The Demonization of Woman in Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu

Ndubuisi NNANNA¹

¹Ph.D, Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Nigeria Nsukka.

Critical opinions on Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu are largely stereotypical. They lament the plunder of Owu and compare it to that of Troy, drawing some parallels between Euripides’ The Trojan Women and Osofisan’s adaptation of it. There is a clear effort to assume some kind of historical and cultural affinity between the women of ancient Owu and Troy. But most of these assumptions are apparently contrived. It seems that there has been no attempt to consider Osofisan’s play in its own right. This study is an endeavor in that direction. It adopts the Reader-Response approach as a methodology to conduct a phenomenological analysis of Osofisan’s Women of Owu in order to discover the extent to which it truly reflects the picture of the Owu war of the 17th century and portrays the cultural identity of the women of Owu. It also compares Euripides’ play with Osofisan’s version in the context of their individual historical backgrounds to examine how each play captures the realities of its specific cultural milieu. The conclusion of this paper is that in an attempt to find parallels to the source of his play, Osofisan has inadvertently extrapolated the cultural essence of a society that had little regard for women into the cultural history of an African community, where women had a lot of respect, and in the process, has demonized womanhood and given impetus to some flawed assumptions and misinterpretations of history. The recommendation of this paper is, therefore, that African dramatists should be conscious of the peculiarities of cultures and the danger in attempting to find contrived affinities between African and Western cultures in an effort to lend some kind of credibility to their creative endeavors.

Keywords: Demonization, Womanhood, Owu, Troy, Adaptation, African Drama. Cultural History.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the extent to which authentic African experiences and cultural history are reflected in African plays adapted from European ones. It focuses on Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu and its treatment of African (Yoruba) womanhood in comparison to Euripides’ treatment of Greek women, in his The Trojan Women, from which Osofisan adapted his African version.
critical views on the play focus on its thematic kinship with Euripides’ play and ignore some very essential historical and cultural irregularities that such a limited focus encourages. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to attempt a rereading of The Women of Owu in its own right to discover the extent to which it captures the authentic historical and cultural experiences of the actual women who were the victims of the Owu carnage of the 17th century. This rereading will, hopefully, provide an insight into the textual privileging that seems to frame many comparisons between adapted African plays and their European models. It will also encourage alternative critical attitudes in subsequent engagements with the focus play.

Research Questions

The questions which this study is concerned with are as follows:

i. Have critics of Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu, as an adaptation of Euripides’ The Trojan Women, adequately factored in the cultural peculiarities of the individual settings of the plays in their appreciation of them?

ii. Does Osofisan adequately capture the lived experiences of the actual women of Owu in the focus play or does he privilege Euripedes’ version at the expense of historical credibility?

iii. To what extent do Women of Owu and The Trojan Women portray the place of women in the ancient Yoruba and Attic societies respectively?

Statement of Problem

The major problem encountered in the course of this research was the dearth of critical materials on the focus play. Whereas there are a plethora of critical opinions on Femi Osofisan and his plays generally, Women of Owu, published in 2006, has, comparatively, attracted very little attention from critics. The research had to rely on the general opinions and the few extant ones that are specific on the play to articulate a framework for a critical engagement with the text.

The first task here is to examine the structure of the textual relationship between Euripides’ play and Osofisan’s adaptation of it, for the purpose of determining if there is mutual enhancement between them or if one text is privileged over the other. The next one is to situate both plays within their respective cultural matrices to appraise the extent to which they, individually, reflect the realities of gender value and expectations within those cultures.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts the historical-descriptive design and the Reader-Response methodology. The historical-descriptive design, with its peculiar relevance to humanities research, is considered appropriate because of its reliance on words as historical data. The Reader-Response critical approach allows a reader to complement the writing process with direct impressions formed from a mental engagement of a text. One of the major proponents of the reader-response criticism, Wolfgang Iser, provides a definition of the approach in the preface to his book, Prospecting: From Reader-Response to Literary Anthropology (1989). For him, “What has come to be called reader-response criticism provides a framework for understanding text processing, revealing the way in which the reader’s faculties are both acted upon and activated. By putting the response-inviting structures of a literary text under scrutiny, a theory of aesthetic response provides guidelines for elucidating the interaction between text and reader” (vii).
M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005), offer a comprehensive insight into the guiding principles of this approach:

Reader-Response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the ongoing mental operations and responses of readers as their eyes follow a text on the page before them. In more drastic forms of such criticism, matters that had been considered by critics to be features of the work itself are dissolved into an evolving process, consisting primarily of diverse expectations, and the violations, deferments, satisfactions, and restructurings of expectations, in the flow of a reader’s experience. Reader-response critics of all theoretical persuasions agree that, at least to some considerable degree, the meanings of a text are the “production” or “creation” of the individual reader, hence that there is no one “correct” meaning for all readers either of the linguistic parts or of the artistic whole of a text (265-6).

To Reader-Response critics, the effects of a literary work “… psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader” (Tompkins ix). The implication of the above assertions is that the meaning of a text cannot be divorced from its effect upon the mind of a reader and consequently should not be dependent on any extraneous assumptions that are not connected with the direct interaction between the mind of the reader and the text. Marvin Carlson affirms the significance of this mind-text engagement by pointing out albeit unwittingly, the creative role of the reader in the interpretative process (292). The Reader is thus by implication privileged over the text. Gerry Brenner calls attention to this privileging by pointing out that:

One virtue of reader-response criticism has been its allowance- some would say indulgence- of every reader’s interaction with the text he or she reads. Diverse though reader-response theorists and practitioners are, fundamental to the theory is its seldom-expressed goal of democratizing the practice of literary criticism. In theory it manipulates readers from subservience not only to the meanings assigned to a text by figures of authority and even its author, but also to the authority of the presumably objective text itself and linguistic structures that supposedly control readers’ constructions of meaning (1).

Similarly, Elizabeth Freund opines that “Theories of reader-response seek to revise the aims and methods of literary study not only by reminding us that the reader is an active participant in the production of meaning, but also by impersonating or characterizing, in some form or other, a reader who assumes dominance or authority over a text” (152).

The ultimate goal of the reader-response approach to the appreciation of literature is the discovery of hitherto ignored or hidden meaning devoid of extraneous interference. Reader-response seeks to reinstate the significance of the reading process as a means of protecting literary appreciation from the straight-jacketed interpretations that, all too often, stultify scholarship. Fowler Robert enunciates that:

By redirecting our critical focus away from the text per say and toward the reading of the text, we shall not only better understand what we have been doing all along as we were reading and talking about our reading but also gain new sensibilities that should enable us to read in new ways and achieve new insights (1).
Although the reader-response approach yields to several methods of literary criticism, the phenomenological analytical process is one of its most complementary frameworks. This is because phenomenology, too, preaches a focus on the object of interpretation and closure of assumptions not immediately experienced. Christiana Howells explains that:

Phenomenology is a philosophy of consciousness which attempts to avoid the reefs of dualistic views such as empiricism and idealism by putting aside preconceptions about the relationship between mind and world. It sets out to go beyond naturalistic epistemology to describe afresh how consciousness relates to the world of phenomena (6).

The usual predilection of the mind is to interpret new phenomena with data from previous experiences. This, of course, would result in interpretations that may be affected by biases and assumptions that are actually unrelated to the immediate phenomenon. Therefore, phenomenological criticism “. . . desires to study only the eidetic aspects of phenomenon without allowing our presuppositions and ideas that are not immediately given to that act experience to interrupt our interpretation of that experience” (Owolabi 134). To achieve this deliberate exclusion of extraneous influence, phenomenological critics adopt “bracketing”. In this way any potential interference is more or less shut out of the immediate material.

This study shall, therefore, “bracket” the assumptions derived from previous studies of Femi Osofisan and his Women of Owu, to allow for a fresh insight on this very important play.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With over fifty plays to his credit, Femi Osofisan is, undoubtedly, one of Nigeria’s, nay, Africa’s most prolific playwrights. He is usually categorized among the second generation of Nigerian playwrights, after the likes of Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark-Bekederemo who are usually considered the forerunners of Nigerian drama. However, Osofisan is equally a trailblazer in his own right for, as Olu Obafemi says in The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre, he is “... a pioneer of the drama of conscious ideological commitment. His plays deal with topical political issues from a philosophically materialistic perspective” (575). He seems to be interested in narratives that capture peculiar experiences of intersecting social processes, shifting locations and identities. According to Emeka Nwabueze:

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 (141).

The themes of Osofisan’s plays revolve around deprivation, subordination, exclusion, and marginalization within cultural spaces and organized social relations. Femi Osofisan has remained an activist of sorts, seeking for an end to injustice and class tyranny in Nigeria. As Muyiwa Awodiya affirms, “... the thematic preoccupation of his works remains the same: a vision of a better society that is free from the shackles of oppression, injustice and corruption” (102). It is, therefore, not surprising that
Femi Osofisan would be interested in the story of Owu and the women who were the victims of indescribable injustice and extreme internecine plunder.

Commissioned by the Chipping Norton Theatre, UK in 2004 and published by the University Press Ibadan in 2006, Women of Owu is a testimony of the depth of Femi Osofisan’s creative versatility. The play is a continuation of his interest in the adaptation of European classics. In 1999, he had successfully adapted Sophocles’ Antigone into what he titled Tegonni, An African Antigone. In 2010, he published a rereading of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice. The resulting play, Love’s Unlike Lading: A Comedy from Shakespeare, was commissioned by The Rainbow Book Club in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

The 2004 premiere tour of Women of Owu was very successful. The play was well received and attracted so many positive reviews. Most of these, as already mentioned, are on the blurb of the published play. They capture the grief and empathy that Osofisan’s Women of Owu evokes, whether on stage or on the page, and the very powerful language and lasting images contained in every scene of the play, which are, to say the least, heartrending.

As noted earlier, there is a paucity of scholarly opinions on the play. But the few that exist, as well as his own, appear to follow the same trend as the production reviews. In his article “To Sack a City or to Breach a Woman’s Chastity: Euripides’ Trojan Women and Osofisan’s Women of Owu”, Olasope expresses the view that the play is “…a play about the sufferings encountered by women during and after war…Owu is looted, desolate and in ruins; psychologically, culturally, politically and economically” (112-3). According to Felix Budelmann:

The play is set outside the burning city, not of Troy, but of Owu in Yorubaland, part of what is now Nigeria. It tells about the sufferings imposed by war. Its main mode is empathy and pity for the victims of war, especially the women. Owu is in ruins, and its former inhabitants are constantly threatened by rape, displacement, slavery, degradation, and death (15).

There can hardly be any encounter with theay that would produce a contrary opinion. But in my view such opinions are more automatic than critical. To arrive at a more historically critical appreciation of the play, this study will suspend already formed knowledge of the text and author and interrogate Osofisan’s handling of actual and mythical historical material in his adaptation of Euripides’ play, and also examine the implications of this handling for the formation of the image of womanhood in Women of Owu.

Critical Analysis of the Focus Play

Euripedes’ The Trojan Women, also known as Troades, was produced in 415 BC at the City Dionysia in Athens during the famous Peloponnesian war. It was the third in a trilogy on the Trojan War. It followed the lesser known Alexandros and the subsequent Palamedes. The plays were derived from Homer’s Iliad and are usually believed to have been a cautionary commentary to Athenians, who had the previous year plundered the island of Melos and dealt savagely with its citizens, slaughtering all male adults and enslaving the women. The play shows the victorious Greeks basking in the glory of victory over Troy after ten long years. The victors set fire to the vanquished city, massacre all the men and dole out the helpless women to the conquerors. It is a gory tale of extreme brutality, rapine, and grief. In the Prologue of the play, Athene and Poseidon, who had abandoned Troy to her own devices, swear to bring extreme calamity and humiliation upon the Greeks on their journey back
home for desecrating their altars and violating the sacredness of Cassandra. One very significant factor in the play is that the cause of the war is laid on Helen, Menelaus’ errant wife. Hecabe, the former queen of Troy hold her responsible for all the misery that Troy had suffered at the hands of the Greeks.

Apart from Medea (431 BC), another popular play by Euripedes, The Trojan Women is the playwright’s most frequently performed play. It has also been variously adapted, notably, by Jean-Paul Sartre and Hanoch Levin. The play is indeed a classic in every sense of the word. But this paper is not about Euripides’ play. It is about Osofisan’s adaptation of it. So the foregoing brief introduction will suffice.

Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu, as already mentioned, was commissioned by the Chipping Norton Theatre, UK in 2004. It is important to note Osofisan’s revealing disclosure in “A Note on the Play’s Genesis”; “So it was quite logical therefore that, as I pondered over this adaptation of Euripides’ play, in the season of the Iraqi War, the memories that were awakened in me should be those of the tragic Owu War…” (Women of Owu vii). The Iraqi War of 2003 was a modern-day plunder of mammoth proportions. It was an epic demonstration of the supremacy of might over right and the tyranny of power. Iraq’s unprovoked annexation of her gulf neighbor, Kuwait, provided a convenient excuse for the (capitalist) Allied Forces, led by the mighty America, to whip the recalcitrant Saddam Hussein into line and punish him for his unrepentant anti-imperialist idiosyncrasies. In less than a year the oil-rich gulf nation was literally reduced to rubble. The aftermath of that massive allied assault with the individual and group socio-psychological reconfigurations that resulted from it, on both sides of the divide, is a major source of global anxiety till date.

It is instructive that the motivation for both The Trojan Women and The Women of Owu was a concern for the ravages of war and the extreme oppression of the weak by the strong. This is the basic ideological thread that connects both plays. Like its source play, Women of Owu opens with lamentation and an epiphany. The patron god of Owu, Anlugbua, appears to two women against the backdrop of the smoldering Owu. Anlugbua has taken the form of an old man and queries the women about the carnage he beholds:

ANLUGBUA: Tell me, dear Women-
You seem to come from there-
What’s the name of the city I see
Smouldering over there?

WOMAN: Stranger, you don’t know?
Look at
My tears! That was once
The proud city of Owu, reduced to ruin
Yesterday- (1)

This encounter initiates the pathetic story of the play. Owu is burning. The once strong city has been plundered by the Allied Forces of Ijebu, Ife, and Oyo soldiers who have razed Owu, decimated her adult male population and unleashed untold bodily and mental humiliation on the women. The Women of Owu are utterly devastated. The two women narrate their collective ordeal to the equally grief-stricken Anlugbua. In this scene, too, the author seems to betray the first hint of an impending textual dilemma: the actual cause of the war. In an apparent reference to the Iraqi War scenario one of the women mentions that the Allied Forces had penetrated Owu town under the pretext of freeing it from the tyranny of a despot:

WOMAN: …. For seven years we had held them off,
These invaders from Ijebu and Ife, together
With mercenaries from Oyo fleeing south from the
Fulani forces. They said our Oba
Was a despot, that they came to free us
From his cruel yoke! (2)
From this allusion to the Iraqi War, during which that country was invaded on the excuse of liberating it from Saddam Hussein, one of the women flip-flops to another reason for the war:

WOMAN: Ancestral father, the armies of Ijebu, Oyo and Ife,
Who call themselves the Allied Forces,
Under the command of that demon
Maye Okunade,
Caused this havoc.

ANLUGBUA: Okunade? Not the man I know? Gbenagbena
Okunade, the one endowed by Obatala
With the gift of creativity, to shape wood
And stone into new forms? The fabled artist
Who also dreamed those arresting patterns on virgin cloth?

WOMAN: The very one! But when his favourite wife,
Iyunloye, was captured and brought here, and given as
Wife to one of our princes, Okunade became bitter, and
Swore to get her back. Shamed and disgraced,
He abandoned his tools and took to arms….
Maye besieged our city for seven full years
Because of a woman, and would not go away!
For seven full years, the people of Owu
Suffered and refused to open the city gates (5-7).

In the preceding exchange it is clear that the author used Woman as a voice to introduce some element of faithfulness to the original text, for of a truth the immediate cause of the Trojan War was Helen, the errant wife of Menelaus. But in the third scene, Lawumi, Anlugbua’s mother (a goddess and former princess of Ife) introduces another dimension to the genesis of the war. She attributes the destruction of Owu to haughtiness:

LAWUMI: Good, let the Owus eat that superiority now!
They sacked the Ife army, and took back
The Apomu market. But that was their undoing.
Because I led them on. I made them attack
The Ijebu traders at the market too,
Yes, I made sure of that! Recklessly
They looted the stalls of the Ijebu, killed many
And sold the others into slavery! And of course
As I expected, the Ijebu rose in response
And sent their dreaded army up against
the city.

That was the beginning of the story
Whose consequences you see now
before you! (19-20).

The above obviously calls to mind
Euripides’ textual undertone condemning
the sacking of the Island of Melos. Thus,
we see that Ososifan has tried to
accommodate his sentiments about the
Iraqi war, the root cause of the Trojan War,
and Euripides’ veiled caution against the
brutality of the Melos onslaught into one
textual umbrella. If all these possible
reasons for the Owu tragedy were allowed
to run their individual courses in the play,
there might have been plot confusion. But
from Scene Five only one causal thread is
allowed to persist: the culpability of
Iyunloye.

To qualify for condemnation, Iyunloye is
cast in the mould of a whore, a temptress,
and a witch. As soon as the infamous Maye
makes his first entrance he rejoices with
malicious satisfaction for the opportunity
to get back at Iyunloye:

MAYE: … This is a happy day!
Yes at last, the day I have been waiting
for, dreaming about!
The woman is in my hands at last, that,
Shameful whore I called my wife!
There she waits now,
Inside there, trussed up with others
Like a common slave! Yes, Iyunloye!
…
I am going to make her suffer as much
as she made me.
She’ll beg, and crawl in the sand till
both her knees
Are in tatters. And then I’ll kill her
(46).

Iyunloye becomes the bug that must be
eliminated to return health to the perished
body politic of Owu. For the moment Erelu
forgets her role as protector/guardian, she
suspends her recognition of Maye as a
common enemy and addresses him as if he
were a messiah of sorts:

ERE卢: Oh you gods, how strange
your ways!
So you are still there after all, giving
pain one moment
And then joy the next! So with all your
mischief, you can still
Mete out punishment to whom it is due
I salute you, Maye, for being the hand
of justice!

MAYE: Do I know you?

ERE卢: Kill your wife, Maye
Okunade, and you will have my
blessings.

MAYE: What strange prayers! What’s
she done to you?

ERE卢: I am the Erelu Afin of Owu.
That should tell you who I am.
It was my son your wife bewitched and
led us to this calamity (47).

As if it is not enough to throw Iyunloye up
as a licentious vermin, Erelu goes on to
paint her as a medusoid personality with
the powers of vitriolic enchantment and
transformative hypnosis:

ERE卢: Let her death be slow and
cruel. But be careful!
When they bring her out here, turn
away your eyes, I beg you,
Don’t look at her.

MAYE: That’s a funny request.

ERE卢: Maye, I know what I am
saying! Women like her are dangerous,
Especially to their lovers. Once they catch you, you’re are hooked

For ever. They have such powers of enchantment, eyes

That will set cities ablaze. You know what I am talking about,

The proof is over there. One look at her again,

Believe me, all your anger will melt away (47-48).

The negative characteristics that Iyunloye is garbed in represent some form of demonization. Among the gods it is Lawumi, another woman, who is so demonized. She is made to admit responsibility for the woes of Owu. She does so when she meets her son, Anlugbua, in the third scene of the play:

LAWUMI: It’s about Owu, your city.

ANLUGBUA: My former city, you mean?

You are satisfied, I hope, with your work.

LAWUMI: So you know.

ANLUGBUA: It had to be you, mother! That such

A disaster would happen here, and I not know

About it. But why did you do it?

LAWUMI: They had to be punished!

Lawumi’s reason for the destruction of Owu is that the Owus became power drunk and attacked the erstwhile weaker Ifes. When Anlugbua reminds her that Ife had attacked Owu first she replies that the attack was justified because the Owus had broken an ancestral law by selling their fellow Yorubas into slavery. It is instructive that Anlugbua is well aware of the history of the war. Yet he claims ignorance of the Owu carnage during his discussion with the two women in the first scene. It is apparent, then, that Anlugbua shirked his responsibility to Owu: the city that venerated and worshipped him. His city. But he is not condemned for this negligence. Some other person/goddess had to take the blame. Is this apportioning of faults gender-determined? Would Anlugbua’s “maleness” have been diminished if he was made to admit culpability in the ominous fate of Owu? Lawumi becomes not just a punitive scoundrel but also a fatuous avenger who delights in punishment just for the sake of personal superbia. Not satisfied with the destruction of Owu, she seeks to punish the Allied Forces for desecrating her shrine in the course of plundering the city:

ANLUGBUA: Well, I hope you are satisfied now!

LAWUMI: No. The city is in ruins, all right, but I’m not satisfied.

ANLUGBUA: No? What more can you want, mother?

LAWUMI: These Allied Forces, they need to be punished in their turn.

ANLUGBUA: What!...

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 total support, did not spare them

Can you believe the insult!...

To cap the insult, look! They have set fire to my shrine! (20-21).
So Lawumi is reduced to a petty conceited bickerer who does not care about all the bloodshed and pillage that Owu suffered but who is more concerned about her selfish resplendency. She is made to fit into the routinized image of the fussing vainglorious woman. Perhaps the women mentioned above were presented in such negative light for the purpose of remaining as close as possible to the parent play. This raises the question of whether Osofisan’s Women of Owu represents the truth of the Owu war or if it merely complements Euripides’ The Trojan Women, even at the risk of historical misrepresentation.

In classical Athens, women were not respected. Chineny Amonyeye calls attention to this gender imbalance during the classical Greek period (46) Olasope, too, observes that “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 (117). So the portrayal of women as weak, wicked and wayward in Greek literature is consistent with the cultural reality of the Attic society. On the contrary, Yoruba women had some respect. They were usually integrated into the mainstream of the political economy of Yoruba communities and were in control of huge commercial enterprises. As Onaiwu Ogbomo says, “Yoruba women were probably among the most influential and wealthy, equal and independent in Africa because they concentrated on commerce” (361). As a matter of fact, the famous Madam Tinubu of Badagry, known for her economic and political prowess, was an indigene of Owu. Owu women were among the richest and most politically active of all Yoruba women.

Comparably, therefore, whereas it could be argued that Euripedes’ play truthfully reflects the reality of the lived experience of classical Greek women, the same could hardly be said about Osofisan’s adaptation and the Yoruba woman. Thus, Osofisan’s version of Euripedes’ classic merely privileges the latter. Analyzing the 2004 London production of Women of Owu, Kacke Gotrick captures the fact that, “In most cases, the aim of Osofisan’s intertextuality is to oppose the rewritten drama, but there are also cases where he intensifies the message of the original drama” (82). Women of Owu is one of such cases. Indeed, as Osofisan himself admits in an interview with Olu Obafemi:

Yes, I find it that I have done a lot of adaptations, or if you like, re-readings. They can be broadly classified into two, you see, if you look at them from the angle of how they came to being, their genesis. The first are those that were commissioned. In these, I am mostly responding to a given brief, to the specific demands of the sponsors. You know, they give you a certain agenda, which you more or less have to comply with, and so your freedom as an artist is somewhat curtailed (Olasope 138).

Similarly, he tells Olakunbi Olasope, in reaction to a question about striking a balance between his adaptations and the original texts, that:

I have to admit that other considerations sometimes come into play...It always depends on the circumstances leading to the adaptation…. Now with the commissioned work, that is, the Women of Owu, I felt obliged to stay close to the original work, keeping to the basic outline, while merely substituting Yoruba rituals for the Greek. It was an obligation that I felt I owed the sponsors (Olasope 17).

Osofisan clearly does not make excuses about his having to stay as close as possible to the original text, even to the detriment of his own version, to fulfill the agenda of his Chipping Norton Theatre sponsors. It is, therefore, very interesting
when scholars like Astrid Van Weyenberg resolve that, “There are indeed notable correspondences between the stories of Owu and Troy. In Osofisan’s rendition, the Owu war similarly started over a woman…” (143). This is a misleading conclusion. Weyenberg should have limited her sweeping statement to the two plays and not to Troy and Owu. Osofisan did not chronicle the history of Owu in his play. As a matter of fact, in popular Yoruba oral history, the Owu war was not fought over a woman. Instead, the Apomu market incident that actually escalated to the Owu carnage is said to have started from an argument over a few bunches of alligator pepper.

Of course, Folorunso Taiwo may be right to suggest that, “Indeed African dramatists have found an affinity between Europe and the continent, in terms of cultural diversity and specificity… (121). But this situation is hardly peculiar to Africa and Europe. Affinities exist between various global cultures and these constitute one of the driving forces of cultural globalization, despite the obvious imbalances often mediate such interactions. In Osofisan’s very seminal essay, “Theatre and the Rites of ‘Post-Negritude’ Remembering”, he laments that:

Eagerly and enthusiastically, we consume the movies, CD-ROMs, records, books and magazines, comic cartoons, etc; produced in Hollywood, India, or Japan. But nobody elsewhere watches our own football matches, or cares about the ongoing debacle in, say, Sierra Leone. Nor about the disastrous oil spillage ravaging the delta region of the mighty River Niger and its peoples, conquered by the mighty (2).

One could also wonder why European playwrights are not in the habit of churning out adaptations of African plays. The process of adaptation is equally controlled by a similar attitude as that which concerns Osofisan above. It perpetuates the notion of High and Low art, which is elitist and hegemonic in nature and validates the superiority of artistic products considered by dominant groups as significant. In the defining structure of literary adaptation, there is a privileged and a deprived text, an autonomous and a dependent one, a hegemonic and a subservient one, because adapting is a form of borrowing. The relationship between lender and borrower is, necessarily, hierarchical. It is a largely osmotic relationship but the end product is hardly ever an equalized concentration of cultural realities.

CONCLUSION

Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu is, undeniably, a fine work, but in an attempt to find parallels to fit into the mould of his source play, the playwright has inadvertently extrapolated the cultural essence of a society that had little regard for women into the cultural history of an African community, where women enjoy a lot of respect, and thereby has given impetus to some flawed assumptions and misinterpretations of that history. In an a bid to satisfy the arbitrary demands of his commission, the author of Women of Owu seems to have ignored the peculiar localized realities that shape the cultural lived experience of indigenous African Women. By attempting to present a sort of metanarrative that totalizes the condition of women as a universal reality, the play deliberately or otherwise, demonizes Yoruba womanhood. This paper recommends more expanded critical attitudes that factor in historical and cultural credibility in the appreciation of African plays adapted from non-African originals. It also suggests that African dramatists should consider African cultural peculiarities and historical authenticity in their adaptation of Western plays. This is because the undeniable affinities across global cultures do not necessarily obliterate the uniqueness of individual lived experiences.
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