

Lessons From Osofisan's Preoccupying Themes In Women Of Owu

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Abstract: *The major themes in the Women of Owu revolve around most of the issues ravaging the contemporary society. The Femi Osofisan presents hard lessons to generations to learn from the issues that plagued Owu people and put Owu to eternal extinction from Yoruba land. It teaches the devastating effects of war, egoistic ethnocentrism, forced marriage (marriage by abduction) and other negative attitudes and practices across ages, the violent contestation for resources, women, power and identity, and the excesses of military personnel and dubious monarchs and politicians. This paper centres on thematic review, highlighting the major lessons to learn for a better contemporary society. It submits that if nations and individuals remain conscious and avoid the issues that led to the fall and extinction of Owu, most of the issues confronting them, especially Nigeria, would cease to exist or would obtain minimally. It recommends attitudinal change, smooth inter-group relations devoid of all forms of discrimination, cultural sustenance and reformation, and the promotion of indigenous knowledge and phenomena.*

Keywords: Lessons, Preoccupying, Themes, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

Significant writers of all nations of the globe have greatly contributed and continuously contribute to the struggles, development and creation of new world order in their society. As Wa Thiongo (1991) has noted, the writer's role is that of helping in the community's struggle for a certain quality of life free from all harmful or infectious exploitative relations. This is what Femi Osofisan has aptly done in *Women of Owu*. Certain harmful qualities of life and exploitative inter-group relations between nations and women and men are presented in the *Women of Owu* so that many strive to be free from them. Wa Thiongo (1991) further sheds light on the writer's significant contributions to the society's struggles thus:

The extent to which the writer can and will help is not only by explaining the world but in changing it will depend on his appreciation of the classes and values that are struggling for a new order, and new society, a more human future, and which classes and values are hindering the birth of a new and the hopeful. And of course, it depends on which side he is in these class struggles of his times.

Similarly, it has been observed that from the earliest stage of the struggle for the evolution of democratic nation states, up to the more recent African and Arab springs, revolution has remained [an] effective weapon for changing the world order. Be it the American or French revolution, or the Kenyan and Tanzanian revolutions, or the Harlem renaissance or Negritude movement, the writer has always been struggling side-by-side with the nationalists or Pan-Africanists against colonialism, slavery, tyranny, cultural aberration, psychological disorientations, etc. Literature

itself is [a] representation of the struggle in society at human, spiritual, economic, social, cultural, religious, environmental levels and within the self. The writer's stand in these struggles is shaped by his vision of the world order and the role he elects to play in his envisioned world order (Uwatt, 2015:1).

The preoccupying themes in the *Women of Owu* significantly reflect common issues of the contemporary society, even though it revolves around historical war. Owu was one of the best organised and most civilised and prosperous model city-states of Yoruba in South-western Nigeria. As such, the Owu's egoism, selling of other Yoruba into slavery and the capture and marrying of Iyunloye to Prince Dejumoo were the remote causes of the war that befell Owu city and people besides being envied by many other Yoruba nation-states, the problem that degenerated to the siege, conquest and cleansing of Owu. Iyunloye, Okunade's wife, willingly gave herself out (Osofisa, 2004:5) during the raiding of Apomu Market by soldiers, as she enticed them with her beauty. She was taken to Owu and married out to Dejumoo, the last prince of Owu Kingdom. Meanwhile, Iyunloye's perfidy (p.49) had pushed Okunade into the army, where he rose soonest to the *Maye* (General) position (p.6). Then, he leads the siege of Owu in revenge for the abduction and marrying of his wife to Dejumoo (pp.6-7).

The play warns against war, marriage by abduction, forced marriage, sexual molestation and assault, betrayal of husbands/wives and/or lovers, the bitter contestation over women, power (traditional and secular) and resources, ethnic hate, hate speech, egoism, superiority tendencies, ethnic prejudices, sour intergroup relations, social, ethnic and religious discriminations (see Dibia, Gotau and Robert, 2016), women alienation and image-battering, mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law palaver, the intimidation of civilians by military and Para-military personnel (see Robert, 2017),

conspiracy, social vices and other societal ills Adumaadan loves her brothers— and sisters—in-law. She shows that in her last respect. For example, Erelu and Adumaadan exemplify the dire need for change of attitudes towards in-law relationship for a smooth one. Erelu seeks reconciliation from and gets forgiven by Adumaadan at last (pp.39-40). Adumaadan shows Princess Adeoti's corpse last respect at the Lawumi's shrine: '...I loved the Princess, and I also cry for her.' It is an indisputable fact to maintain that the preoccupying issues in the text are continuously resurfacing because the latter generations, including those of the present time, have refused to change from attitudes and odd ways of life.

2. PREOCCUPYING THEMES IN WOMEN OF OWU

There are many lessons to learn from the preoccupying themes in Women of Owu. The themes are central to the happenings of the contemporary society. The themes are war, siege, conflicts, the contestation for power (kingship, chieftdom and secular political offices) and resources, culture erosion, gross negligence and the attrition of indigenous history and heritage, egoism, ethnocentrism, racial tendency and discrimination, social class and gender discriminations, failed leadership (misrule), spiritual forces, religious conquest and pogrom attempts as in the case of the Fulani's on Tiv and other Nigerian tribes (Besong and Robert, 2019; Mac-Leva 2014; Duru, 2016; Yanor, 2016; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Adogi, 2013; Tenuche and Ifatimehin, 2009; Adisa, and Adekunle, 2010; Ker, 2007; Ingawa, Ega and Erhabor, 1999), sour inter-group relations, social vices and other ills that characterise the contemporary society. The major themes, in which the minor ones are imbedded or situated in, are discussed in what follows herein at least in fair details.

2.1 The Theme of War

War and other forms of violent conflicts characterise the contemporary society, in which sophisticated weapons and technologies are commonly obtained and widely used. The alarming rates of war and other violent conflicts in the contemporary society makes the theme of war in the *Women of Owu* preoccupying. Insecurity is on the increase in many parts of the world, with the highest rates recorded in the developing nations. Nations (tribes or races) that find themselves better than others in one way or the other exhibit what the Owu did to other Yoruba nation-states. The Fulani, who engaged the Oyo in violent war and made them refugees (p.12), still terrorise other tribes of contemporary Nigeria, including Tiv, Alago, Eggon, Gbagyi, Edo, etc. (Mac-Leva 2014; Duru, 2016; Yanor, 2016; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Adogi, 2013; Tenuche and Ifatimehin, 2009; Adisa, and Adekunle, 2010; Ker, 2007; Ingawa, Ega and Erhabor, 1999). Fulani herders, in particular, are continuously used by their educated fellows and elites to terrorise other tribes of Nigeria. The text thus recounts the Fulani's historical raid on other tribes, which they sustain to the contemporary times.

The other examples abound, including the Ife vs. the Modakeke, the Eggon vs. Fulani, etc.

Massacre is prevalent these days. The killing of fellow humans seems a normal act these days. Security agents kill innocent civilians, who they intimidate and harass (Robert, 2017), and label them variously, simply describing their wanton and careless killing as accidental discharge. Till date, women are the most sufferers of war and other deadly conflicts. Besides being poor widows, who battle with caring for their children and themselves, they continuously suffer post-war trauma and other ills (e.g. maltreatment and injustice) from men in the society. Women suffer sexual assaults, alienation, battering, abduction for and/or forced marriage, ritual killing and abduction and being buried alive. Strained political violence and communal clashes are endemic and recurring in contemporary Nigeria. Violence has gradually become part of Nigerian political culture. Religious violence in Northern Nigeria is alarming and recurring. It is most so in the North, where countless Islamic fundamentalists kill for the sake of their religion, as they often claim even though Islam forbids that. Islamic rhetoricians and fake leaders brainwash and incite their followers (fellows) with fake teachings that make many of them volatile to other religious and tribes as well. They are mostly inimical to other religious, dabbling others infidels, pagans and so on (Robert and Besong, 2017). In the North-East, thousands of lives and property have been lost to the Boko Haram insurgents, who are Islamic militia attempting to Islamise Nigeria, by virtue of their demands, pursuits and activities. The Boko Haram has the mission of cleansing Christians and other religious. Its formation, historically, has ethno-religious political undertone.

Like the Allied Forces did to Owu, these insurgents have sacked different communities and local government areas in the region and closed down schools, markets, hospitals and what have you. As in the cases of Iyunloye and Owu women, the Chibok girls and many other women in the North-East have been kidnapped and shared among the Nigerian insurgents and their allies (allied forces) in neighbouring countries. This is captured in the play thus: 'Women were seized and shared out to the blood-spattered troops to spend the night' (p.4). Only a few selected 'distinguished' women were spared for the Generals (Osofisan, 2006:4). Gesinde describes other women as riff-raff, small fish (p.26). The reader is told how the captured Owu women are shared among top, men of the Allied Forces (pp.23-26).

The Generals decide who owns each woman (p. 25). For examples, Keso, the shy daughter of Erelu and wife of late heroic soldier Sakula, is to be inherited by Otunba Lekki, a popular legend (p. 25). Erelu, the Queen and Erelu of Owu, is allocated to Balogun Derin, a dubious liar and flirt, described by Erelu as [a] 'Dog' (p. 26). Erelu dreads him for his attributes and enjoins her Owu women to weep for her, for being chosen by the Dog. Adumaadan, the widow of Lisabi, Erelu's slain son, also talks about going to her new master, the man who murdered her husband (p.39). And,

Orisaye says, I shall be married to my enemy that handsome butcher of our people...’ (p.28). Meanwhile, on normal ground, these women would never accept these men, their new masters and forced husbands.

Further, the reader is told of the extent of war effects on Orisaye, one of the princesses of Owu kingdom, and on Owu women in general. Orisaye is badly affected by the massacre labelled ‘liberation war’. She is reported to have lost her senses to the war (p.26-7). Orisaye’s words aptly illustrate her insanity that resulted from her war experience (pp.27-32). Erelu, her mother, speaks of it viz: ‘What you think is a human body set ablaze is just my daughter, Orisaye, running around with a torch. The war has affected her badly and she’s... Well, no longer in control of her senses’ (p.26). Chorus Leader complements the foregoing, in her statements about Orisaye’s insanity thus: ‘‘Hold her! Hold her, Erelu, she will burn herself! She is out of her senses. Insanity is the drug of misery’’ (p.28). Clearly, forced marriage, sexual harassment/assault, psycho-emotional problems, post-war trauma, slavery, rights deprivation, alienation and domestic violence, women image battering and servitude, dehumiliation, impoverishment (poverty feminisation), compulsory widowhood and singlehood, and single motherhood prevalence are common war effects on women across ages, as in the case of Owu women.

A reflection on the foregoing definitely pictures the devastating effects of war and other violent conflicts between/among and within nation-states. Women are still victims (most sufferers) of war and other violent conflicts in the contemporary society. Many women in different nations of the world have lost their husbands and children and/or male relatives to war and violent conflicts. They also lose other valuables to war and other violent conflicts. These include their property, businesses, jobs, credentials, prestige (image), homes and entirety. It is imperative to note that those who conscientiously reflect deeply on the preoccupying themes in the *Women of Owu* would always be conscious of and avoid whatever could cause war and other violent conflicts. After all, everyone in the society is affected in one way or the other, directly or indirectly, during and after every war and conflict in the given societies, nations or communities. It is to learn from and deter the reoccurrence of such war and events that happened in Owu city in the contemporary society that Femi Osofisan dramatically recounts and presents the mixed experiences of Owu women, comparing the siege with the Iraqi War. The Owu never fought but were besieged with a military invasion and genocide. All the men, infant, young and old, were killed, while some women were murdered gruesomely and others captured, harassed and taken into eternal slavery.

2.2 Societal Ills against Women in Contemporary, as in Women of Owu

Apart from contemporary women being killed during / in wars and bitter conflicts, they suffer all kinds of ill, basically from men, the sexist and cruel men. Some women are also cruel to their fellow women, young and old alike,

especially those they are better than. Many women have been reported of maltreating children under them, while some have kidnapped and/or sold out children, others have indulged in different kinds of ill against women and humanity. Again, countless ladies/women have been kidnapped, raped, molested and killed by other different dubious sets of people these days. That is, women do not only suffer these ill from men and military personnel alone. These happen across the globe, not in Nigeria alone. To start with, marital issues faced by women are depicted in the text, *Women of Owu*. Adumaadan is hated by Erelu, her mother-in-law, who also hated Adumaadan’s late husband, Lisabi, and his three other brothers. Erelu loved only one of her five sons and only one of her three daughters. This exemplifies the chronic hatred suffered by most contemporary daughters-in-law from their wicked and evil-minded mothers-in-law. Adumaadan remarks, ‘‘Poor woman, you’ve never liked me, and I... have not liked you either. Dear mother-in-law, you had only one son whom you loved... It was not my husband’’ (p.40).

Be it as it may, the contemporary mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are taught to reconcile, have smooth relationship and share each other’s pains and woes, as exemplified by Erelu and Adumaadan. Iyunloye begs Okunade, her first husband whom she betrayed and dumped for Prince Dejumo of Owu, for forgiveness. Okunade gets sobered and succumbs at last to Iyunloye’s demand. He forgives and takes her back at last. This reflects the biblical teaching that God forgives humans for every sin no matter how grievous, provided the sinner returns to Him, shows remorse and asks for forgiveness. Again, that Iyunloye bought her way into Owu palace with her beauty and charms Okunade with seductive dispositions, words and admiration is a lesson to learn about women and their seductive power or influence on men.

Men ought to be mindful of such women in order not to fall into their traps and ruin themselves, their people and/or society, as in the case of Iyunloye. Many ladies and women have got into secret societies that use them, as Iyunloye claims she is used, to unleash mayhem on men and the society. This is a common cause of bitter conflicts between/among secret cults on campuses and streets. Because most men of contemporary times are not mindful of the destructive powers of women, as exhibited by Iyunloye and Lawumi (pp.20-21), they continuously have issues with and fall prey to women. Many men even most often undermine as well as disregard women. Many ladies and women have got into secret societies that use them, as Iyunloye claims she is used, to unleash mayhem on men and the society. This is a common cause of bitter conflicts between/among secret cults on campuses and streets. Like Iyunloye notes that she was a victim of circumstance, used as a helpless tool of fate to fulfil a prophecy (p.51), many women, especially ladies are so used by demonic forces of these days to plague men and the society. However, significantly, Iyunloye plays the role Judas Iscariot played in

the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ for the redemption of mankind. Judas was such a tool of fate. Without that betrayal, the prophecy and mission of dead would have not happened or get delayed and yet be fulfilled similarly by another person. The reader also learns of how the spirit world of immortal beings [the Supreme Being and deities] control(s) the physical world of humans, the mortals. Lawumi claims to be the one behind the siege of Apomu Market and Owu city (pp.6, 20-21), and goes on to seek Anlugbua's and other gods' supports to besiege soldiers of the Allied Forces with calamities and death, while returning, as their penalty for also disregarding her up to the point of killing those who ran to her shrine for refuge (pp.22).

2.3 General Lessons to Learn from Women of Owu

Parents are taught to love all their children and daughters- and son- in-law too. It is not good to love a particular child/ren and hate or neglect others, as exemplified by Erelu, who later realises that too late and thus claims to have loved all her children equally. Erelu exemplifies strong motherly love for her child, Dejumol, to the extent of defying the priests' order that he should be destroyed. She however fails to seek alternative solution(s) to avert the priests' prophecy or revelation from the gods. When Erelu realised the rising doom that will befall Owu because of Iyunloye, she advised and prevailed on Iyunloye to return to her first husband, Okunade, and even offered to aid her escape. One has to take precautions early enough in all situations. Being proactive is better than being post-active. It is also learnt that women easily influence men with seduction and charming manners and convincing words. Iyunloye depicts this in the text (p.4). The contemporary people ought to learn from the text and decrease from practices such as the engaging and marrying of infant and young ladies to very older men against the knowledge and interest of the 'future bride'. It is also a common practice among many cultures to engage/marry a girl/lady to a god/deity, a secret society, and an adult son of the girl's parent's friend and so on. Some force their daughters to marry those they do not love/want, all because of royalty, fame, money, position and what have you. Such marriages most often do not last or have peace. In the text, as Erelu notes, two of her daughters were already engaged to kings before the siege. Orisaye, the third princess, is said to have been wedded to Obatala, the Owu's god of purity and creativity. And the god insists that she remains a virgin. So, as at the siege of Owu, Orisaye is still a virgin. The significant lesson to learn from this is the fact that virginity is a virtue upheld by many African peoples, even till date, despite that many young people no longer have regard for virginity or aim at keeping it until marriage. In Igbo land, especially in parts of Anambra, virginity is celebrated with different gifts from the groom to the bride's mother. When a [newly married] groom discovers that his bride is a virgin until their honeymoon, he informs some adult members of his family, gets the conventionalised items and goes with them to his mother-in-law and offers her, thanking her for teaching and prevailing on her daughter to keep her virginity

until marriage. Many Oraukwu people in Anambra are still fond of this practice.

Next, the contemporary religious no longer obey and respect God's commandment. Fake religious practices have rose and submerged the classical true religious practices (see Dibie, 2017). The gods' warning exemplifies the prophecy about and warning against end-time happenings and fake religious teachings and practices, which are already manifesting, taught by the holy writs of several religions. Another lesson is taught and learnt about the essence of oral history and the danger of endangering indigenous history, oral knowledge and cultures. Oral history is upheld in the text. Every nation-state has a history (Besong, 2018; Robert, 2017; Alago, 1993; Isichei, 1976). Many Nigerians of the contemporary times do not know their history and care little or not about that. These days, it is common for one to hear a child say, 'I am from Tiv or Benue' but cannot tell of the part of Benue or Tiv land, all because their parents do not tell them. The recent abolishment or replacement of History in the Nigerian school curriculum with Civic Education and such others, it is a clear indication of the extent to which Nigerians have forgotten their history, origin, migration and oral knowledge. This subject would have aptly been incorporated into Government or created as an autonomous subject without the dropping of History. In the text, Lawumi lends credence to the foregoing in the case of Owu thus: 'Owu forgot its history; forgot its origin; your people became drunk with prosperity' (p.19).

The mystical oral history of the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria is recounted. Lawumi recounts Owu history, origin and migration, noting that Owu was founded by husband, upon her father' authority, because she, an Ife princess married him, an Owu son. It is imperative to note that the account is subjective and misleading because it was from Owu her husband went to Ile-Ife and married her. Rather, Lawumi's father only gave the husband royal blessings to found Owu [royal] Kingdom. This is the tendency of many contemporary historians, rhetoricians and elites, who tell their peoples lies about their true history. Anlugbua, the self-claimed great grandson of Oduduwa, also narrates his account of Owu history, noting that he was there when the little old village of his father (i.e. Owu) was built up into a fortress and called Owu.

Anlugbua claimed that he came down from Heaven with his uncles: Obatala, the god of creativity, Orunmil, the god of wisdom, and Ogun, the god of metallic ore (p.5). He also informs the women as well as the reader that before leaving the earth, he dipped his sword into the earth, became a mountain, took an oath that forbade him from coming to the earth without being called to come and help the Owu, and left an iron chain for the Owu to pull whenever they needed him (p.7). Besides, the text teaches lessons about the historical incidence of slavery and the infiltration of the White (colonialists) into Africa, which Owu represents, and their later destruction of every indigenous (African culture and its development and panorama), which the destruction of

Owu traditional religion represents. Slavery routes are mentioned in the text to include Kano, Abomey, Ijebu, Ife and Cape Coast to Europe (p.16). The unfair inhuman treatments meted out on the captured Africans and other Blacks are recounted. Chorus Leader notes that slavery is not good in any part of the world and thus calls on the women for revolution against slavery everywhere in the globe. Human trafficking, child labour/abuse and other forms of modern slavery ought to be combated and wiped out from the contemporary society. This is another lesson to learn from the text.

In line with the above, lessons are learnt about how stronger nations of the world oppress as well as invade the weaker ones, even up to these days. The Owu oppressed some other Yoruba people until the siege and its fall, regarded as liberation war. Several characters in the text talk about 'the law of defeat, the law of combat' by Erelu (p.16), and 'the law of victory, the law of defeat' by Anlugbua (p.7), among others. This law is characterised by slavery (enslaving the defeated), vandalism, subjugation and the erosion of everything, including the religion and other aspects of culture of the defeated people/s (the weaker nation/s). The developed nations have been applying the law of defeat on the developing (weaker) nations (see Rodney, 1973; Bolton, 2007). In the text, Woman speaks, 'Nowadays, in the new world order, it is suicide to be weak (p.8).

In Nigeria, the so-called minorities have been suffering the plights of the weaker peoples in contact with the stronger ones over the ages. Central Nigeria has the highest ratios of the minorities. The minority tribes are continuously marginalised by the majority. The exonerated few, Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo marginalise other Nigerian tribes politically, economically and otherwise. Yet, among them, Igbo is marginalised. Since many Yoruba are Muslims, besides being the most educated of all, they are barely marginalised by the Hausa/Fulani. Recurring wars and/or bitter conflicts between Ife and Modakeke, Fualni vs Tiv, Agatu, Eggon, Alago, et al., etc. are cases of the stronger fighting (troubling) the weaker.

3. CONCLUSION

Many lessons abound in the text to be learnt for betterment, if the contemporary people heed Osofisan's warnings given in the *Women of Owu*. Lessons are taught in the play about many subject matters or issues of contemporary times, as earlier noted. Basically, if the lessons taught by Osofisan in *Women of Owu* are put to conscious and effective practice by all and sundry, most of the issues confronting the contemporary society would not be in place. Accordingly, war has devastating effects on women in particular, the society, and the environment. As depicted in the play, the effects of war [and bitter conflicts] include death, conquest, untold hardship and abject poverty, women abduction and sexual molestation/abuse, starvation, epidemics, drought, slavery, breakdown of economic, socio-political, cultural and educational activities, etc.

Erelu (pp.5-6) and Iyunloye represent the modern civilised African women (pp.55). Gesinde represents sexist men (p.31). Okunade represents the authoritarian military Generals of contemporary times that are desperate, destructive and lawless. It is high time, the illusion and mythical beliefs in and about deities be dropped, as Erelu and Woman insist in the text. The text shows that despite the frailties of women, such as Iyunloye and Lawumi's infliction of pains and calamities on Owu and the Allied Forces, women are fighters, warriors and agents of change. Erelu (p.16), Orisaye (p.28-32) and Chorus Leader (p.17) represent these women in the text.

Finally, failed leadership is depicted in the text. Oba Akinjobi and his close elders fled Owu the night to the siege (p.2). Dubious leaders betray their followers, as exhibited by the Kabiyesi of Owu (p.34). Change and continuity are depicted in the text (p.2). Change and continuity in African feminism (African womanism) is showcased in scene five (p.39). Similarly, women's unison in revolution against societal ills to affect a new world order is seen in different scenes. For example, Chorus Leader speaks in page 38, 'I agree with you, Erelu. And instead of crying, let us raise our voices and curse these men!' Also, Orisaye's attacking words on Gesinde for addressing Erelu anyhow (pp.28-9) and her emphatically expressed plans to murder Balogun Kusa and his household (pp.30-32), when she gets to his house lend credence to the courage, rebellion and planned actions of radical women who fight for and affect change in the society.

4. RECOMMENDATION

The following recommendations are made:

- This paper calls on all and sundry for attitudinal change in every society. Hate speeches, ethnic hate, religious sentiments, discrimination and violence, ethnic, religious and social conflicts, ills against women and all forms of slavery should be discouraged and wiped out of the society with strong operational legislations.
- The society (citizens) should do away with bad leaders by rejecting them, instead of holding on to cultural, political and other factors and allow them perpetually mislead it (them). Women have to rebel against the prevailing ageing gender-based ills confronting them in the society. Military excesses should be properly checked with operational legislations.
- Nations and individuals should be conscious of and avoid the issues that led to the fall and extinction of Owu, including the abandonment of History as a school subject. There should be smooth inter-group relations devoid of all forms of discrimination, cultural sustenance and reformation. And,

indigenous culture, knowledge and phenomena should be promoted at all times.

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