisan and its French translation *Il était une fois quatre voleurs* by Nicole Medjigbodo.

Femi Osofisan's dramatic works have received extensive research analysis in relation to issues of social justice, historical concerns and identity, in relation to the original English texts. Although foundational in nature, it does not address the translational dynamics of Osofisan's poetic strategies in relation to their translation into a target language. While the significance of African literature in international research discourse is on the increase, it remains that the dynamics of Osofisan's unique poetic voice, which is a blend of local colour and satire, in its transfer from Anglophone Nigeria to a Francophone context remains relatively unstudied. This results in a substantial research gap in relation to Osofisan's poetics and its translation dynamics in relation to the ideological foundations of Postcolonial Criticism.

The paper aims to examine the poetic translations embodied in the English-French translation of the play by Femi Osofisan and evaluate its significance in relation to the translation and reception of literature in Africa. In this regard, the paper will examine the significance of cultural and linguistic mediation in the translation of Osofisan's non-standard poetic language, the tension between the translation of the poem's aesthetics and cultural adaptation (domestication and foreignization), and the significance of translation choices in relation to the aesthetic significance and positioning in the Francophone literary polysystem.

Research Landscape

Previous works have investigated Femi Osofisan's literary works, whose literary productions are characterised by a profound engagement with socio-political realities of Nigerian society. Through

satire, symbolism and cultural allusions, Osofisan critiques prevailing social injustices and advocates for the reform of societal structures that perpetuate inequality and moral decline. Adeyemi (2009) investigates Femi Osofisan's poetics of protest vis-à-vis dramatic performance. The paper examines how Femi Osofisan's drama is characterised by challenging social injustice and reflects his commitment to social justice, human rights and democracy. Adeyemi bases the study on Marxist/dialectical theory and postcolonial criticism. The study reveals that Osofisan rewrites history and myth to speak to modern problems and that Osofisan's poetics of protest is grounded in a strong ethical and political vision.

The study is similar to our study because both see Osofisan as a cultural and political writer. Also, both studies highlight Yoruba culture as the heart of his dramatic art, and both stress the importance of performance and orality. But the difference is that, while Adeyemi's study examines Osofisan's protest, message, ideology and artistic procedure. The study looks at how that message travels into French, what is kept, altered or lost. Also, Adeyemi adopts ideological and performative presuppositions; this study engages polysystem theory. This suggests that one is literary and ideological, the other is linguistic and translational. Adeyemi sees culture as a concept Osofisan uses to challenge society, while this study imagines culture as a translational concept carried across languages, often with linguistic exertion. Adeyemi's study explores how Osofisan uses English mixed with Yoruba elements to make bold political statements. Ours examines how these same Yoruba-based expressions survive or change when translated into French.

In the same vein, Osita (2009) examines theatre and performance in Femi Osofisan's works. The study argues that African theatre and performance are diverse and complex, and it reflects the continent's rich cultural heritage. Osita (2009) emphasises that Osofisan's theatre serves as a mirror to society, addressing corruption, injustice and social dysfunction. The study concludes that Osofisan's theatre is participatory, culturally rooted and transformative. This aligns with Osundare's (2012) investigation of Osofisan's poetics of history, asserting that Osofisan's drama rewrites and interprets Nigerian history and compares it to other African dramatists. The work is similar to this research; both investigate Osofisan's work. The difference is that this study examines how poetics is negotiated in the translated work of Femi Osofisan. Both Osita (2009) and Osundare's (2012) approach Osofisan's plays through performance and theatre studies frameworks, drawing on performance theory, indigenous African theatre theory and sociocultural/postcolonial theory. Both studies highlight Osofisan's use of song, dance, chorus, proverbs and

ritual to create participatory theatre and historical dynamism. Their works are similar to our research because both are situated within cultural discursive frames, suggesting historical and cultural traditions as central to literary discourse. They all examine Femi Osofisan's plays from their socio-political singularities, exploring his use of history, language, culture and performance. The differences are: focus and purpose. Osita examines how Osofisan's theatre and performance bring his plays to life, focusing on staging, movement, song and audience engagement. Our study examines how cultural and linguistic elements transfer, idioms, songs and other culture-specific expressions. Osita uses performance theory, African indigenous theatre theory and sociocultural/postcolonial perspectives to study how theatre communicates meaning. The current study uses polysystem theory, such as equivalence and cultural transfer, among others. Osita engages in close reading of plays in terms of performance, audience participation and theatrical devices. Our study uses comparative analysis between English source texts and French translations, focusing on poetic negotiation. Osita finds that Osofisan's theatre is participatory, socially engaged and transformative; performance elements enhance the message and emotional impact. Osita shows that performance and staging are crucial for fully understanding Osofisan's message. Our study shows the limits and possibilities of cross-cultural transmission; how identity, culture and meaning survive or change in translation.

Thus, foundational to understanding Osofisan's what (his themes), do not engage with the how—specifically, the translational negotiations of his poetic devices in a target language. Femi Osofisan's work is characterised by a distinctive language that blends idiomatic Nigerian English, political discourse and traditional storytelling rhythms. Translating this combination requires complex decisions about cultural equivalence, linguistic negotiation and aesthetic impact.

African Poetics and Postcolonial Postulations

Within the wider area of African literary studies, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that the literature of Africa needs to reclaim its cultural identity and break with colonial legacies. It is under these circumstances that the role of translation becomes not just the mere transmission of meaning from source to target culture, but also the essential tool for the promotion of African views across the globe and the preservation of the cultural heritage of the continent. There appears to be a gap about the comprehensive investigation of the poetic transactions that exist within the translated dramatic works of Osofisan, and this is particularly true because the dramatic language of Osofisan

is deeply entwined with the cultural and ideological aspects that the postcolonial theory of translation aims to highlight.

Postcolonial Criticism: Ideology, Power and African Poetics

Postcolonial theory frames translation as an ideological act that mediates power dynamics between literary cultures. This analysis looks at how translation is a process of negotiating retention versus erasure of African linguistic difference (Venuti, 1995). More contemporary scholarship has moved beyond colonial criticism to explore translation as a process of cultural autonomy. Bandia (2023) examines how contemporary African translators utilise strategies of hybridisation and linguistic intervention to assert cultural sovereignty in Francophone and Anglophone texts, directly challenging universalising norms. While Bhabha (1994) introduced the *third space*, contemporary analysis focuses on the specific linguistic features of this space. Adeyefa (2022) critically stresses the need for stylistic investigation in African literary translation. His argument for resisting domestication and favouring transliteration (for ethno-linguistic figures) informs the ethical measure against which the handling of Osofisan's Pidgin-based poetics and cultural items is assessed. This is in relation to whether Medjigbodo's choices represent a practical allowance for target culture familiarity, which has been analysed in modern studies of ideology and translation conventions (House, 2020).

Polysystem Theory: Systemic Pressures and Literary Status

Polysystem Theory (Even-Zohar, 1990; Toury, 1995) remains vital for analysing the systemic pressures that guide translational choices concerning the target literary system (French). Three positions are adopted: Norms of Acceptability, Governing Factors and Updated Relevance. Norms of Acceptability as a theoretical position help explain the pragmatic shifts in the translation. When a literature is positioned peripherally, translational strategies often favour acceptability to ensure market viability. Kruger (2024) argues that translation should be viewed as a dynamic and interpretative process that involves continuous negotiation between languages, cultures and contexts, rather than a mere transfer of linguistic form from one language to another. This perspective recognises the translator as an active mediator who makes informed choices to preserve meaning, style and cultural significance while responding to the expectations of the target audiences. This understanding aligns closely with Polysystem Theory, which conceives translation as a socially and culturally conditioned practice shaped by the norms, conventions and power

relations operating within the target literary system. These perspectives underscore the idea that translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a complex act of cultural and literary mediation. The analysis uses Polysystem position on Governing Factors to interpret choices, such as replacing non-standard Pidgin poetics (school pikin, cheap half-kobo pick-pocket, four boys and a one girls, Standard Six an adfantage p.23) with conventional French idioms, as systemically motivated. This is supported by contemporary research on governance and market factors in translation (Pym, 2021), showing that accessibility often overrides strict poetic fidelity when introducing peripheral literature to a central audience. On relevance, the Polysystem framework is still widely used to trace the global flow of literature and the dynamics of literary prestige (Sapiro, 2020). Its application here allows the study to move beyond linguistic critique to analyse the political economy of Osofisan's presence in Francophone drama.

The integration of Postcolonial Criticism and Polysystem Theory provides a rigorous, bi-fold mode of analysis. This analytical framework enables the study to move beyond mere linguistic analysis and instead contextualise the poetic negotiation within its holistic socio-political and system-based context. The major focus of the postcolonial critique is on issues of power, ideology and cultural sovereignty, and it aims at evaluating the ethics of translation in the context of African linguistic and cultural difference. This is used in evaluating the need for transliteration (Adeyefa, 2022) in the evaluation of omission and retention. Polysystem Theory focuses on Reception and Systemic Acceptability; it determines the external, pragmatic factors that pressure the translator to ensure the text's acceptance and status in the central French literary system. It explains the shift from Pidgin poetics to conventional French for reasons of readability and centrality (Kruger, 2024). This dual approach ensures the analysis of Osofisan's poetics is fully contextualised, determining not only what was negotiated but also why those negotiations were necessary to achieve both cultural sovereignty and literary system access.

This study, therefore, employs a qualitative, descriptive and comparative textual analysis to investigate how cultural references are negotiated in the English-French translations in *Once Upon Four Robbers* by Femi Osofisan translated as *Il etait une fois quatre voleurs* by Nicole Medjigbodo. The qualitative approach offers the most appropriate lens because the research concerns cultural meanings and intercultural mediation. It enables the researcher not merely to note the presence of cultural features but to explore how and why translators make specific interpretive and stylistic choices when handling culturally embedded expressions.

Poetic Negotiations Across Cultural Systems

From the comparison of *Once Upon Four Robbers* (ST) to *Il était une fois quatre voleurs* (TT), it is clear that Nicole Medjigbodo's translation is characterised by a negotiation that focuses more on tone and affective similarity even as it is mindful of cultural sovereignty and systemic acceptability. There are three major areas of negotiation that can be identified. These are: mediating non-standard Anglophone poetics, cultural-political markers, and improving dramatic tone.

Mediating Non-Standard Anglophone Poetics

ST (Osofisan)	TT (Medjigbodo)	Translational Strategy
1. Don't go with him, Alhaja. He's on their side, you can see. The Leader always suspected it too. Every time we went on a raid and had to kill, he broke down and sobbed like a silly school pikin . p.24	➤ Ne va pas avec lui Alhadja. Tu vois bien qu'il est de leur côté. C'est ce que le chef avait, lui aussi, toujours soupçonné. Chaque fois qu'on était sur un coup et qu'il fallait descendre un type, il s'effondrait en pleurant comme un gosse stupide . p. 10	Cultural Neutralisation and Lexical Amplification
➤ And so you'll run, isn't it? Like a cheap half-kobo pick-pocket in the market pursued by women. You think - p. 23	Et c'est pour ça que tu veux foutre le camp, hein ? comme un vulgaire voleur à la tire pourchasse par les femmes du marché. Tu imagines- p. 9	Cultural adaptation and substitution

ST (Osofisan)	TT (Medjigbodo)	Translational Strategy
➤ (In a mocking ‘illiterate accent’): Wanted urgently: four boys and a one girls. Standard Six an adfantage but not compulsory ...position -p. 32	(Faisant semblant de lire les petites annonces). « Offre d’emploi, urgent : quatre boys et une bonne. Sachant lire et écrire si possible- » p.20	Normalisation or standardisation

The expressions ‘school pikin’p.24, ‘half-kobo pick-pocket’p.23 and ‘want urgently: four boys and a one girls. Standard Six an adfantage’ p.32 is in fact Pidgin expressions that are embedded in specific cultural and contextually determined environments, and the translation of the expressions in French, which are ‘comme un gosse stupide’p.10, ‘comme un vulgaire voleur’p.9 and ‘quatre boys et une bonne. Sachant lire et écrire’p.20 (which is literally ‘like a stupid kid’, ‘like an ordinary petty thief’ and ‘four boys and one maid’) transform the expressions from an ethno-linguistic code to a standard lexical sequence in the target language of French. In the context of polysystemic postulation, the translation strategies aim at optimising the acceptability of the translated text through the mitigation of the potential acceptability barrier posed by the presence of West African Pidgin in the Francophone text (Kruger, 2024). The use of the adjective ‘stupide’, ‘vulgaire’ and ‘bonne’ in the translation are examples of lexical amplification.

Negotiation of Political and Cultural Markers

The most significant poetic negotiations occur where the text contains strong cultural-political specificities, resulting in a dialectic of retention and omission that defines the text's cultural sovereignty (Bandia, 2023).

A. Retention as Foreignization

The consistent retention of the honorific title *Alhaja* p.22 as *Alhadja*, p.6, *Allah* p.31 as *Allah* p.18, *Aafa*, p.30 as *Aafa*, p.16 in the TT is a vital act of foreignization (Venuti, 1995). By preserving the term, the translator forces the reader to acknowledge the socio-cultural specificity of the Nigerian Muslim context. This fulfils a key tenet of Postcolonial Criticism: resisting the erasure of African

identity and asserting cultural difference, despite potential comprehension difficulties for the receiving system.

B. Omission as Domestication

On the other hand, a very important passage of political satire is completely left out:

ST (Osofisan, p.33)	TT (Medjigbodo, p.22)	Translational Strategy
‘and buy chieftaincy titles as life insurance! No, let our obituaries litter the public places and one day -’p. 33	(Omitted passage) p.22	Cultural Exclusion and Overt Domestication

This is a satirical comment that targets a Nigerian tradition of turning money into social capital (‘chieftaincy titles’). A complete loss of socio-political poetics undermines the critical message of the ST. A Postcolonial reading of cultural sovereignty, as described by Adeyefa (2022), considers that there is a loss of cultural sovereignty here. This simplification of African political discourse is necessary to make it easily understandable to the target audience. A pragmatic act of domestication is performed here, as it is done in a Polysystem approach.

Poetic Intensification for Dramatic Tone

In maintaining the play’s emotional and dramatic poetic force, the translator frequently employs Amplification and Intensification strategies.

ST (Osofisan)	TT (Medjigbodo)	Translational Strategy
and our Leader would have been the first to disinherit him! To have him wiped out like vermin. p.66	Et notre chef aurait été le premier à le déshériter ! Et il l’aurait fait liquider ! p.69	Lexical Intensification
Life is life, and human life’s still valuable. p.25	On n’a qu’une vie et toute vie humaine est précieuse. p.11	Aphoristic Amplification
You trade in death and danger. By government decree your life’s	Le danger et la mort sont ton lot quotidien, au décret du gouvernement,	De-metaphorisation

ST (Osofisan)	TT (Medjigbodo)	Translational Strategy
the cheapest commodity in the market, and you don't understand! Listen to Alhaja, man! There'll be nothing after us, you hear, nothing but empty stalls and their solidarity of suffering, the blood stains...p.66	ta vie est la moins chère des marchandises sur le marché, et tu dis que tu ne comprends pas ! écoute donc, Alhajda, vieux ! il n'y aura plus rien après nous, tu entends, rien que des éventaires vides et leur solidarité dans la souffrance, des taches de sang...p.70	
Let it rise. We've got a wound to avenge. p.22	Et bien qu'il leve ! nous avons une blessure à laver dans le sang. p.7	Metaphorical intensification

The phrase 'liquider' (liquidate/assassinate) carries far more lexical intensity in the French language than its English equivalent in this idiom. Again, 'Life is life' is raised to 'On n'a qu'une vie,' maintaining its philosophical significance as an aphorism. Also, 'you trade in death and danger' translated as 'le danger et la mort sont ton lot quotidien' conserves the French idiomatic expression that conveys continual exposure to danger. Moreso, 'we've got a wound to avenge' translated as 'nous avons une blessure à laver dans le sang' preserves the notion of vengeance, and it becomes more pronounced and culturally nuanced in the target language. These lexical decisions reflect the translator's paramount attention to tonal and dramatic equivalency, reaching for powerful lexical tools of the French language in order to transmit this play's burning poetic intensity onto the Francophone stage.

From the entire analysis, it is observed that Systemic Acceptability surpasses Linguistic Fidelity. Such techniques as Cultural Neutralisation (e.g., *school pikin* to *un gosse stupide*, with the latter referring to the Nigerian school children) and Overt Domestication (omitting the *chieftaincy titles* satire) were used to make the text conform to the norms of the central French literary system, increasing its systemic acceptability and spread. Moreover, it was noticed that there is a negotiation of Cultural Sovereignty. This is because the translator used foreignisation deliberately by retaining words like *Alhaja*, *Allah* and *Aafa*, in the TT. This is because there is a concession made regarding cultural sovereignty by not including the political poetics of *chieftaincy titles*, which simplifies the

politics of the text. According to Adeyefa (2022), there is a weakening of the ethical power of the text. Finally, Tonal Equivalence is Paramount in the translation negotiation. The systematic deployment of Lexical Intensification and Aphoristic Amplification enabled the translator to successfully capture the central poetic element of the play, its passionate, condemnatory and imperative dramatic tone, which was then fully incorporated into the French idiom.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the intricacies of poetic negotiations in the English-French translation of Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, using the integrated framework of postcolonial translational postulations and polysystem theory. The analysis points out the role of translation as a mediating act between the African Anglophone poetics of the source text and the target culture's ideological and systemic needs. The study asserts that systemic acceptability surpasses linguistic fidelity in the translation of the selected literary poetics. Such techniques as cultural neutralisation and overt domestication are deployed in translation to achieve textual relationships within French literary systems by enhancing its systemic acceptability and operationalism. The translator uses foreignisation as a deliberate strategy to capture cultural sovereignty and tonal equivalence in the target text. The translator's systematic choices of lexical intensification and aphoristic amplification aid a negotiation of the central poetic elements of the play, its passionate, condemnatory and imperative dramatic tone, which is incorporated into the French idiomatic system. Consequently, the study reiterates that African literary translation involves a negotiation of systemic acceptability rather than mere linguistic fidelity; it advances translatorial inclination to preserving orality, indigenous worldviews and stylistic features; thus, foregrounding translational mediation of peripheral voices without the erasure of source text's cultural identity.

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