COMMENT

“WOMEN, CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: WOMEN AND RAGE IN FEMI OSOFISAN’S WOMEN OF OWU”

Afolayan, Bosede Funke *

Abstract

An extreme situation of conflict such as war is the material with which Women of Owu by Femi Osofisan is moulded. Experiences of women re called to view. As an adaptation of Trojan Women by Euripides, le obvious criticism is to draw out the similarities and differences between these two plays. This paper, however seeks to examine the responses of women to the agonising effects of war. In other words, v attempt to discuss Osofisan’s representation of these women’s actions to an overwhelmingly frustrating event such as war. The questions this paper seeks to answer are what is the role of women in this conflict and how are they able to contain the aggression? In expressing their rage, we observe that these women engage in poetic mentations, expose their naked bodies, and use harsh language and incantatory wailing and communal crying as tools of resistance, however, they seem powerless in the face of stronger challenges because they are constrained by gender in particular and culture in general. Although historical, the play’s implications for modern life is immense because of its topicality, the universality of war, and especially in the raging rebellions and crises in the world. Almost all those who rule and manage are male: interesting and important phenomena are identified from a male perspective as well as from the perspective of those who manage and control. Women are largely absent from this world: the female domain of production and reproduction that provides necessary infrastructure for the male world is, despite its importance, invisible, uninteresting to many social scientists, and largely unconceptualised. (Acker, Barry and Esseveld 1991: 137, quoted in Albert Isaac, “Rethinking the impact of Patriarchy on Feminist Epistemology and Methodology in Nigeria” p.59)

* Dr. Afolayan Bosede Funke is a Lecturer in Department of English, University of Lagos, Akoka Lagos, Nigeria.
Introduction
The above prefatory statement aptly captures the state of the womar. - Africa. Africa is traditionally a patriarchal society and leadership is large the forte of men. Men are in the forefront of affairs in a typical African society. They manage resources, control people and issues, lead; decide when to go to war or who will go to war while the women and children remain at home. When the war is fought, won or lost, the groups that suffer the trauma of the war the most are the women and children. Women would have lost husbands, sons and fathers while children become fatherless.

In all, women and children become refugees, displaced and barely able to eke out a living for themselves and are left to the sympathy of relief organisations. Most times, the women are raped, forced into marriage and assaulted while the children have turned into “child-soldiers”; an alarming phenomenon in Africa. This paper investigates the role of women in armed conflict and their place in conflict management with particular focus on Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu.

Historical Background
In the past few decades, Africa has become a theatre of wars. From the crisis in Liberia and Sierra Leone, to that of the Republic of Congo, to Dafur in the Sudan, to the protests in Egypt and Cote D’Voire, and to the
present armed conflict in Libya, Africans have experienced the monstrosities of war especially in the Rwanda genocide of 1994. These wars are no longer fought between opposing soldiers but a large number of civilians have been forcibly co-opted and these civilians have become victims of such wars. Soldiers rape and sexually assault the women, sometimes right in the presence of their families. These ugly realities provoke deep thoughts from well-meaning Africans and peacemakers who are engaged in issues of conflict resolutions, human rights and of course, equality of the sexes. If women continue to be the main victims of wars, then it becomes imperative that they should be a part of the negotiation-table.

However, by tradition, men fight the wars while women stay at home to nurse the wounded and bury the dead. In this arrangement, men seem to be “better-off” because they are either killed off in the battle (so removed from physical pain) or they return decapitated (with one leg or an arm) while the women are traumatised the more by abusive and frustrated husbands because of the conditions the war has left them. In this way, women are the losers; they have to mourn not only husbands, sons and fathers, but also, tolerate abusive husbands who vent their anger on the women. The questions this paper seeks to explore then are what can women do to alleviate their problems during armed conflicts? What can they do to restore peace in a violent situation? What are those things women can do to prevent conflicts, either through meditation or through peace building? The mythical Amazons in classical Greece were all female soldiers who fought to protect their lands. Could women in modern times fight to liberate themselves from constricting traditions?

Traditional societies in Nigeria especially the Igbo community have an important place for the women even though it is a highly patriarchal society. The Umuada (married daughters of the clan) plays important role in the community. In Yorubaland also, women have been known to be kings but only for a short period of time as regents. Not only that, the oloris -queens are known to wield some level of power among the womenfolk. But all these are tokens compared to the population of women
in the society. The village-heads are mostly men and they deliberate on conflicts in society. In most cases, women do not have a say in their own matter. The non-representation of women in decision-making bodies in the society has implications for their growth.

Traditional societies have ways and means by which conflicts are mediated and resolved. In Yorubaland, for example, inter-clan marriage is one means by which peace is maintained between different clans and villages. Such marriages are used to strengthen ties between villages and prevent the outbreak of war. When conflict breaks out between one village and another in Yorubaland, the offended village may send an “Aroko” to the offending village which is like a proverbial call to war. To settle such conflicts, the villages may return to the negotiation table, the mediating arms of governance is made up of men of integrity, versed in diplomacy and making truce between feuding groups. Usually, women are not members of this group. They are restricted to making refreshments - providing tea, kolanuts and food for the visiting group. In other words, when peace talks begin, women are usually relegated to the background. It is against this background that we examine the roles women play during war, either as the cause of war or its victims in Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu*.

**Women’s Experiences in Osofisan’s *Women of Owu***

*Women of Owu* opens when the war has been lost by the Owu people and won by the allied forces of the Ijebu, Ife and mercenaries from Oyo. We are therefore, introduced to the aftermath of the war with its sordid details of death, rape, arson, mindless torture and subsequent preparation for onward movement into slavery. The women are gathered into a camp- awaiting their fate. In this situation, where they await their lot, Osofisan reveals the causes (both remote and immediate) of the war and gives vent to the grief of the women.

It is through the women’s talk that we are able to gather the causes of the war. In other words, it is from their mouths that we get to know the reasons for the war. The women claim that their suffering is initiated by the
wrath of the gods especially that of Lawumi and when men fight with the gods, men bear the consequences of either their disobedience or the superior power of the supernatural. Shakespeare corroborates this view of the gods in *King Lear* when he states that, “as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sort.” Lawumi decides to punish the Owu people by allowing them to be conquered because the people failed to heed the law that no Yoruba should sell another into slavery. More importantly however, the Owns are to be punished because they become proud and arrogant. Owu had sent their army to fight Ife which was their cradle. Again, Anlugbua, the deified founder of Owu when leaving, had left a condition for his people, that anytime they were in trouble the people should call on him. Whether by design or disobedience, Anlugbua was not invited.

He appeared, however, when the battle has been lost to witness the ruins of his beloved Owu.

Also, through the anger of Adumaadan at Erelu, her mother-in-law, we gather that the war had been predicted and could have been averted but for the “motherly love” and “error” of Erelu. Erelu’s last son was to be sacrificed because he was prophesied to bring war to the land but Erelu disobeyed the god’s prediction and kept the child out of motherly love.

The immediate cause of the war can be found in the revenge of Maye whose captured wife, Iyunloye was given to one of the princes of Owu. Maye, an artist-turned-soldier butchers innocent civilians all in the bid to be re-united with Iyunloye, his lost wife. Under Maye’s command, the allied forces camped outside the gates of Owu for seven years until they were able to infiltrate the once-impenetrable gates of Owu, killing all the men - husbands, brothers, sons and fathers. On their part, the allied forces claimed they were saving the Owus from themselves. To them, the Owus were labouring under a despot and they needed to be freed and liberated from his clutches. Freedom and liberation were the reasons proffered by the allied forces for invading Owu. What freedom do you give a people when you kill their men? According to the women, this is the main reason the allied forces invaded the city. Hear the women
Ibadan Journal of Peace and Development

(Osofisan, 2006:13-14):

Woman: They are not interested in such petty things
  As Profit-
Woman: Only in lofty, lofty ideas, like freedom -
Woman: or human rights -...
Woman: All they care for, my
dear women
  all they care for, all of them is our freedom!...
Woman: Bless the kindness which has rescued us
  From tyranny in order to plunge
  Us into slavery!

This has resonances in the world’s perennial problems of conflict and misunderstanding where a super-power invades another country with the veiled promise of liberating the people from the clutches of a dictator or despot. The examples are there in Iraq, Afghanistan and in a way, in Libya.

The “waiting period” for the women in the play exposes their vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of a stronger army. While the victors rejoice over their loots and drink to their victory, the women are left with nothing but mere talk to fill the emptiness of their lives. They coir: do nothing to alleviate their condition other than talk, sing, dance and curse These women - both young and old ones are united by a common loss, defeat and misery. They mourn in words and in songs. Overwhelmed by grief, anguish and agony, the women of Owu take solace in recounting their loss. They have no weapons to fight the allied forces and as a mob, they could not attack the messenger Gesinde who comes regularly to torment them. They wail, crying together, lamenting their lot. As feeble and power as they seem, their energy is directed against the allied forces and as usual. Erelu conveys this anger in abusive language and name-calling (Osofisan, 2006:11-12):

Erelu: Oh you, Ijebu beasts! And the animals from Ife who are your allies!
You, Oyo mercenaries who have been made homeless by
The Fulani, and so must make others homeless too!
All you men over there preparing to return home
After destroying our city! My curse upon you!
May you never again know the soil of your motherland!).
The curse is accompanied by spitting which shows the women’s venom (Osofisan, 2006:12):
Woman: Tuah! I spit and the wind dries it
      May each of you be sucked and withered by the wind
      Of affliction on your journey back!
The chorus leader joins in the cursing:
      ... may you all without exception
      Suffer the indignity of unremembered graves
This last strong statement is followed by such abusive words as “liars” and “savages” to describe the allied forces who have come to plunder, Soot and cause ceaseless mourning among the women. Other abusive words used to describe the allied forces are “slaves” and “dogs” (Osofisan, 2006:43-44). These are strong metaphors conveying their anger against the allied forces.

Kept together as a group, these women have only their mouths with which they curse the invaders. The women, led by Erelu engage in communal cantatory wailings. Erelu wails and these wailings are physical presentations and outbursts of her inner agony. For example, Erelu ploys wailings three times as a tool of resistance as shown in the stage rections (Osofisan, 2006:13-14): (they resume their dirge, till Erelu’s sudden wail of anguish cuts them off abruptly), (Erelu wails again), and (As Erelu wails...)

They employ harsh language and invectives as tools of resistance. Erelu-Afin, the queen represents the helplessness of the women in this poetic lamentation (Osofisan, 2006:11):

Erelu: Oh, I wish I could die, die. Or fall silent silent
      In a hole where sorrow can no longer reach me!
Who will save Erelu-afm? Who can save me now?
This is an example of poetic lamentation used by the women in the play. The women engage in singing dirges which symbolically convey their suffering. There are at least ten dirges in the play and they occur when sad news is brought to them or when they take stock of their situation. When the women learnt of Adeoti’s gruesome murder (her throat had been cut off) from Adumaadan, their response was a general shout of lamentation which ended in a dirge. Erelu chants her oriki, crying and lamenting the death of her beautiful daughter.

The women’s anger reached its peak when after a song of malediction: they bared their breasts and cursed the invaders. This “nakeding” of their breasts is in itself an abomination. In Africa, the act of women exposing their breasts in the public is seen as an evil-omen. It portends evil for such a community where it happens and it is the women’s act of resistance against an unpopular regime. In Nigeria, for example during the 2010 governorship tussle between Governor Oni and Governor Fayemi in Ekiti state of Nigeria, old women in Ado-Ekiti (the state capital) came out in large numbers and bared their breasts protesting the problems that the struggle had brought them. The act is not just historical but traditional to the people and is employed at any time as a means of protest. In other words, the act is a traditional weapon against oppression in Africa.

At the end of the play, the women engage in “a ritual valediction to the dead”. This ritual ceremonial dance starts with slow dances and ends in a trance in which Erelu speaks the mind of Anlugbua to the people. This stage direction reveals a call - taken by the two choruses - swells up into an incantatory chant and at its height, Erelu is possessed (Osofisan. 2006:65). At the end however, Erelu screams, collapses and dies, thereby cheating Balogun Derin who had wanted her as a maid for his wife.

What roles have the women played in the war? First, Iyunloye, like Felen of Troy is the immediate cause of war and Erelu, realising the imper of this, tries several times to lead her out of the palace to her husband. Maye who is camped at the gate. With several delay tactics and cunning she fails to stop the war. Iyunloye is not just a beautiful woman but a very
cunning seductress and temptress. She knows the power she wields over men. While other women are sprawling in their grief and miteming, not careful of how they look, Iyunloye, in her low estate, takes special care of her body. Her tongue is like honey as she tempts Maye. Maye acknowledges this: “You’ve always known how to handle words” (Osofisan, 2006:50). Openly, fighting for her life, she flirts with and seduces Maye. Thus, through the character of Iyunloye, it has been shown that women could be just enough reason for a war. The passion that Maye feels for her motivates him to abandon his promising trade and join the army. That passion also makes him committed and daring in order to reach the height “This career as commander of the allied forces.

On the other hand, Erelu, with the death of the men, remains the only symbol of the Own tradition and as the oldest of the women, she is waited upon for inspiration and whatever she says is taken as the law. Her personal loss is however to be subsumed under the general loss. Despite this, we see the petty rivalry between her and her daughters-in-law – Iyunloye and Adumaadan. Through her relations with these younger women, Erelu shows that she is atypical woman with atypical woman’s feelings. She is content when Maye promises to punish the wayward Iyunloye. In fact the women sing songs of abuse to Iyunloye. Erelu also waxes philosophical as she advises Adumaadan to be like “a reed” bending to wherever the wind takes her with her new master/husband.

In Adumaadan, the playwright reveals the fear of every woman in an armed conflict. This fear is not unfounded for according to her (Osofisan, 2006:42):

Adumaadan:... I was happy once, glad to devote myself totally To the toil 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 what frightens me even more, I confess. For I am only a woman with a woman’s familiar
Weaknesses. Our flesh too often in spite of itself.
Quickens to a man’s touch,
And a night of loving is all it takes, they say, to tame.
The most unwilling among us. I am scared.
Therefore that this animal in my body will betray me
That against my wishes, against my memories
It will begin to respond eagerly
To the new man even as it once did to my husband!

This is the fear of every woman in an armed conflict situation, especially women like Adumaadan who live just for their husbands. The women in this situation become concubines to officers, domestic servants who may also serve as bed mates or are gang-raped and carry unwanted babies whose fathers are unknown. Orisaye, Erelu’s daughter and Obatala’s vestal votary is half mad. The girl is traumatised so much that she dances and sings for her intended slave master/husband. She raves and rants half insane and the prophecies she makes in her unstable and delirious state become reality at the end of the play.

Another of Erelu’s daughters, Adeoti, dies at the entrance to goddess Lawumi’s shrine. Why does the goddess allow this to happen to her worshipper who believes in the goddess’ ability to protect her own? Adeoti’s death at the shrine, Anlugbua’s failure to save the Owus and the gods’ inability to prevent the war despite the several sacrifices made to them are all incidents for Ososfan to express his (typical) revolt against the gods. This “sacrilege” is conveyed in Erelu’s defiance (Ososfan, 2006:?):

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!
To reinforce this revolt against the gods is the petty anger of Lawumi who decides to ruin her people. The goddess turns around and punishes
the allied forces who she had aided to ruin Owu. She pleaded for Anlugbua’s help in routing the allied forces that had perpetuated mindless carnage against her worshippers. How just can a goddess be?

Form

*Women of Owu* is a historical reconstruction of the Owu war of the 1820s. It is also an adaptation of Euripides’ *Women of Troy*. In fact, it is a commissioned play by Chipping Norton Theatre, UK. A number of articles have been written on this play. Some of them are reviewed below in terms of their relevance to this paper: Tunji Sotimirin, writing on “Restoring Moral principles Through the Theatre” focuses on the disobedience of Erelu in not sacrificing Adejumo. It is this error that leads to untold hardship” for the people of Owu. As stated earlier, Erelu’s act is one of the remote causes of the Owu war.

Felix Budelmann’s essay entitled “Trojan Women in Yombaland: Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu*” is more interested in the: issues of war, slavery and responsibility on the one hand, and post-colonialism and classicism on the other hand. Its focus also seems to be on the simil arities and differences between the two plays and the UK audience of *Women of Owu*. This essay illuminates this paper in the attitude the director of the UK production has towards the play. To Chuck Mike, the play’s director, *Women of OWN* is a play by itself, which is also how we want to see this play.

What is equally striking in the play is the “inaction” of the women. The whole play in itself is “pure lament” - all we see is the women’s lamentations well represented in their mourning, wailings and screams. It is a fact that they have been defeated and the realities are on the ground for us to see in the burning and corpses littering the city. What do these women do to help themselves? Why could they not rise up against their tormentors? When the mutilated body of the only surviving son of the deposed king was brought to them by Gesinde, we expect some motherly rage from them which would have supported the Yoruba adage that says *if the Baale cannot be told he is wicked, you can kill his goats or the one* that says *if the chicken pours my medicine away, I will break its eggs*. The two
proverbs support revenge and swift action. These women are aware of their end yet they could not act as a mob and take up some heroic acts to redeem their lot. Their “inaction” in this situation is contrary to the typical Osofisan's depiction of women in his plays. In *Morountodun* for instance, Titubi relies on Moremi’s heroic act of infiltrating the enemy camp to rescue her people to motivate her to take a step. She is not passive, despondent and laid-back or wallowing in her misfortune while she does nothing. Titubi like Moremi chooses to be a part of the action by being combative. But women of Owu sing, dance, scream, shout, curse and bare their breasts. I once asked Osofisan in an interview in 2008 why the women in this play are so helpless and overwhelmed by grief. His response was that *Women of Owu* was a commissioned play and there was very little he could do to impose his views on the play. This could be the reason for the deviation when this play is compared with his adaptation of *Antigone* as *Tegonni*. A different adaptation of this Euripides’ play by Sartre called *Les Troyennes* takes away the mourning voice and makes the play a protest one (Budelmann. 2006:93) which would have followed a typical trend from Osofisan.

The chorus is a feature of the classical play which T.S. Eliot has also employed in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Femi Osofisan has used effectively in *Women of Owu*. To Budelmann, “as in the 5th century BCE Athens, the chorus here is not an embarrassing interruption of a good plot but central to the plot, and as Athens, participating in the chorus is conceived as a social act”.

The chorus is a group of women who comments on the action on stage and in this play, they are mourners too. The chorus leader especially acts as a morale-booster for the women. Severally, in the play, she rouses the women’s hopes and encourages them when their morale is low. For instance, after a general wailing, the Chorus Leader says (Budelmann. 2006:5):

No, stop the wailing and brace yourselves.
My dear women, the lesson is clear.
Afolayan, Bosede Funke

It’s us, not the gods,
Who create war. It’s us, we human beings,
who can kill it
Again, (Budelmann, 2006:37) the chorus leader becomes philosophical in trying to buffet their despair:

Chorus Leader:
But we never remember that, we human beings
We are always eager to forget that the sky is at its calmest
In the moments before a mighty thunderstorm
And she admonishes them against “cringing” and despair but to “raise our voices and curse these men”.

In this play of “a pure lament”, whose tone is dark and “sombre” is infused moments of singing and dancing. The songs are most often dirges expressing the lamentations of the women. Other songs are celebratory of snatches of victory they had. Yet, others like the Song of Abuse meant for Iyunloye are made to revile and condemn acts of perfidy. The ritual dance in which Erelu lost her life is sacred as it is meant to invoke the gods.

Conclusion

This paper has devoted attention to the experiences of women after a war. It is argued that women suffer greatly in any situation of armed conflict as in the case of *Women of Owu*. Conflicts are part of human social interaction. Anger brews up when contracts are breached. Quarrels, fighting, slandering and war are the usual consequences of such breaches. However, mechanisms are put in place to restore social harmony after such disorder.

*Women of Owu* treats a universal theme- the monstrosities of war. In doing this, it focuses on the experiences of women after the Owu war with the city burning and in ruins. The women, as usual in wars are left to count their losses while their men are dead or enslaved and they too, wait to be distributed among the victors either as concubines or maids. The play has shown that this group of people are the most vulnerable in a war. Therefore, what role should they play in the conflict and its resolution?
Both Erelu and Iyunlove are implicated in the conflict either directly or indirectly as both are the causes of the war. As prominent as these women are, they could not be involved in resolving the conflict or in restoring peace. The reasons for this are not unclear as they are constrained by culture. Conflict and its management are the domain of men and men who would have constituted the peace talks have been killed off while the women, instead of taking the bull by the horn lapse into poetic lamentations and exposing their breasts which to the opposing team is ineffective. They resort to invoking the gods but the gods will not help them.

Women are known to resort to spirituality in issues beyond them. As care-givers and productive essences, their whole lives revolve around the homes, children and husbands. They naturally want to protect by whatever means within their powers. Their sphere of influence is limited to the domestic either as mothers or wives goading their sons and husbands to be manly by stirring war instincts of honour and courage in them. Women give up sons and husbands for the war. But when the war occurs, the women suffer physically and psychologically. In this play, the anger they feel is powerless, their frustrations, anxieties and desires for revenge unmet and as a commissioned play the presentation is how Osofisan wants us to see them - a position of weakness and powerlessness.

However, women can become combative enough to change then invisible and ineffective roles in conflict management (like the 1929 Am Women’s Riot in Nigeria and the active role of Funmilayo Kuti in Egbalar a In modern day warfare, women are no longer cooks and nurses in the camps of soldiers, but are sometimes combatants and war-reporters c: the battle ground. Significant development has been made even in the arm of Foreign Service and diplomacy. Prominent women like Condoleezm Rice and Hilary Clinton of the US have contributed to issues of mediation peace negotiation and have represented their country in the area of foreign relations.

This stride is yet to be noted in Africa for example where women like Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, President of Liberia are a rarity in Africa. Elite women
who are leaders are usually placed in those “soft” areas like women-affairs ministry, education, special duties and tourism, not in key areas of technology, works and housing, etc. These are “male-privileged” jobs preserved for the male. Women who break the constricting roles planned for them by patriarchy and are admitted to these areas are few. Women would have to find measures by which they and their children will be protected in extreme situations of war and also, conceptualise ways to actively participate in conflict management. One of such ways is to form themselves into pressure groups, peacemaking movements lobbying and forcing our men to see the evil effects of their actions by making useful interventions to peace-talks. Women need to take active roles in issues that affect their lives.

References
