

CHAPTER 8 DRAMA

Analysis of Selected Plays: Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

Femi's Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is the second play to be studied in this book. The aim of the study is to further put into practice all that have been learnt in Introduction to Drama. The study seeks to give a model literary analysis that can be applied in the study of other plays.

The Playwright's Profile

Femi Osofisan was born on June 16, 1946 at Eruwon, a village near Ijebu-Ode in Ogun State of Nigeria. Three months after his birth, his father died. Osofisan and his other siblings were left to the care of their mother. Osofisan was brought up by his mother. He attended colleges in Ibadan, Dakar and Paris, and has travelled widely in Western Europe, the United States of America and West Africa.

Osofisan is one of the leading writers of the new generation in Africa. In Nigeria, he is generally considered the most significant playwright after Wole Soyinka. He is also an innovative theatre producer. His published works include *Morountodun and Other Plays*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, and *No More the Wasted Breed*. The plays point in different proportions to Osofisan's interest in the history, myth and folklore of his people. *Women of Owu* borrows from Yoruba history, mythology and folklore. Osofisan blends the work with classical literatures.

Introduction

Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* borrows from history, myth and classical literature. The play is derived from the historical defeat of Owu by the combined forces of the armies of Ijebu and Ife with mercenaries recruited from Oyo refugees. The refugees were fleeing the attack by the Fulanis. The play is based, in addition, on Yoruba mythology and is strengthened by Euripides' plays, most probably *The Trojan Women*. Euripides was a classical writer, Athenian and Greek. While Osofisan's play has been uprooted from Greek origins and planted in Yorubaland, the play retains many features that make its association with Euripides' play clear.

Plot

The plot of the play is largely linear and simple. The play explores the interaction between the human and the supernatural, and is on the desire to avenge wrongs. God, goddesses, ancestors and human beings are involved one way or another in the play pursuing vengeance.

Lawumi, the mother of Asukungbade and now a goddess, was hurt that Owu people scorned Ife, her ancestral home. So, she made Owu people attack the Ijebu traders at Apomu market and by *that* started her process of revenge. That attack led to many consequences and in the end the sack of Owu, which begins the play. When the Ijebu traders were attacked at Apomu market, many people were captured. Among those captured are Iyunloye, the wife of Okunade, an Ife indigene. Iyunloye was subsequently given as wife to Adejumo, an Owu prince. Okunade was hurt by this, and so he joined the army to get her back and take vengeance.

Contrary to a law laid down among the Yorubas, the Owus were selling other Yorubas into slavery at the market of Apomu. The flagrant disobedience to the law made Ife to send out her soldiers against the Owus. Unfortunately for the Ife army, the Owu people had an army far superior and so sacked the Ife army. Lawumi saw Owu's act as an insult to both herself, a princess of Ife, and Ile-Ife. According to her, Owu was founded with the help and blessings of Ife. So, she tricked Owu army to attack Ijebu traders at the market. Expectedly, the Ijebu retaliated and in alliance with the Ife and the Oyo mercenaries led an attack against the city of Owu. The attack led to the ruins of Owu.

The Allied Forces held siege against Owu for seven years. The forces were led by Okunade, the wronged husband whose sole motive is to take back Iyunloye his wife. With the other armies, Okunade pretends the war is to free Owu from a wicked king. After seven years of trying to enter Owu but without success, the armies of Ife, Ijebu and Oyo lost many men to starvation and death. So they left the gates of Owu and reviewed their war strategy. Owu people discovered that the camps of their enemies were empty, thought that the enemies had left finally and started rejoicing but suddenly saw their city in flames. The only escape from the flames was through the gates and they were flung open. But the people ran out into the Allied Forces waiting for them with their guns. Owu city went down. Her men and children were slaughtered; some, including the Oba, fled and the women were captured. Anlugbua, former Owu war leader, now a deity, appears as an old man, and is told the story of the siege and sack.

In their camps, the invaders sorted out the plunder and divided the city's riches among themselves. Oba Akinjobi is captured and killed, and Aderogun the only surviving male child in the royal family is also killed. The women are shared and given out to different men and each one prepares to go to her new master. Erelu, the queen, is to go with Balogun Derin and Orisaye, her daughter, is reserved for Balogun Kusa to marry, against Owu tradition. Orisaye is a votary and has been wedded to Obatala who insists she remains a virgin. Orisaye prophesies that she will take her revenge on Kusa on the marriage bed.

Lawumi requests other gods and goddesses to support her to avenge herself and she gets their support. According to her, the army of the Allied Forces desecrated her grove and so she curses the soldiers and their hometowns. The prophecies and curses soon begin to manifest. A report comes to the camp of the enemies that someone has seized Otunba Lekki's father's throne and started a war back home. So, the general departs in a hurry home.

Before departing with Balogun Derin, Erelu enters into a trance and is possessed by Anlugbua. In the trance, she scolds man for following the path of the gods and ancestors and causing and prosecuting wars. As the god's mouthpiece, she preaches that men will enjoy mercy and peace when they learn the wisdom of sticking together, and loving one another. She collapses and dies, and Anlugbua himself speaks in the same way in which the woman has spoken to end the story.

Subject Matter

Women of Owu is on war and vengeance. The play treats the idea that war and vengeance destroy nations. It describes terrible consequences of war and vengeance on man and the supernatural. It presents men, women, gods and goddesses pursuing vengeance and seeking to right some wrongs. The men and women involved in the pursuit of vengeance choose war to redress the wrongs. In their various pursuits, the consequences are terrible.

The grave consequences of war and vengeance described in the play are many. First, Owu was totally destroyed and almost all her citizens killed. Many soldiers starved to death and some others were killed during the war. Life was disrupted, and many families were displaced including those of the Allied forces. Religious life was disrupted and the gods and goddesses were not spared the horrors of the war.

Themes

Women of Owu is preoccupied with war. The themes are presented around the idea that war is costly for both the victor and the vanquished. The themes may be stated as below:

- (i) War is an evil wind that blows no one any good.
- (ii) When a town breaks the law and tradition of its race and causes war, the consequences are grave and nobody can predict how it will end.
- (iii) Men, gods and goddesses who settle disagreements by war destroy themselves.
- (iv) War dehumanises man and ‘humanises’ gods and goddesses.

War is an Evil Wind

Women of Owu presents the idea that war is an evil wind that blows no one any good. The play alludes to several wars but focuses mainly on the war against Owu. It mentions the attack of Ife on Owu, the war between the Fulanis and the Oyo people, and the war between the allied forces and Owu. In all the wars, peoples are displaced. The play shows the destruction brought on Owu by the war between her people and the allied forces. It describes also that the allied forces had it rough too. All the parties that are involved in the war suffer one way or the other. Many people died on both sides.

Breaking the Law and Tradition of a Race Has Terrible Consequences

The play states that when a town breaks the law and tradition of her race and causes a war, the consequences are terrible. The Owu people broke the law and tradition of Yorubaland by selling fellow tribesmen. They did because they had a strong army and a walled city and thought that they could not be conquered by any other towns within Yoruba kingdom. This violation started the war and led other Yoruba nations to join forces against Owu. Though the Allied forces paid dearly for the war, Owu was eventually defeated and ruined forever.

Settling Disagreements by War Has Terrible Consequences

Women of Owu treats the idea that when parties settle disagreements by war, it has terrible consequences. The people of Ife were angry with the people of Owu for breaking the law and tradition in Yorubaland. Against tradition and the law of the land, the people of Owu engaged in selling fellow Yoruba kinsmen into slavery. The violation made the people of Ife to attack Owu. After the attack, Owu people retaliated. Lawumi, a princess from Ife, and now a deity, interfered and made Owu army attack the Ijebu traders, kill many and sell the others into slavery. She uses this trick to get the people of Ife and Ijebu together and avenge herself on Owu. According to tradition, Lawumi’s father gave the founder of Owu a crown and made Owu one of the seven kingdoms of Yorubaland.

To avenge themselves, the Ijebu rose in alliance with the Ife army and mercenaries from Oyo and besieged Owu city seven years. They set the city on fire, forced the people of Owu to open their gates and destroyed the ancient city. People were killed, largely males, old or young, and the women were seized and shared out to the soldiers

and Generals. But in the end, the allied forces suffer many losses too. Many of them died in the war front; troubles await some at home; others are not sure of what awaits them on the way back home or at home.

War Dehumanises Man and ‘Humanises’ Gods and Goddesses

Another theme in **Women of Owu** is that war dehumanises man and ‘humanises’ gods and goddesses. The play describes how war has turned human beings to animals. People rolled in the dust like animals. Soldiers treat fellow human beings as worthless and waste lives at will. Killing people becomes a sport. Women become articles of trade; they are shared out among men who decide what to do with them. The survivors of the war are in different ways dehumanized. In the name of duty, they still kill after the battle is over.

The play ‘humanises’ the gods and goddesses. They are presented with human nature and compared with human beings in different ways. Like human beings, the gods and goddesses want to be respected, loved and worshipped. For example, Lawumi is angry that the Allied forces did not respect her. She gets angry that they killed people who ran into her shrine. The gods and goddesses are shown also to have vices like men and women. Anger, vengeance and trickery are some of Lawumi’s vices.

Characterisation

The persons represented in *Women of Owu* are many and fall into two categories. There are those listed at the beginning of the play as ‘*Characters*’. These are twelve in number. There are also some that are not listed in the play but are part of the actions in the play. The characters in the first category are shown and presented in action while those in the second category evolve in the actions of the characters in the first category. The characters in the play are human and supernatural.

Characters Presented through Dramatic Method.

The characters presented, talking and acting in *Women of Owu*, include Erelu Afin, Gesinde, Okunade, Orisaye, Adumaadan, Iyunloye, Chorus Leader, Chorus of Owu, women and soldiers. Anlugbua and Lawumi belong to this group but are unlike the human characters listed before them. The two are supernatural beings. Aderogun is the last character of the group. He stands out in the group because he neither talks nor acts but is simply presented.

Erelu Afin

Erelu Afin is the wife of the Olowu of Owu Ipole, Oba Akinjobi. She is fondly called ‘Ayaba’ and. ‘Iya wa’. She had five sons and three daughters for the king. She plays the true mother to her biological children and the entire Owu people. Erelu is the leader of the Owus who survived the war. The people look up to her, ask her for advice and take instructions from her. She is one of the supreme examples of suffering womanhood. She lost a husband, her five sons and a daughter. Erelu is also a figure of dignity and resolution. She is rich in the tradition of her land. Take for instance, she recognises the need to properly bury the dead, release their spirits and send them back safely home to the ancestors. Erelu serves as the medium between the people of Owu and the gods and goddesses of the land. She answers the questions Owu people ask through Chorus Leader, offers them words of wisdom about life and gives them prophecies.

Orisaye

Orisaye is a princess and one of the daughters of Erelu Afin. The god insists that she remain a virgin and lead a life of piety and devotion, and she does as instructed.

Orisaye is a prophetess. She receives messages from Orunmila and declares them to the women of Owu and Gesinde. One of her prophecies is that Erelu will not go with Balogun Derin but die in Owu land. She also foretells Kusa's death as well as her own. Another is that the gods have decided that the journey of Balogun which should be only three weeks of trekking away from Owu will take another seventeen years. The first prophecy comes true by the end of the play.

Orisaye is a bold and daring lady. She calls Gesinde to order repeatedly, abuses him and calls him names. Balogun Kusa demands that Orisaye be given to him to marry but the princess declares that the wedding will be dreadful and be an unbreakable pact with death.

Orisaye brings some liveliness to the tragic atmosphere that pervades the play. She sings and dances to '*E súre fún mi*', '*Olóbe ló loko o*' and '*Jòwó o dúró sisi*'. She appears to be the only Owu woman who speaks no ill of the gods and goddesses.

Gesinde

Gesinde is an Ijebu soldier. He is also the herald and staff officer of the Allied Army. He carries messages from the Allied Forces to the people of Owu during the actions in the play. Gesinde bears the message to Owu women to prepare to go with their future masters and tells them which woman goes with which master.

Gesinde participated actively in the war that has brought Owu into ruins. He gives facts about the war that none proves wrong. He respects tradition and culture. He allows Owu people to have their way in some instances. Despite the fact that he is aware that the people of Owu are defeated and under his instruction, he shows them some respect. He addresses Erelu Afin respectfully and calls her '*Your majesty, Ayaba*'. He allows Owu women to perform the rites the living owe to the dead. Gesinde is a very firm and dutiful soldier. He carries out every instruction from the generals.

Gesinde is human at heart. He shows much pain at the suffering and loss of Owu people.

Okunade

Okunade is otherwise known as the Maye. He is the Ife war leader and the General of the Allied Forces. He took to arms shortly after his wife, Iyunloye, was captured in a war raid by the people of Owu on the Apomu market. He then enlisted as a soldier to get Iyunloye back and to avenge himself on Adejumo the man to whom Iyunloye is given.

Okunade is a good soldier. He showed passion for killing. He rose rapidly through the ranks and became the Maye and the commander of the armed forces of Ife. Because of his fame in the war, Owu women call him by names such as 'that demon' and 'a butcher'.

Okunade is a passionate lover. He passionately loves Iyunloye. He shows no interest in any of the women of Owu. Gesinde reports the interests of Balogun Derin, Balogun Kusa and Otunba Lekki but reports none of Okunade. There is no mistake of omission on the issue as Gesinde's eye never misses anything. Okunade's sole

interest in Iyunloye is confirmed in Gesinde's final report that 'Maye has allowed Iyunloye to join his caravan and ride with them in triumph'.

Iyunloye

Iyunloye is the erring wife of Okunade. She is stunningly beautiful and pays attention to this aspect of herself. Even in her rough state, following the war, she is described as 'conspicuously beautiful'. She is reported as 'having taken some care to spruce herself up a bit.' She is aware that her beauty is a weapon and relies on it to enchant men. Iyunloye is a model of the seductress. She acknowledges this in her account of how she was captured by the Owu forces. She confesses that she had her beauty and bought her life with the asset.

Iyunloye knows how to use words to win a man over. She calls Okunade 'my husband'. Iyunloye is an enterprising and resourceful woman. She symbolises the power of women. She is the model of those women who win in all wars without firing a shot.

Anlugbua

Anlugbua is a god among the people of Owu. He is the son of Lawumi, an Ife princess and Oba Asukungbade, the ancestral founder of Owu Ipole. After his death, he became a deity in the land. He was an Owu war leader. When departing this world, he dipped his sword into the earth and became a mountain. He is sworn to an oath that forbids him to return to fight for Owu land unless he is sent for. His instruction is that whenever some misfortunes arrive too great for the people of Owu to handle, they should run to the hill, pull his chain and call his name three times. According to him, once that is done, he says he shall be back, sword in hand, to defend Owu.

Anlugbua is associated with war. He is also the god of the sea and controls the storms, lightning and thunderbolts. The weapons show that Anlugbua could be a savage god. Anlugbua's weapons are not only natural elements. He also uses a sword.

Anlugbua is a god capable of appearing as an ancestor and possessing a human being. He possesses Erelu during the ritual valediction to the dead. Anlugbua is a very humane god. He is concerned with the people of Owu. It is not his fault that Owu comes to ruin. The people did not call him when attacked by the Allied Army but relied on their strength. Anlugbua is broken by the losses of Owu people. He sympathises with them and promises to preserve the remnants of Owu people. He says he will make sure that the Owu people going into slavery start new kingdoms in new places.

Lawumi

Lawumi was a princess of Ife. She got married to Oba Asukungbade, the ancestral founder of Owu Ipole. She was the mother of Anlugbua and Sango. She became a goddess after her death. She appears to be the goddess of retribution. She frowns at every wrong and sees to it that it is punished. Lawumi is behind the fate of Owu in the hands of the Allied Forces. According to her explanation to Anlugbua, Owu had to be punished and attacked by Ife because Owu broke the law that no Yoruba should sell other Yoruba into slavery. She adds *that* that the Owus were wrong to have attacked Ife.

To Lawumi, Owu's act is arrogance and lawlessness against history and their origins. Lawumi instigated the attack of Owu people on the Ijebu traders when the former sacked the Ife army. Subsequently, she made the Ijebu rise in response and sent their dreaded army up against the city of Owu.

Lawumi is the police of the Yoruba state. She keeps the law and order. She frowns at the Allied army for breaking the tradition and desecrating the shrines of goddesses and gods. Because of their disrespect for the supernatural, Lawumi decides the army must be punished. She mentions how the Allied Forces killed men and women who ran to her shrine and how they set fire to it. She hates the fact that Princess Orisaye was literally dragged out of her hands. Lawumi secures the support of many goddesses and gods to punish the sacrilege.

To punish the invaders, Lawumi secured the support of Esu, Ogun and Orisa Oko. She obtains Anlugbua's promise on the issue too. In specific terms, Lawumi wants the return of the Allied army to be filled with grief. Esu promised to confuse the invaders at every crossroads and make them miss their ways. Orisa Oko promised to turn the forest against them. Lawumi pleads with his son, Anlugbua and secures his support to assault them with terrible storms, shafts of lightning and awesome thunderbolts till they perish.

Adumaadan

Adumaadan is Erelu's daughter-in-law. She is married to the son, Lisabi. Her marriage is blessed with daughters and a son. Adumaadan is a homely woman. She was happy once and devoted totally to the care of her husband raising her children. The war claimed the lives of her husband and daughters and she was initially left with only her son, Aderogun. When the Owu women are to be shared out to the army of the Allied Forces, Adumaadan is given to the man who killed her husband. Her homely nature drew the attention of her husband's killer to her. The man asked she be given to him.

Adumaadan is a straightforward woman. She does not hide her feelings. She shows this in how she relates to Erelu over some issues. Adumaadan expresses suspicion that Erelu loved Dejumo more than Lisabi, her husband; she blames the war and death of Lisabi on Erelu. She expresses anger that Erelu preserved Dejumo's life against the prophecy. The prophecy was that Dejumo should be killed to prevent disaster in Owu. She calls pride what Erelu called motherly love for saving Dejumo's life.

Adumaadan is a very kind woman. She sympathises with Erelu on the death of Adeoti. Adumaadan tells how much she loved the princess. She did the much she could do for Adeoti by closing her eyes in death and pouring some sand on her.

Other characters in the play include Chorus, Chorus Leaders, Aderogun, Dejumo, Lisabi, Sakula and other women characters. The characters, except Chorus and Chorus Leaders, do not play lead roles in *Women of Owu*. 'Chorus' appears to be a body of women but is better seen as one character, since all the women speak in one voice. Some moments in the play one or two women stand out as leaders of the chorus. However, Chorus Leader 1 and Chorus Leader 2 share the responsibilities of the group. Chorus makes observations, deductions and comments about developments in the play. The character pleads at times on behalf of the living and at other times on behalf of the dead.

Setting

There are different levels of setting in *Women of Owu*. These are physical, religious, historical and temporal. The most visible physical setting is the market place in Owu Ipole. It is an open space close to the main gate of the town. The space, before the war, served as a market. The market is apparently at the entrance of the city of Owu.

Owu is a city-state enclosed within two walls and with a moat around it. A moat is a body of water dug around a place for its protection. Thus, the kingdom is able to keep off attacking forces once her gates are shut. This defence explains why Owu succeeded in keeping the Allied Forces out for seven years until a terrible fire engulfed the city and forced Owu people to open their gates.

Time Setting

The time of the play is when war is common and might is right. Other than the war which the play is about, there are reports of other ones. One is the war between the Oyo and the Fulani forces. Reference is made to Oyo people fleeing the invasion of the Fulanis. Another war referred to is *that* where the Ife army took Apomu market from the people of Owu. In another war, the market was recaptured by the Owus.

Time in *Women of Owu* is defined further by the contact of the West with Yorubaland. The time is when trade flourished between the Ijebus and the white men on the coast. The Ijebus got guns from the trade. Their troops brought the guns in abundance to fight the war against Owu. The significance of this contact with the West is that it provided the Allied Forces with weapons that are superior to the ones used by Owu army. The use of guns by the Allied Forces hastened the fall of Owu. It also increased the casualties in the war.

Religious and Cultural Setting

In cultural and religious terms, actions in *Women of Owu* are set when the natural and the supernatural interact freely. The play is set when human beings rely on the supernatural beings for so many things. At the beginning of the play, Anlugbua appears as an Old Man to two women and discusses with them. At the end of the play, Erelu is possessed by the spirit of Anlugbua and speaks as the god to Owu people.

Language and Style

Women of Owu is based apparently on Yoruba history and mythology. But the play apparently borrows from Euripides' *Trojan Women and Hecuba*. The two Greek plays focus on the experience and activities of women after the fall of Troy, a Greek city.

Osofisan's play appears to borrow from the two but more from *Hecuba*. *Hecuba* is a tragedy by Euripides and about Hecuba, the wife of Priam at the time of the Trojan War. Also called Hecabe, the woman was most unfortunate mother. She saw her sons and husband killed, her infant grandson murdered, herself and her daughters enslaved. She stands as one of the supreme examples of suffering womanhood. She was a figure of dignity and resolution, even in her misery. Erelu is modelled after Hecuba in many respects.

Helen of Troy motif is a classical one that features in *Women of Owu*. The issues are almost always the same in classical mythology and many literary works that borrow the theme. Helen is a woman of an exceptional beauty, and many suitors wanted her but she chose Menelaus. She married Menelaus but later ran away with Paris. Helen's elopement with Paris was the immediate cause of the Trojan War. After the capture of Troy, Helen returned to Sparta with Menelaus. In *Women of Owu*, Iyunloye is modelled after Helen.

Song

Song is a major dramatic device in *Women of Owu*. The play opens with a song and closes with another. In between these songs are many other ones. About sixteen songs are deployed in the play and some of these are repeated twice or more. Most of the songs are mournful and express grief. The fall of Owu and the death of many no doubt inform the dirges.

Allusion

There is an allusion to history in *Women of Owu*. The attack of the Allied Forces on the Owu is described in a Renaissance image: ‘A hideous armada of fire’. Armada was the fleet of ships sent against England by Spain in 1588. Britain took the fleet literally by the storm and defeated Spain.

Summary

Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* is on war and its consequences. The play, like some of his other plays, borrows from Yoruba mythology and history. The play is based on the 1821 Owu war, and its actions are dramatised by human beings, gods and goddesses. It shows that war dehumanizes and is an ill wind that blows no one any good. The play also shows that war ‘humanises’ the gods and goddesses because they behave as badly as men and women in all matter.

Revision Questions

1. Discuss how Femi Osofisan ‘humanises’ the gods and goddesses in *Women of Owu*.
2. Describe the war strategy of the Allied Forces and the sack of Owu.
3. Discuss the contribution of the chorus to the actions in *Women of Owu*.
4. ‘War is an ill-wind that blows no one any good.’ Discuss.
5. Trace two concerns of classical literature in *Women of Owu*.

Objective Questions

1. The ‘celebrated slut’ in *Women of Owu* is _____.
A. Orekelewa B. Iyunade C. Iyunloye D. Orisaye E. Adeoti
2. The father of Anlugbua is _____.
A. Asukungbade B. Akinjobi C. Maye D. Lawumi E. Sango
3. *Women of Owu* is a play set in _____.
A. 1821 B. 1850 C. 1860 D. 1840 E. 1831
4. *Women of Owu* is Osofisan’s re-reading of a play by
A. Sophocles B. Euripides C. Aeschylus D. Socrates E. Longinus
5. The actions in *Women of Owu* cover _____.
A. one day B. two days C. three days D. four days E. seven days
6. Gesinde is a soldier from _____.
A. Ife B. Owu C. Owu Ipole D. Ijebu E. Oyo
7. The Allied Forces held siege against Owu for _____.
A. 7 years B. 7 months C. 6 years D. 6 months E. 5 months
8. *Women of Owu* is set in _____.
A. Orile-Owu B. Owu-Igbole C. Owu-Ife D. Owu-Ile E. Owu-Ipole

9. During the assault on Ife by Owu, _____ captured Iyunloye.

A. Awalona B. Sakula C. Balogun Derin D. Gesinde E. Maye

10. One character in *Women of Owu who* neither speaks nor acts but is physically present in the play is _____.

A. Orisaye B. Akogun Awalona C. Aderogun D. Oba Akinjobi E. Anlugbua

Answers to Objective Questions

(1) C (2) A (3) A (4) B (5) B (6) D (7) A (8) E (9) A (10)C