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The Brutalization of Women in War

Throughout human history, men of different nations and cultures have waged war against one another. These wars have killed and maimed millions of men, women, and children, and uprooted millions more from their homes, all motivated by the lust of men for dominance over land, wealth, and women. Thousands of works of art, literature, and poetry have celebrated how the stratagems of male commanders succeeded, portrayed how brilliant armies of men have been vanquished and enumerated how once vibrant economies built by men have been shattered by senseless wars. However, almost all works of these countless wars have not dealt justice to one monumental aspect: the devastation and atrocious impact on women these wars have unleashed. The ancient Greek tragedy *The Women of Troy* written by Euripides is one of these very few priceless gems of literature that focuses on the terrible plight of women, an often overlooked consequence of war. What makes this play about a possibly mythical Trojan war written more than two thousand years ago relevant even today is its timeless description of the brutalization and devastation of women that has been permeated across all wars in human history. *The Women of Troy* resonates with authors and individuals of many cultures due to its timeless description of the horrific physical and emotional trauma women had to suffer and endure for a lifetime in the aftermath of war.

The ancient Greek play resonates with people of many cultures and religions due to its vivid but tragic descriptions of the gross physical abuse women had to endure. In *The Women of Troy*, the Greek god Poseidon announces the fate of Cassandra, Queen Hecabe's daughter. He says that "she will be taken by force, in contempt of the god and all pious feeling by King Agamemnon as his concubine" (Euripides 129). Such was the fate of many women during the time of the Trojan War. Many women including Cassandra were sold into slavery, tortured, and raped by the enemy men. For many women, their husbands, fathers, and sons were killed, right in front of them leaving them unprotected. They had no other choice but to lead their lives with complete strangers as husbands and be submissive to their new masters. Many other women like Cassandra were abused and endured harsh lives with men who just wanted to fulfill their carnal desires and acted entirely on their impulses. The *Women of Owu*, an adaptation of Euripides's play by Femi Osofisan detailing the plight of African women who are sold into slavery after the 19th century Owu War, also highlights the physical abuse endured by women in an entirely different continent. Erelu Afin, one of the main characters of the play who is the Queen of Owu, describes how she witnessed her daughters "seized by their hair, their clothes ripped off their bodies by brutal men, and their innocence shredded forever in an orgy of senseless rapine" (Osofisan 10). Erelu describes the extreme physical abuse her daughters underwent, having their innocence stolen from them in a vicious and horrible manner. This description demonstrates how women in these wars were treated akin to animals that could be treated in whatever manner their master desired to. The similarity of the stories shared between the women in *The Women of Troy* and *Women of Owu* demonstrates how timeless the brutalization and devastation of women is. The Syrian adaptation of Euripides's play, the *Queens of Syria*, also brings to light the harsh

struggles of Syrian women who were uprooted from their homes and driven out from their lands during the Syrian war. One Syrian woman describes how she had “wanted to find a better life for [her] children” as “there was a lot of shelling” in her hometown (Fedda). Even though it would have taken a lot of risk and courage, the Syrian woman had to leave her own hometown behind in hopes of finding a better life for her children. She would have traveled long distances past treacherous roads in order to finally reach safety in Jordan. The gross physical abuse of women is still prevalent in wars today, and the authors of the plays bring this to focus in hopes of warning society of the brutal and forgotten consequences of war.

The ancient Greek play resonates with authors and individuals of disparate cultures due to its heart-wrenching descriptions of the emotional trauma women had to endure in the aftermath of wars. In *The Women of Troy*, Queen Hecabe of Troy mourns “for [her] dead world, [her] burning town, [her] sons, [her] husband, gone, all gone!” (Euripides 130). Women during the Trojan War had to move on with almost no time to mourn after losing their sons and husbands and their homes. Not only were these women physically abused by enemy soldiers, but also they were expected to lead cheerful new lives with the enemy men who had killed their loved ones. *Women of Owu* also highlights the brunt women had to bear. In *Women of Owu*, Erelu tells her daughter in law, Adumaadan that they “are losers, now, [the] women of Owu. [Adumaadan] lost a husband, [Erelu] a king, five brave sons, and a daughter” (Osofisan 40). Erelu and Hecabe would have been devastated as they lost their entire family and were left alone to fend for themselves. In *Queens of Syria*, another Syrian woman empathizes with the situation of Hecuba in *The Women of Troy*. She said “Hecuba is just like me. She was the wife of the King of Troy... she lost everything she owned. She lost loved ones and family” (Fedda). Many women

in Syria had to leave all their belongings in their homeland when they fled the war-torn country.

They could only cherish and hold onto the beautiful memories of their life in the past.

Furthermore, Women during these wars not only had to bear the loss of their husbands but also of their small children. In *The Women of Troy*, Andromache, the daughter in law of Hecabe, has

her son Astyanax snatched from her by Talthybius, one of the soldiers. After struggling to hand over her son, she reluctantly gives in to the soldiers as she knows there would be worse

consequences if she disobeyed. She says she is “powerless to save [her] son from death” and

requests to “fling [her] miserable body into [their] ship” and “leave behind [her] dead child”

(Euripides 138). The separation of mother and child is heart-wrenching but very common in war.

Andromache knew that if she raised her son he would have been subjected to torture and death

later on as he is a Trojan. In *Women of Owu*, Adumaadan, the daughter in law of Erelu, is forced

to give away her young son to Gesinde, a soldier of Ife. She tells him to “[g]o and do with him as

[he] [has] been ordered,” but then asks to hold her son “a little just once more” (Osofisan 45).

Adumaadan embraces her son for the last time as she knows she will never see him again. The

fact that *Women of Owu* talks of the emotional trauma faced by women in the loss of their

children demonstrates how timeless the dehumanization and devastation of women is. The worst

outcome for men during these wars was instant death or imprisonment which was far better than

what women had to suffer; the lifelong physical and emotional trauma with no one to lean on for support.

The ancient Greek play *The Women of Troy* evokes intense feelings of pain, disgust, trepidation, and remorse in the reader and exposes one’s conscience to the terrible plight of

Athenian women after the Trojan war. By reenacting Euripides’s play, the authors of *Women of*

Owu and *Queens of Syria* bring awareness to the physical and emotional trauma of women in the aftermath of war. The stories draw parallels between the suffering of ancient Greek women to modern women in two other continents: Africa and Asia, more than two thousand years later. The message of *The Women of Troy* is universal and its appeal transcends both geography and time as demonstrated by *Women of Owu* detailing the plight of African women, who are sold into slavery and prostitution after the Owu war in the 19th century, and *Queens of Syria* retelling the plight of Arab women in the aftermath of the Syrian war. *The Women of Troy* serves a glorious and powerful purpose of warning our society of the tragedies that could befall modern nations if we don't learn lessons from the people of bygone eras and civilizations.

Works Cited

Fedda, Yasmin, director. *Queens of Syria. Queens of Syria – Trailer*, The Nightlight Cinema, 26 Apr. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1WjhArzShA>.