African Performance Review
Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012
pp 37-51

Femi-Nism: Woman as Narrative Ligament in Femi Osofisan's Plays

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> The critic adds his weaving to the Penelope's web of the text, or unravels it so that its structuring threads may be laid bare, or reweaves it, or traces out one thread in the text to reveal the design it inscribes.
>
> *(Hillis J. Miller, 1970:36)*

Introduction

A major challenge that critical interest on a popular subject faces is the danger of reductionism. The reason is, simply, that one can hardly approach such a subject without undue influences from older models and previous fashionable opinions. It is this type of challenge that confronts an attempt, such as this, to discuss the dramaturgy of Femi Osofisan: one of Africa's most prolific and popular dramatists.

Osofisan's plays number over forty; each dealing with subjects or aspects of what is undoubtedly, a variegated thematic landscape. Yet, most of the critical attention generated by these plays and his critical writings seem to have followed an almost regimented line of thought. One of the pioneering studies by Olu Obafemi regards Osofisan as being committed to raising "mass awareness to a positive revolutionary alternative to social decadence" (1982: 118-9). In the same vein, Chidi Amuta, in a very important attempt to articulate a theory of African literature, encapsulates Osofisan's plays as simply, "dramatic literature that is politically committed on certain ideological predilection that is class-partisan and sees socio-political salvation mainly in terms of revolutionary transformation" (1989: 167).

Not to be outdone, Jas Amankulor joins his voice agreeing that the plays "advocate radical social change" (1993: 162). Olu Obafemi, too, lists Osofisan as "a pioneer of the drama of conscious ideological commitment… [whose] plays deal with topical political issues from a philosophically materialist perspective" (2005: 575). Emeka Nwabueze ties it all up very comprehensively by pointing out that:

> Osofisan has consistently attempted to arouse revolutionary consciousness in his readers and audience. His works combine effectively his astonishing expression of anger, frustration, and outrage against Nigeria's socio-political milieu, his penchant for avant-garde dramatic structure, his love of symbolic dialogue, and his pre-occupation with political consciousness, mass mobilization and revolution (2003: 141).

As can be seen, in terms of fundamental theoretical thrust, all of the comments and descriptions of his plays above position Osofisan towards Marxist/revolutionary critical sentiments. This statement is not intended as a refutation or condemnation, but it is their very obviousness and recognition of his revolutionary credentials and sentiments that could also lead to pedestrian bracketing of his writings. In addition, it is necessary to admit that the above appraisal does not constitute an exhaustive register of all critical statements on Osofisan's plays. Such might require volumes of books. What has been done here is a sort of chronological overview of about two decades of critical work on him. Of course, there have also been few departures, mainly by younger critics, from the popular committed perspectives. Durant and Fabb provide a possible way out of fixating Osofisan's critical activity on popular opinion. According to them, "received opinion about a literature obscures actual contact with the text, and the best way to get around this is to strip away context and accumulated opinion: to read closely for yourself" (1990: 25). Interestingly, too, in recent times, some critics have read feminist colourings in Osofisan's plays. Tess Onwueme (1994:229) finds some merit in the positive images of women in the plays. And Ngozi Udengwu, who regards Osofisan as a gender-sensitive rather than a feminist writer, is of the opinion that "Osofisan's plays prove that a male writer is capable of presenting positive images of women, rather than the stereotype images of the doomed active woman and the favoured passive woman that has characterized literary writing for decades" (2009: 202). This paper, beyond the presentation of images, examines the structural roles played by some female characters in Femi Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road* (1969), *Morountodum* (1979), *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986), and *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* (1997). These plays represent about four decades of

writing. They will be explored to reveal the underlying functions of key female characters within the playwright's overall narrative aesthetics, focussing essentially with regards to the following: Initiation of Dramatic Conflict, Thematic Exposition, and Resolution of Conflict.

In recent times in Africa, there has been a lot of feminist consciousness. Probably one of the consequences of globalization, many writers and critics, mostly female, have engaged in elucidatory literary activity to examine, expose and attempt a definition of the treatment of women and femininity in African literature. These efforts have sought to liberate, centre, and empower African women (Mazrui, 1993: 97) or to "reinstall the female body into the male economy" (Smith, 1998: 143) in a cultural/literary sense. But all too often, especially among new zealous converts to feminist literary congregation, there appears to be a fixated disposition on perusing texts for stereotypes that denigrate femininity. So, according to Catherine Stimpson, "consciously or unconsciously, many critics confuse what they are saying about women, if they are saying anything at all, and what there is to be said." (1988: 84).

Some studies have been relevant in the revelation of some patterns of prejudice hitherto concealed or ignored in studies of women and feminism in African literatures. But as Shohat and Stam rightly warn;

> the exclusive preoccupation with images whether positive or negative, can lead to a kind of *essentialism*, as less subtle critics reduce a complex variety of portrayals to a limited set of reified formulae. Such criticism is procrustean, the critic forces diverse fictive characters into pre-established categories (1994: 199).

As earlier suggested, this type of criticism easily stifles creative discovery, encourages normative simplification, and eventually collapses the horizons of scholarship. Therefore, while being gender biased, this paper will not concentrate on the relationship between male and female characters in the plays. It will not lament partial authorial treatment of femaleness/femininity, particularly with regard to questions and images of domesticity, sentimentality, debasement and evasiveness. Instead, it will depart from the illusion of absence to the reality of presence not as binary oppositions that define worth, but as narrative devices.

Initiation of Dramatic Conflict in Osofisan's plays

Many Colours Make the Thunder-King begins with a riddle: why would a man marry a river, a forest, and a mountain. In the play, these symbols are used to represent Oya, Osun, and Oba, respectively, who are all

female characters. The prologue presents Shango, ordinarily the hero of the play, as an unfulfilled man who must accomplish the task of marrying a river (woman/Oya) to become fulfilled or complete. He succeeds, and even seeks a second wife (forest/Osun) and everything seems to be easy sailing for him. But it is at this point that the first hint of a conflict is introduced in the play. This occurs in the fifth scene of the play when Oya discovers Shango plotting to marry a second wife. Her reaction is vehement;

> **Oya:** Well, I will not accept it! And I will not run away! My father never turned his back on a fight! This battle has just begun (30).

Despite Oya's opposition, Shango marries Osun and Oya seems to have repressed her anger for the moment. But the conflict of interests between Shango and Oya is apparent. Oya does not necessarily oppose Shango's desire for a second wife. She recognises the cultural acceptance for that. Her anger is with his deliberate and hegemonic negation of her position as a confidante, being his first wife. She regards it as a slight on her person. She reasons beyond the cultural boundaries allowed for a woman and fights for her right to be heard. By the tenth scene of the play the dramatic tension between Shango and Oya heightens with Oya's open resistance of Shango's attempt to marry a third wife (Mountain/Oba). Oya lobbies and obtains the support and alliance of Gbonka and Timi (Shango's generals) and succeeds in focusing attention on Shango's negligence of state/martial responsibilities in favour of nuptial expeditions and marital adventure. Thus Oya shifts the focus of the story, introducing a complication that becomes a major force that other than unsettling the narrative equilibrium also opens a new space in which she controls the narrative as well as establishes the terms for her confrontation with Shango. This is so because prior to Oya's significant opposition to Shango, the latter enjoyed a central place, without opposition, in the story. But from the moment that Oya openly challenges Shango, the entire conflict of the play seems to swing between Shango and Oya, establishing for the first time a protagonist – antagonist polarity between the two.

Gradually, Oya succeeds in foiling Shango's quest for a third wife by generating a child, with Osun's help, from Yeye Iroko. Next she ousts Osun and Alegemo from the palace by devising a plot that falsely entangles the two in a suggested rather than actual adulterous liaison. Then she turns Shango against Gbonka and Timi, taking advantage of a brewing rebellion in the land, thus setting Shango on the path to self-destruction. The moment of highest tension occurs when Shango's grip

on the reins of his kingdom degenerates to critical laxity and eventually collapses with Gbonka's ultimatum to Shango to surrender his crown. Shango becomes a fugitive. All things considered, from the perspective of plot control, Oya cannot be said to be any less a hero than Shango. In fact, in terms of dramatic stature and dynamism, Oya seems to possess more heroic credentials and capacity because her actions and choices determine the resolution of the play. In the end the play swings away from traditional cultural constructs of victory for men and patriarchy to Oya's favour in a manner closer to the displacement of male order than personal victory. Viewed from this perspective, the play could be seen as a story of a domestic tussle between Oya and Shango, that gains national dimension as a result of Oya's insistence on the respect of her dignity as a person and her struggle to maintain her place as a force to be reckoned with in the kingdom: an active rather than a passive role, which establishes her place of worth and portrays her and women like her and in the other plays in this essay as significant initiators of dramatic conflict and change.

In *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage,* conflict is dimly suggested very early in the plot (Two: First Fall) when Akanbi (the protagonist of the play) says:

> Bisi, when we parted yesterday / It was to meet again… But now, I am afraid we have parted forever (5).

But after this the story follows a somewhat predictable (action - reaction) parallel line from Olabisi's (Akanbi's would-be spouse) curious inquiry to Akanbi's explanation (through a flashback) narrating his meetings with Adigun and later with Gbadamosi and Fatai, culminating in Akanbi's reluctance to continue nuptial plans with Olabisi. However, the actual point of attack comes later and is initiated by Olabisi. This occurs towards the end of Scene Three, The Second Fall, when Olabisi, after several attempts to reason with Akanbi, returns his ring and demands her necklace from him.

> **Olabisi:** Take your ring. I release you. Return my necklace, and go (32).

It is this singular action of Olabisi's that twists the story and introduces effective conflict to the plot. Prior to this, there was nothing to suggest that Olabisi had any sense of identity beside men but it is at this point that she realises that her dignity as a person could no longer find fulfilment in Akanbi's definitions of her. She insists on her independence and asserts her right to personal existence devoid of extraneous control by letting go of the totems that bound her to Akanbi. From this point, she

is no longer just an appendage to Akanbi but an independent character with her own thoughts and motives, which all too often question those of Akanbi, thereby initiating plot conflict.

Morountodun begins with the Director/Narrator getting ready for a play performance. However, it is not until Titubi (the heroine of the play) enters with her retinue that the play's conflict is initiated. She is opposed to the essential message of the play, which seems to be targeted at the middle class to which she belongs. And it is no surprise she confronts the Director for what she regards as an affront to her person as a member of that class. It is from here that the political and cultural stasis in the society is upset;

> **Titubi:** …I, Titubi, daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, I am stopping this play tonight! And if you're wise, you'll go and return your tickets and collect your money back … (7-8).

This declaration injects the preliminary crisis into the play's plot, for it generates an altercation between Titubi and the Director that twists the story of the play from what appeared as just a narrative of a night out at the theatre to the bigger political argument about class and individual responsibilities between Titubi and Superintendent that eventually leads to Titubi infiltrating the enemy's camp. Titubi's confrontation with Director presents another side of the dialectical coin, one which contradicts the erstwhile attempt by the Director to sway the emotion of the audience to his favour with the argument that the uprising of the peasants against the middle class was justified. Titubi enters with "*... a near-hysterical mob, consisting mainly of women bearing placards, and some handbills which they begin to distribute round the auditorium.*''(6) The inscriptions on the placards proclaim the contradictions in the peasant class that the Director had earlier glorified:

> "DOWN WITH AGITATORS! WIPE OUT THE INSANE LOVERS OF POVERTY! AWAY WITH HYPOCRITES! CRUSH THE PEASANT REVOLT! CLEAN THE CITY OF LOUTS! DEATH TO THE JOBLESS! NO FOREIGN IDEOLOGIES! TO EARN IS HUMAN! WHO DOES NOT WANT MONEY? (6-7).

Director's final humiliation comes when he compromises his crusader posturing and joins in the scramble for Titubi's disdainful pecuniary exhibition. The whole foundation of the story is upset and the very rationale for Director's proposed performance is called to question.

The major complication in the plot is initiated by Titubi towards the end of the first scene. This is evident when she volunteers as a government agent to quell the peasant revolt and despite the superintendent's reluctance, and in spite of himself, he allows her. The highest tension in the play is in Scene Ten, when Titubi brings Marshall (the combatant leader of the peasant revolt) under gunpoint to superintendent. Here the plot of the play has been stretched to absolute elasticity and everything seems to hang in a balance. But it is still Titubi who provides another twist with her opening monologue in Scene Twelve. Here we see a dynamic character, with all the trappings of a hero, rotating the plot like a ring round her finger – revealing different sides of it and offering diverse possibilities thereby sustaining suspense. The major conflict of the play, which is the struggle by the peasant class for economic and political emancipation, is mediated by Titubi; a member of the middle class, she commits class suicide (Amuta, 1989) and willingly defects to the peasants and carries on their struggle to fulfilment.

As soon as Situation One opens in *Red is the Freedom Road*, Akanji, the slave prince, Basorun (Commander of the army) and protagonist of the play, are seen seated on a rock. There is stasis. There is no activity, no words; until Ibidun, Akanji's wife, enters and upsets the situation, introducing dramatic significance to the status quo, and in so doing, establishing the opening conflict of the play through her exchange with Akanji. From the onset, Ibidun seems to represent a potential obstacle to Akanji's ambition to become the Basorun of the land as she insists that her place as Akanji's wife be respected when the soldiers that attend Akanji enter and, ignorant of her identity, refer to her as "... only a slave... a woman and a slave... not a person to be counted where men are speaking... "(118). To Ibidun, this debasement of her character on account of her class and gender is unacceptable and she voices out her objection. She challenges Akanji: "Do you stand there while they say all that to me? Akanji, do you bear insult to your wife?" (118). Akanji is more interested in the position that he seeks. He asks Ibidun to bear with him till he secures the power he desires. Ibidun doles out arguments that contradict Akanji's line of thought. She asks him "… so you sell your own people for power! So you desert me.... " (119). Thus she provides new and radical, although antagonistic alternative to Akanji's line of thought, for while he is concerned with political power she is concerned with the strength of character and moral fortitude that come with sustenance and filial support in spousal relationship. Eventually, by the time the king enters, a major complication has occurred, quite early in the play, that seems to seal Akanji's tragic fate. The king challenges Akanji to flog his mother, who has now become a slave and is too weak to walk, as proof of his allegiance. Ibidun

warns Akanji about the foolishness of his proposed action in the context of cultural morality. But Akanji ignores the warning and flogs her, thereby earning the curse of a dying mother. Here, the two women serve as parameters to measure the content and character of Akanji's heroic dimension; there are standards to determine his strength of character within the matrix of cultural evaluation. But at the same time, they serve as catalysts to his tragic destiny because his rejection of good advice from women simply because they are wife and mother respectively, leads to his eventual downfall even after he had acquired the political power that he sought at their expense. Situation Two is dominated by Ibidun (interestingly the only named characters in the scene are all female). A very important element of this scene is its cosmological significance. Ibidun mediates in the relationship among the dead (Akanji and his mother), the unborn (Ibidun's stillborn child), and the living (Ibidun), providing a sort of foreshadowing for Akanji's morbid and tragic destiny. It is this same significance that is highlighted in Ibidun's dying statement in the final scene: "... Husband, our child is dead. Mother is gone. Don't leave me behind. I cannot stay alone." (138)

Thematic Exposition

In the plays under examination here, a crucial factor concerns the ideological categories of the actions which give meaning to the issues at stake. As Terry Eagleton observes, with reference to ideological categories, the visibility is not always immediately derived. "… (It) depends on the text's precise modes of working (the categories) as well as on the nature of the categories themselves". (1976: 85) These modes of expression may occur within seemingly insignificant exchanges within the plot. "… even what appears to be generalized pleasantries are an essential part of the text conveying information" (Miles-Brown 1994: 39). This section will explore female characters of the selected plays as significant expository vehicles for thematic meaning.

Probably because of its fabled nature, *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* does not hide much information beneath its surface. Oya and Ireti, her attendant-confidant, are the first characters to give a clear, unambiguous insight into who the 'river' refers to in their conversation at Oya's 'sub-aquatic palace'. Their dialogue plays reveal the themes of the play, which range from excessive ambition and spousal rivalry, to political conflicts. In *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, however, Olabisi and Titi play a very pivotal expository role. From the beginning of the play until well into the Fifth Segment (Stalemate), there are mere hints and allusions to the cause and nature of the terrible enmity between Atanda and Folabi

(the sworn enemies and remote causes of the ancestral hate that serves as the play's major preoccupation). It is clear that the former killed the latter and that Adigun avenged Folabi's death by butchering Atanda. But, without doubt, Atanda and Folabi were also best of friends to the extent that proverbs about true friendship were made out their relationship! See, for instance, Akanbi's response when Adigun informs him that Atanda is his father's murderer, and Adigun's confessed ignorance;

> **Akanbi:** But you always told me they were friends, and many proverbs still talk of their friendship (13).
>
> **Adigun:** Like twins they were. Then, suddenly they quarrelled … we did not even discover the cause. And underneath, the quarrel grew and festered, like a hidden cancer… (14).

One is at a loss about what actually happened that even, Adigun, an active participant in the Iloto hill tragedy, did not know. It is a suspense maintained until the later part of the Fifth Segment. And it is Titi that reveals the true situation to Olabisi;

> **Titi:** It's a long story. A sad story. Your father and Akanbi's had long been friends. It became even proverbial, their intimacy. Then one day, a stranger came to the village (53).

The above statement is the introduction to a discussion between the two female characters (Mother and daughter) that serves as the expository vehicle, which resolves the suspense surrounding the reason for the deep hatred between the two families in question. It also introduces the theme of capitalist exploitation and deception into the story, such that what seemed like a petty squabble between two simple folks assumes a political and an economic dimension with dire ideological significance and consequences.

In *Morountodun*, Titubi plays an expository role on three levels: dialectical opposite, Narration, and Historicisation. As a dialectical opposite, with her oratorical prowess and affective personality, Titubi serves as a foil that reveals the different sides of other characters and issues. Her encounter with Director, as already noted, reveals the contradictions and apprehension in the latter's character when exposed/subjected to ideological scrutiny. In the same scene she engages Superintendent in an eloquent, well-matched banter in which her intelligence and reading of class and the subtle hints at man-woman relationship, if not gender dialectic, seep through:

SUPERINTENDENT: I congratulate you. Gestures are large, when the wind alone is the obstacle

TITUBI: Don't think you're clever. Every Cobra is poisonous, whatever its gloss.

SUPERINTENDENT: The hunter brings home a grass-cutter, and beats his chest. What will happen to the elephant-killer.

TITUBI: The shoulder is not smaller is it, simply because it has chosen to wear a low-necked blouse (13).

This exchange deals with the relationship between sexual difference and constructed gender types, suggesting a re-examination of culturally assigned roles and tropes on the basis of biological status.

At the end of Scene Ten, Titubi adopts the role of Narrator, an essential component of the epic form, and an important facility in constructing cultural and historical narratives about roles and genders. She introduces flashback scenes that explain present plot developments. It is in one of these scenes that Molade and Mama Kayode provide the first detailed, comprehensive information about the remote and immediate social, economic, and political concatenation of events that led to the conflicts between the peasants and the government. It is still the same women, with Mosun and Wura, who in Scene Thirteen reveal the romantic relationship between Titubi and Marshal, a development that changes Titubi from being just a mere shadow of Moremi to a dynamic personality with her own right to self-determination and actualization.

In terms of historicisation, Titubi links the past with the present when she sees and aligns her role in the revolution and in the history of the peasants and community, to the actions of the legendary Moremi who saved her people from foreign invaders in Yoruba mythical history. In her discussion with Superintendent, in Scene Four, she collapses the gap between myth and reality. In effect, Titubi's emergence as a person, woman and revolutionary from the shadows of Moremi is much more than a dramatic strategy; it marks the ideological separation of lived history and experiences from the stultifying constraints of myth and legend, an important step away from conservative patriarchal constructions towards an emancipatory revolutionary goal.

This insight prepares the ground for the enactment of the Moremi legend in Scene Five. The spatial and temporal complementarity established in this scene, between Moremi and Titubi, is an expository link between what was, what is, and what could become. It "… provides … the pretext, in both senses of the word, for the unraveling of the dominant discourse" (Irele, xxvii).

The opening scene of *Red is the Freedom Road* offers no other information than a scene description and a static character. It is from Ibidun's mouth, upon her dramatic entry, that the character is named and signified as "Akanji" and "my husband" (116). It is also Ibidun who provides the background information about the state of affairs in Akanji's family and the psychosocial and economic relations in the land. It is also from the discussion by Ibidun and her companions (all female), at the burial scene in Situation Two, that Ibidun's identity as a princess is revealed for the first time. Ibidun, more or less, plays the role of a Narrator. This is more so and significant as the play does not include a named Narrator.

Resolution of Conflict

In drama, as in human relations, conflict arises as a result of difference. This may derive from opposing views, interests, tastes, and other such dispositions usually hinged on subjective grounds. Difference, as a logical textual component, arises out of discrepancies between meaning and assertion (De Man 1971:110) and it is the quantity and quality of these that determine the generation of anxieties and the processes of their resolution. The connection between polarity anxiety and resolution is captured by Jane Gallop;

> Difference produces great anxiety. Polarization, which is a theatrical representation of difference, tames and binds that anxiety…. All polar oppositions share the trait of taming the anxiety that specific differences provoke (1982: 93).

In *Many Colour Make the Thunder-King*, Osun is used to resolve conflicts. From reluctantly accepting to side with Oya in Scene Eleven in order to ensure peace in the land, through offering an alternative child bearing strategy to Oya, to Scene Twenty – Two in which she remains steadfast in her profession of innocence and declaration of love for Shango, she is seen, as a manager of anxiety. She is always initiating steps to the resolution of differences and the eventual return of equilibrium between/among opposing forces. By Scenes Thirty-Five and Thirty-Six, when Shango and Oya go to seek Osun's forgiveness so she could aid them in the recovery of Oya's son, we still see Oya as the constant factor restoring emotional order, and serving as the balm for troubled souls.

A single thread that runs through *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* is the enmity between the families of Atanda and Folabi. It is this difference that forms the major conflict of the play. When Akanbi learns that Atanda killed his father, he vows not to marry Olabisi and when the latter

discovers that Adigun killed her father she takes a similar vow. This would, naturally, lead to a stalemate, yet it is Olabisi that takes the first step to resolve the difference that would if left unchecked, amount to a dangerous and bloody stalemate. After her initial impulsive vow "Never, Mother. I shall Never Marry him now. Never!" (57), she undergoes a spiritual experience, which calls to question the rationale for the perpetuation of old feuds and grievances. She decides to sacrifice ancestral acrimony at the altar of love and happiness. She tells Akanbi:

> Mother came out, I walked straight towards her. I said: mother, forgive me, I can't … No, I cannot live by the hatred which poisoned your life (58).

This singular resolve lays the foundation for the eventual resolution of the ancestral conflict between the antagonizing families. It is Olabisi's strong will and sense of personal determination that ultimately kick all parties to the conflict in line. The entire story of the play could be said to revolve around Olabisi. Afterall, the Narrator's introductions aside, Olabisi starts all but one segments of the play. The only one, Six: Knock-out, that Akanbi starts, he begins with Olabisi's name)!

The role of mediator in the resolution of conflict in *Morountodun*, is taken up mainly by Titubi. In Scene Fourteen she proposes a truce between the peasant (rebel) and government forces with a sermon that ends with her declaration: "Let a new life begin" (71). This is followed by Mosun's and Molade's musing in Scene Fifteen;

> **MOSUN:** So tomorrow we negotiate.
> **MOLADE:** Yes. And the war will be ended (71).

Unfortunately (expectedly), when Marshal ignores this suggested resolution and attempts to resume fighting, he does so to his own doom.

Red is the Freedom Road presents Ibidun, in Situation Two, performing a burial rite. This ritual attempts to pacify the spirit of Akanji's mother. It could be said that, ideally, the ritual should be performed by Akanji. But here Ibidun serves as a proxy to ensure the successful passage of Akanji's mother to the world of the ancestors, thereby avoiding conflict between the worlds of the living and the dead. Repeatedly, Ibidun pleads "Mother do not despise us" (124). Ibidun's role here raises important questions as to why Akanji does not perform the ritual for his mother's passage since after all, that is an uncommon role for a woman to play.

A clear-cut denouement is not, usually, a hallmark of the epic drama. In consonance, Osofisan's plays mostly end suggestively rather than

definitively. However, there are points within the story when the hanging strands of the independent scenes are brought together and integrated into a unified idea that suggests a plausible end.

In *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*, the final knot is tied at Osun's sacrificial death in a futile bid to save Alegemo, in Scene Thirty-Nine, and Oya's suicide, which resurrects him. According to Alegemo, the "… queen returns to fertilizing origins in the bosom of mother earth" (92). With this situation, and Shango's death, the land is redeemed. In effect and although cosmic equilibrium is restored to the erstwhile chaotic collective psyche of the community, this is possible mainly because of Oya's suicide than it is due to Shango's death and vacation of the sacral-secular and cultural-political spheres.

In *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, the hatred that started in Iloto Hill also ends there. The calumny of the older generation gives way to the love of the new. Titi sums it up in her words: "Our night. Their dawn. Dew is upon us' (67). Even Detoun regains her mental balance and announces the death of Adigun (the old order). In this final scene, the female characters around whom the Iloto tragedy revolves provide the real and apparent fulcrum for the final burial of hatchets. Titi proffers the answer to Adigun's demise "… He was trapped in a cannibal rage." (69) Olabisi declares an end to the past: "… farewell to Iloto" (70). And taking a cue from them, Akanbi is psychologically empowered and joins their two phrases to declare: "… farewell to a cannibal rage" (70).

The resolution of *Morountodun* occurs in two dimensions. One is figurative: the marriage between Titubi and Marshal represents a sort of class rapprochement designed to balance the equation of the elite – peasant dichotomy. On the other hand, it is structural: the appearance of Moremi and Titubi on opposite platforms represents a union between the past and present that provides a significant definition of reality. In both cases, the female character dominates.

In *Red is the Freedom Road,* Ibidun's female companions provide another perspective for the rationalization of Akanji's actions:

> **BOLAJI:** And all along we misunderstood him. We would not fight with him.
>
> **DOYIN:** I know now why he could not tell. Words fly the air. He would have been betrayed (137-8).

Thus at the end, despite what appeared as unforgivable offences, Akanji is presented as a character to be empathized with. But more important than this is Ibidun's suicide, which establishes her faithfulness to cultural/family values and it is her death that provides an avenue for a

possible re-union of Akanji, Ibidun, their child and Akanji's mother in the great beyond.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of *Red is the Freedom Road* (1969), *Morountodum* (1979), *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986), and *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* (1997) demonstrates that female characters play very crucial roles in Femi Osofisan's plays. Their activities form part of the narrative essence of the plays in terms of plot and character development. This reading, contrary to the opening premise about the reductionist approach to interpreting the playwright's many subjects and themes, makes it important for critics of African drama to open up more alternative vistas for the discussion of plays of African dramatists and the role of women in them. Such an approach would be a departure from the straight-jacketed perspectives that all too often see women as playing passive and even derogatory roles in many an African play.

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