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To Sack a City or to Breach a Woman's Chastity: Euripides' *Trojan Women and* Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

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Abstract

The link between fact and fiction has been established by critics from Plato to philosophers such as Homi Bhabha and Jacques Derrida. Also, the inter-textual interface between classical literature and African literature has been explored by scholar-critics such as Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong' o, to name a few.

However, Femi Osofisan's creative appropriation of Euripides' *Trojan Women* in his *Women of Owu* has not received adequate scholarly intervention. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt is made to investigate the convergence and divergence between the two playwrights' imaginative reconstruction of the status and exploits of womenfolk. This is with a view to establishing that both are quintessential realistic and historical plays that artistically chronicle some of the topical issues in their enabling milieus.

The paper is premised on Classical and Gender frameworks. It investigates the Greek warriors' lifestyle of rapine and pillage, which encouraged taking women as slaves and concubines. It also establishes the strong influence of Athens on some plays of African descent, especially western Nigerian drama which elucidates polytheism, the invocation of the gods, and the fate of mortals at the hands of the anthropomorphic Greek and Yoruba gods. The essay further reveals that women were responsible for the wars fought in antiquity and were also concentrated in the courts of powerful and influential men. Consequently, this inadequate supply of womenfolk drove men to compete fiercely over women, and, in the process, women not only became the heroines of wars, but the victims as they bore the brunt of the wars.

The paper concludes that, through his play, Osofisan has made connections between the history of ancient Greece and the history of struggles in Nigeria. This is because the two plays, *Trojan Women* and *Women of Owu*, lend themselves to the

thematisation of contemporary women-related issues of the family, sex, war and the relationship of the individual to the society s/he inhabits.

Introduction

The *Trojan Women* is a play on the consequences of war and the fate of those defeated in war and their conquerors. It was produced in 415 BC in the middle of the Peloponnesian war (431-405). Although the play is set in the aftermath of the Trojan War which ends in the rape of Troy, it is not about any specific war, but about war generally. In the black of the night, thousands of men and boys are butchered in city streets and homes, and the women and girls are led out across the plain to the sea. They are stowed in the bellies of ships and sped across the Aegean to lives of slavery and concubinage in Greek homelands (Gottschall, 2008:1). In the course of the play, the Greeks murdered Astyanax, the last surviving male member of the royal family because of fear of what he could become in the future, as the son of Hector, the great Trojan hero, he might, pose a threat to Greek security.

In the play (and in Homer's *Iliad),* the Greek victors are made despicable, and their victims are portrayed as noble. Hecabe is the worst hit. She suffers multiple losses and humiliation; her daughter, Cassandra, and daughter-in- law, Andromache, are taken away to their different fates. At the play's climax, Hecabe has to bury her grandson, Astyanax, whilst watching the city of Troy and the hopes of dead and enslaved Trojans smoulder in the rising smoke and fire of the burning city-state. Poseidon, the god of the sea, presents the prologue, telling the audience that Polyxena has been sacrificed on Achilles' tomb, and that Agamemnon has violated Cassandra, the psychotic priestess of Apollo, thus dishonouring the gods. Athena solicits Poseidon's support to punish the Greek fleet for their hubris against Cassandra at her altar, an affront to her temple and other shrines of Troy. Thus, the fate of fallen Troy and its citizens is so shocking that these erstwhile quarrelsome deities contrive to render the Greeks' homeward journey extremely sorrowful. The play debates the causes of the war and its costs, while the prologue shows the hazards attendant on victory.

Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is set at a significant moment in Yoruba history, before the several independent city-states were amalgamated into part of Nigeria by British colonisation. The play refines the plot structure of *Trojan Women* innovatively. The great war between Owu and the Allied Ijebu, Oyo, and Ife forces ends in massacre of men, mass rape and abduction of women, wholesale theft, and Owu's total destruction and incineration. *Women of Owu* is a play about the sufferings

encountered by women during and after war. Its main dramaturgical mode is empathy and pity for the victims of war, mostly women and children. Owu is looted, desolate and in ruins; psychologically, culturally, politically and economically. Its former inhabitants are in perennial fear of rape, displacement, slavery, degradation and death. *Women of Owu* laments the horror, futility and hopelessness of war at any time (Budelmann, 2007:17).

Each of Osofisan's characters corresponds to one of Euripides', but he re-works the plot structure imaginatively, with significant variations. Owu has been destroyed. The men have been killed. The women, including the former queen, are camping near the burning ruins. The play dwells on the group of women bemoaning what has happened to them. In the background, a great and rich city with ancient tradition is burning, and in the cold dawn, a broken old woman, once the queen of this city, is lying on the ground. Over the queen's forlorn figure sweeps one gruesome misery after another, each more wanton than the one preceding it, each politically expedient in the conviction of the conquerors of Owu. Yet, this crushing of a once proud nation and its people, the symbolic representation of humanity, does not lend the conquerors the glory they expected; they are plainly uneasy and frightened to the point of sacrificing Adeoti to a ghost and hurling Aderogun to his death. Actually, there is a touch of desperate humanity in search of a solution to impending danger in the sympathy shown by Gesinde (Talthybius' counterpart) in his admission in a particular instance, to be in awe of the Allied forces since his fate was in their hands also. However, the final stroke is the appearance of self-assured and bedizened Iyunloye among the havoc she had caused. It was for this worthless woman that vanquished and victors alike had suffered ignominy (Budelmann, 2007: 17).

Aegean Influence – Religion and the Gods

Euripides and Osofisan show the gods in their plays as both vindictive and benevolent. Euripides explores divine presence with regard to human life and mankind's expectations of their gods. He shows that reciprocity to human conduct from the gods is an important, but uncertain virtue, which humans hope for but cannot guarantee from their gods. Homeric men feel that they are doomed to perpetual conflict. The blame for this is placed at the feet of awesome supernatural forces of cruel and capricious gods and uncaring fate (Gottschall, 2008:4). The Greeks were polytheistic; the history of their gods is based on strife and inter-family competition. Each of the major gods and goddesses had responsibilities for various aspects of human existence, and these have found parallels in

some Yoruba gods. For example, Poseidon, the sea god, has identical functions with Olokun, the sea goddess. Apollo, god of Prophecy, is the equivalent of Orunmila; Zeus, god of thunderstorm and lightning, finds a partner in Sango and Athena, technology. There is really no accurate way of sharing the powers and areas of operation of the gods, especially since their functions are inter-related. The Olympian gods also interested themselves in human affairs, as they frequently intervened in mortals' lives, altering their expectations and supposed destinies at will; they would fight with one another and place mortals in jeopardy. Acting as one god demands is no guarantee that you will be spared painful punishment by another one (Rabinowitz, 2008: 77-78). Osofisan introduces a further element to his play by drawing on Euripides' gods, a debate on responsibility and guilt, into the history of Owu and the expansion of the ritual lamentation by the Chorus. In Greek and Yoruba societies, it was the prerogative of women to perform the ritual lament at funerals because they were considered to be more emotionally expressive and receptive to divine possession. The gods are fingered in the calamity that befell Owu, but the blame is placed squarely on the shoulders of the people. Lawumi (Osofisan's Athena) wanted Owu people punished because they enslaved other Yoruba in the past and behaved arrogantly against Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba people. One is enthralled with this play, which invites readers to identify with and appraise the different characters and subjects, and in the same vein judge themselves as part of a bigger humanity prone to the same excesses and violence and pain explored in the play.

> **Lawumi**: Arrogance that was their sin! An insufferable display of arrogance towards me, towards Ile-Ife, where we all come from! Yes, it's true that your father founded Owu, but it was only with the help and blessings of Ife! It was because he, a priest, married a princess of Ife --me! – that my father agreed to give him a crown and make Owu one of the seven kingdoms of Yorubaland. Is that a lie? (*Women of Owu, p.18*)

Lawumi claims that Owu forgot its origins and became power-drunk as a result of wealth and affluence. In their stupor, the Owus attacked Ife. For this they pay heavily and painfully at the hands of the Allied forces, this Anlugbua believes outweighs by far, an appropriate penalty or retribution for the alleged sin. Afterall, the Ife army launched the first attack on Owu at the market of Apomu. Lawumi goes further to say that the Owus refused to stop trading in slaves of other Yoruba citizens, which was a violation of the law laid down by Sango (a ruler/ king of

Oyo kingdom), hence, her support of the genocide in Owu. Anlugbua comes too late to save his city; he is scolded and criticised by the women. As a belated peace offering to the Owus, Anlugbua agrees with Lawumi's plan to blight the return journey of the fleet of the Allied forces for their desecration of her altar and the sacrilege committed against other gods. These were the same Allied forces and people whose cause she had hitherto championed. In this, Anlugbua is only too glad to lend his unstinting support.

> **Lawumi**: Because they too, they have no regard for me. Just imagine, when they set the town on fire, desperate men and women ran to my shrine for protection. But do you know, these Allied forces, the very soldiers I gave my support, did not spare them! Can you believe the insult! Yes, the fugitives were Owu people and so were enemies, but so what! They had run to me for refuge! Me, their ancestral mother! But no, the Allied forces did not care for that! They seized them all! Even Princess Orisaye, Obatala's votary, was literally dragged out of my hands, without any of the soldiers protesting! Then, to cap the insult, look! They have set fire to my shrine! (*Women of Owu, p. 21*)

The discussion of the causes of the war leads to a discussion of the role of the gods, thematic to the plays, as is obvious from their presence at the opening. The prologue and choral song reveal a central feature of ancient Greek religion: the gods receive worship from and should protect mortals, but they leave when the city falls (Rabinowitz, 2008:134). In the *Trojan Women*, Hecabe expresses belief in the divine justice that directs the affairs of mortals. Finally, she regrets that the sacrifices she has offered to appease and placate the gods have been wasted since she never got anything for them. The gods have meant nothing but suffering for her, and it makes no sense to call on the gods since they do not listen. Similarly, Erelu reinforces conviction in the gods in *Women of Owu* when she declares that:

> The gods are not worth much! They lie and lie all the time and deceive us! They will take all our sacrifices, wear us down in supplication, but they have their own designs on us all the time! Did we not pray enough? Did we not offer sacrifice upon sacrifice! Yet see what they have made of our city! The gods are not worth much respect (*Women of Owu*, p.61).

The women believe that the gods are remote from humans and oblivious to their suffering. To what extent then are mortals responsible for

their fates? The immediate cause of the women's misery is the sack of their city. However, why was the city sacked? Greed, as the women suggest, but there is also the complex issue of the Helen – figure, Iyunloye. The role of Helen is an ambiguous one, sometimes presented as the instigator of the Trojan War, at others as the helpless victim of Aphrodite. The two women caused their husbands to take up arms as leaders of the Greek army and Allied forces respectively. They both left their spouses, voluntarily or otherwise, to live with their lovers. But Helen argues in her defence:

> It was this woman here who gave birth to the whole bad business when she gave birth to Paris. Secondly, it was old Priam who ruined both Troy and me, when he did not kill the infant, the dream of the firebrand come true, too true, the future Alexander. That was the start of it; hear now the sequel. This Alexander was made the judge of the three goddesses. The offer of Pallas was the leadership of a Phrygian army that would overthrow Greece. Hera promised him empire over Asia and the furthest limits of Europe, if he would decide in her favour. Cypris told of my marvellous beauty and promised it to him, if she surpassed the other goddesses in beauty. Cypris prevails, and see what a boon my nuptials conferred on Greece: she was not conquered by the barbarians, you had neither to meet them in battle nor submit to their empire. Greece's good fortune was my ruin. The evil genius that was this woman's son, brought an ally along with him, a most powerful goddess. Yet you, my unworthy husband, left him in your halls and sailed off to Crete on a Spartan ship. Chastise the goddess, be stronger than Zeus who bears rule over the other divinities but is the slave of love. I am not to blame. (*Trojan women, p.195-6*)

Helen's submission exonerates her and describes the women, including herself, as victims in the power tussle of the Olympiads. Unfortunately, a victim suffers because his/her suffering is not the outcome of his/her own acts or choice. Hecabe blames Helen for betraying her husband and argues that killing her will make other women chaste. Menelaus echoes her sentiments, albeit unconvincingly. But Helen claims that she is innocent. She insists that she was raped and taken away by force thereby putting the blame of her disappearance from Sparta on others, including Hecabe, Priam, and Aphrodite. On the contrary, Cassandra and Hecabe, as well as Menelaus, believe that she went of her own volition. The repercussion of Helen's wantonness is the extinction of the men and the suffering unleashed on the women.

The Burden of War on Women

In Athenian Society, slavery was fundamental to the economy[1]. So, war was a lucrative business for the procurement of cheap slave labour. Conversely, Osofisan condemns slave trade and economic exploitation of people in the Yoruba kingdom of Owu. The men of Troy are dead, and the women are slaves, and the Greeks who have orchestrated this will be punished, shipwrecked by a huge storm sent by Athena and Poseidon, and a similar fate awaits the Allied forces on their homeward journey. The two cities are depopulated to the extent that their only inhabitants are women and children, and the women have already been allotted to various rulers as slaves. It is the female population whose lives are wrecked by male violence and upper class women face the privations of servitude in a foreign land. In Homeric society and most pre-industrial states, women were treated as chattels, objects and victims taken in marriage by capture or contest and subjected to a sharp sexual double standard. The Hellenic society suffered from inadequate supply of young women in relation to young men.

The institution of slave-concubinage suggests that women were not equitably distributed across the Aegean world; they were concentrated in certain communities, and, within those communities, in the households of powerful men. While Homeric men could have only one legitimate wife, the society was in fact polygynous, with high-status men monopolising the reproductive capacities of multiple women while low-status men were comparatively deprived. This uneven distribution of women across and within communities may have been exacerbated by excess mortality of juvenile females, either through disproportionate exposure of female infants to diseases or to dysfunctional parental care. The shortage of women, whether it was brought about solely through polygyny or also through differential mortality, created strong incentives for men to compete, as individuals and in groups for women. There were two types of raids: those targeting livestock on the peripheries of settlements, and those focused on the women and spoils inside settlements. As Gottschall argues, this practice indicates that capturing women was not a fortuitous side effect of war, but a main, consciously held objective (Gottschall, 2008:4).

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1 For discussion on Greek slavery see Vidal-Naquet (1997,19), Rabinowitz-'Slaves with Slaves in Euripidean Tragedy' 1998:56 in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture* ed. Sheila Murnaghan and Sandra R. Joshel.

Homeric men lived with the possibility of sudden, violent death, and the women lived in fear for their men and children, and of sails in the horizon that may portend new attacks of rape and slavery. The men were usually killed, livestock and other portable wealth were plundered, and women carried off to live among the victors and perform sexual and menial labours (Gottschall, 2008:1). Homeric men risked fighting desperate, determined men with edged weapons largely in hopes of claiming specifically sexual access to new women. That warriors are significantly motivated by the hope of capturing women is clear throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. "Sex can be used as the principal reinforcement for fierce and aggressive performance involving risk of life...women are the reward for military bravery… polygyny is the objectification of much of this system of rewards"(Gottschall, 2008: 68). This motive is explicit in Nestor's pep talk to the demoralised Greek warriors, reminding them of victory's spoils: "Don't anyone hurry to return homeward until after he has lain down alongside a wife of some Trojan" (*Iliad* 2.355 cf. Gottschall, 2008: 68). The centrality of female spoil is clear not only in the Trojan conflict, but also in a large number of references to wars that were fought in the past. Achilles says: "I have spent many sleepless nights and bloody days in battle, fighting men for their women" (*Iliad* 9.325-27).

Sexual relations are explicitly depicted or implied because slave women almost always were valued at least as much for their reproductive as for their productive capacities. Women were used to justify war; differences are especially noticeable in the aftermath to ancient wars: the men were typically killed, while the women were raped and carted off to slavery (as rape or fear of rape is the reality for women in the chaos of present day wars). The ongoing crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan is a substantive case and the wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, and Liberia are recent examples where women were raped and mutilated. In many tragedies of war, enemy women bear the heaviest personal and collective costs during and long after the wars.

Greek warriors may rape for multiple reasons. In fact, that the Greeks rape partly for revenge against the Trojan men is at least implied in Nestor's pronouncement that each man should rape a Trojan woman in requital for his sufferings over Helen. Thus, while there may be a sense in which female bodies serve as another type of battlefield upon which men hash out their disputes, and while there may be a sense in which raping enemy women is "the ultimate insult", the prevailing sense is that all forms of sexual coercion depicted in Greek epics and mythology are mainly motivated by simple sexual desire (Gottschall, 2008: 80).

Pericles in his funeral oration (Thuc. 2.46) declares that respectable women should have no public reputation, whether for good or ill.

Andromache and her Yoruba counterpart, Adumaadan, were especially desirable to the Greek soldiers and Allied forces respectively because they were the epitome of domestic virtues (Goff, 2009:59). The news of their impeccable conducts and attributes as wives to their husbands, Hector and Lisabi, filtered to the warriors and these made them desirable to the enemy. Here we see sexual slavery become marriage. The women believe that the gods were punishing them for this, and would rather embrace death as a more desirable fate than life in sorrow because they would not want to betray the memories of their former spouses since "a single night abates a woman's aversion for a man's bed''...

> **Adumaadan:** Hope? What hope has a dog tethered to the belt of Ogun? I was happy once, glad to devote myself totally to the care of my husband and to raising his children. I won a reputation for that, and see, it's what has ruined me now. They say it's because of my devotion and fidelity that my husband's killer specifically asks for me to be given to him! And that's what frightens me even more, I confess. For I am only a woman, with a woman's familiar weaknesses. Our flesh too often, and in spite of itself, quickens to a man's touch. (*Women of Owu, p.42*)

This speech reinforces women's avowal and loyalty to their husbands and their desire to be honourable while at the same time Adumaadan reveals the 'weakness' inherent in women to be loyal even though Osofisan hinges this loyalty on mainly sexual gratification rather than extend the metaphor to include the psychological and emotional investments by women in their husbands.

Conclusion

The two plays elucidate similar structures in the relationship between gender, war and power; there are similarities between the Athenian imperial democracy and modern imperial democracies (Rabinowitz, 2008: 138). Euripides and Osofisan correlate the toppling of citadels and the violation of women, the Greek and the Allied forces victory with appropriation of the reproductive labour of Trojan and Owu women. The plays culminate in the painful deaths of Astyanax and Aderogun, making explicit, that in war, death is the fate for men and boys, while slavery and rape are the misfortune of women. Andromache's and Adumaadan's future children will be sired by the enemy. Because of one woman, one love affair, the husbands who died in war and the sack of Troy/ Owu must wander in death, unburied, unwashed, and their widows and

children must make their way as slaves to their various destinations in Greece and among the Allied forces.

In essence, as Euripides and Osofisan have shown, more than sacking a city or plundering the resources, the more important consideration for war and the men who wage wars, using the examples of the Greek and Yoruba societies, are the acquisition and oppression of women. Other arguments about rights and duties, honour and service are, in many regards, the public and respectable faces of private sexual urges. What is not in doubt is the fact that the stated noble ideals do not stop men; instead, war becomes both a pretext for breaking away from social restraints as well as the opportunity for men to satisfy their secret urge to enslave women for sexual gratification, and to deflower and debase them at will despite the illegality of such actions and the very strong censures in place against those who do these in nearly all fighting communities.

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