

Interrogating the Conflicting Presentation of Osofisan's Women as Heroines and Villains. *Tegonni... and no Longer the Wasted Breed* as Paradigm

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Abstract

This paper takes a close look at the misrepresentation of the female image in Africa. Most cultures and civilization regard the female image as weak, inferior and lower than men, lacking capacity to achieve any noble sublime or reputable feat. They are relegated to the kitchen, the bedroom, the backyard and the back side of history. Feminism arose to challenge, change and debunk this mentality. They canvass that arts should be enlisted in the politics of the representation of the female image. Many feminist artists are in the vanguard of this effort. Interestingly, Femi Osofisan's drama seems to portray him as a feminist because in many of plays, he projects the woman as strong, virile and productive. However, a close look at the presentation and portrayal of women in his dramaturgy reveals something quite different. Unlike feminists who project the woman as spotless and blameless, Osofisan's strong heroes and protagonists are women, yet his most heinous, dark and despicable villains are also women. The goddess' Yemonja in *Tegonni...and Elusu* in *No More the Wasted Breed* where used as paradigm. In carrying out this research, the literary methodology was used in gathering useful information from the library for critical analysis. The work also leveraged on the new formalistic theory which posits that arts must be relevant to society. This paper concluded by establishing that Osofisan is not a feminist but a socialist, canvassing equality and egalitarianism for the downtrodden and voiceless in society, which the female gender typifies and epitomizes: a metaphor of the oppressed and silenced.

Key words: villain, heroine, oppressed, goddess feminism.

Introduction

Women in history have been presented as weak, incapable and subordinate to men. Most cultures and civilizations regard the female gender as inferior, subservient, and lower than men, lacking capacity and ability to achieve anything noble and reputable. They are termed the weaker sex condemned to the kitchen, the bedroom the farm land and the backside of. They are regarded as objects good for nothing but sex, reproduction and domestic affairs. They have no voice, no identify, no purpose order than to serve men and raise children. They are incapable of stately and political excellence. The president of the most populous country in black Africa ventilated the same sentiments when he remarked that "my wife belongs to my kitchen, the other room". This opinion is strengthened by Aihevba 2012 when he avers that:

Woman is history is presented by patriarch as a symbol of erotic desire, positioned by race, class and gender as a subservient group of people lower and inferior to the male folk. Women are made into exhibition to be observed and displayed, coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote 'to-be-looked -at-ness- socially women were perceived as culturally inferior, whose identify was to be found in the desire to please, serve, others and seek, definition through being secondary to men. They were defined as racial minorities, sexual deviants or even the masses! They were the object of male violence, religious fundamentalism and pornography which presented them as literally in bondage to men. (172).

This stereotypic vision of women is worsened by various religions. In Islam, women are sentenced to purdah. They are required to cover every part of their body especially with dark apparels even in dry seasons under the unforgiving heat of the scorching sun. In the Holy Bible, (MK,11:4) women are equally disregarded. When Jesus Christ fed the five thousand, women and children were not counted because they don't count. The apostle Paul in the Epistles forbade women to teach in temples. They were to learn in silence (1st con.11:14). In our African traditional religions, the death of men is believed to be caused by their wife(ves). So they are meant to go through very torturous rituals to prove their innocence including a prolonged mourning period. In advertisements, the female body (often half naked) is used in almost all commercials to sell various items, including engine oil as if that's all they are good for.

Feminism therefore arose to challenge and change this mentality that women are subordinate to men. Their fight is against the mass cultural representation of women as domestic and sexual objects only and good for nothing else.

Feminist, artists use their arts as tool to challenge, debunk and confront the male conception of the female. They use their arts to reimagine the world in which we live and represent the image of women currently by perceiving them as agents of change in society whose feelings and experiences could be recovered from the oppression of silence enjoined on them by male dominance. Catherine Simpson, Mariama Baa, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwanpa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and others are in the vanguard of this efforts.

Quite notably, Femi Osofisan has also contributed in his dramaturge to the politics of the representation of the female image.

Osofisan's Socialist Ideology and the Politics of Women Empowerment

Osofisan's Dramaturgy is foregrounded on the emancipation of the downtrodden and oppressed in society. His major aim is giving voice to the voiceless oppressed masses and transferring hegemony to the poor. Osofisan is a consummate man of the theatre who uses his dramaturgy to further the cause of the down trodden masses. Osofisan's drama is materialist and socialist with the poor at the centre. In consonance with this view, Sandra Richards asserts that.

Osofisan champions the cause of the common man and woman in an age when late capitalism has apparently caught the entire world in its seductive stranglehold and an indigenous elite class further strips the nation of its tremendous physical and moral resources. Grounding his vision of change in a dialectical reading of history. Osofisan manipulates his Yoruba and Western heritages to speak directly of the socio political challenges facing his society and to scrutinize art as (counter) hegemonic practice (vii)

On his part, Muiwa Awodiya describes Osofisan's drama as one that is based on freedom, egalitarianism and justice. According to him:

The significant thing about Osofisan's drama is not so much its philosophical content as its posture of revolt; its restless search for fairness in a world of abandoned justice. In the plays, myths of rebellion are enacted to confront the betrayal of aspiration, pervasive squandering of human and material resources and widespread political corruption... (13)

Commenting on the same subject, Aihvba and Odiya believes that:

Femi Osafisan believer in the socialist cause... to Osofisan and his contemporary's art is a relevant and a potent instrument of social mobilization. Drama must be functional in terms of arousing the consciousness of the masses in order to effect a change for a better society through collective action... drama is a potent ideological tool for liberating the oppressed masses. (7)

Consequently, all Osofisan's plays share certain thematic concerns, with the emancipation of the poor through collective struggle. His plays may attempt to take many shapes and dimensions but all aimed towards the same ideal, an ideological commitment to social change. Commenting on his consistent thematic preoccupation CharlesUji posits that:

There is one particular aspect that seems to be a very permanent feature in (Osofisan's) dramatic works. And that aspect relates to change and collective action (115)

Consequently, Osofisan's puts contemporary society on the podium and draws his characters from the down trodden poor oppressed masses. Osofisan's heroes therefore consist of common characters like present farmers' fishermen, poor artisans, labourers, traders, public servants and very significantly women. It is not surprising that Osofisan gives women a leading role and a vibrant voice in his dramaturgy. Women as have already been established in this essay are a symbolic and an archetypal Metaphor of the poor oppressed masses. They are marginalized, sidelined, silenced, not represented, and misrepresented. Osofisan being a socialist apostle and crusader gives women a leading and Heroic role in his dramaturgy, abiding with the feminist goal and ideology of feminism which advocates that literature must be conceived as an instrument for the presentation and proper representation of the image of the female gender as strong virile, productive and virtuous. Does this make Osofisan a feminist?

The Contrapuntal Presentation of Women as Heroine and Villain in Osofisan's *Tegonn... And No More the Wasted Breed*

In the plays under discussion in this essay, Osofisan reinvents two strong and potent female characters as Hero and villain in *Tegonni... and No More the Wasted Breed* respectively; our focus shall be on two goddesses' Yemoja, Yoruba goddess of the River and Elusu (Olokunsu) goddess of the inland waters.

Tegonni... is a postcolonial text foregrounded on the clash between the African indigenous and the colonial Western Cultures. It presents a tragic picture of African victims under the Weight of colonialism imperial domination. It also documents instances of black victim confronting the white colonialists with all their excesses. The play is a rewriting of Euripides Antigone, foregrounded on the audacious atrocities of the colonial masters in their attempt to colonize African societies. The colonial occupation only heaped sorrow, pain and suffering on the discomfited African Victims. The discussion between Tegonni and the governor suffices.

GOV. think of the possible consequence to your people. You are young, but I am sure you've heard about what happened to the greet Benin City, what they suffered for daring to kill white Men. Your people will be wiped out

TEGONNI. Shut up and listen, historian why do you think it will matter if you wipe out our town? What you have done already to our men and to our pride is that not sufficient damage? When our souls are in bondage what does it matter again what happens to our carcass?... (86)

Their conversation continues:

GOV. (*Breaking into a sweat*) where are you taking me?

TEGONNI You'll see

GOV. Listen I am the Governor,
a British officer..... symbol
of the Empire

TEGONNI. And I am just a little African primitive, from a lost village in the jungle, I represent no power and no empire just a small girl, tired of being trampled upon by invaders like you, whom we once welcomed as friends but tricked us into signing off our freedom just because you have guns...(87)

The play is replete with clashes between the dominated Africans and the white imperial masters, but the African refuse to give up hope and resign to fate. Bayo repudiates Western Culture;

BAYO. Don't thank me, I am only doing my duty!
When you accept to be the surrogate father
of a bridegroom who comes from a bush
country where they have no culture, then you
have to think of everything for him!

JONES. Is it land of her majesty the Queen of
England, i hear you describe like that you
primitive? Just let the General hear you when
he arrives this morning! (38)

The governor denigrates and violates the African culture even more:

GOV. Welcome me – with that! Rather audacious,
isn't it? This is what they call Christianity,
these liberated priests who come over to
Africa! They bring the word of God to the
jungle and what happens! Satan takes over!
Everything changes to voodoo! Our sacred
hymns are turned to dark incantations! And I
am supposed to like that! I am supposed to
tolerate it as “the expression of another
culture” while the Devil Crows triumphant in
my ear! (46).

In the end, Osofisan subverts social order by female characters who are empowered to bring about the defeat of the imperialist. The female protagonists, strong willed, spirited characters transcend the stereotypical image of women as oppressed, silenced and weaker sex. The heroines triumphs in the end.

The heroines in this struggle are led, mentored and encouraged by Yemoja the Yoruba deity of the River all the way to victory. Not very visible in the play, yet not absent. Her impact and presence is felt throughout the play as the unseen mother that gently urges, propels, impels and guides her daughters to victory. The play opens and ends with her. Her ever loving kind and generous disposition becomes the fuel that steers the girls to triumph:

On a platform, the water Goddess, Yemoja, in full resplendent regalia is rowed in, in a much decorated boat. Her colours and body adornments are the same which, although far less abundant and more muted, Tegonni will be seen wearing later for her bridal procession. Yemonja is surrounded by her female attendants also richly dressed and carrying mirrors – They and the boat men swing and sway to a song! A spectacle of dazzling colours and fluid, synchronized movements... (10)

The picture invoked here is that of love, harmony and beauty. Her attendants here refer to Tegonni and her fellow girls who participate in the struggle it is the image of a mother hen and her chicks who congregate for mentorship and direction. This interpretation is strengthened in the end when the heroines are reward by Yemonja After the victory:

Almost simultaneously with the freeze, lights come up on the boat of Yemoja the figurer frozen on it, as we saw last. Their song gradually becomes audible again as the figures come alive rowing around the Goddess. In a symbolic dance, Antigone and Tegonni kneel before the goddess and are each rewarded with a crystal fan and dazzling blue necklace the two rise again and *join the rowing and singing, and the boat begins to leave... (106)*

Elusu in the *No Longer the Wasted Breed* is quite the opposite of benignity and love symbolized by Yemonja. She is Portrayed as a goddess of doom and destruction for her devotees. *No More the Wasted Breed* is an insidious attack on the ritual and pessimistic world view bantered by Wole Soyinka in *The Strong Breed*, where the protagonist was fated to die as a carrier . In spite of all attempt to avert this fate, he is destroyed in a most tragic and catastrophic manner. He meets his doom not only as carrier for his people, but for strangers. On the other hand, Osofisan reversers their tragic fate in *No More the Wasted Breed*. The protagonists, Biokun and Saluga (common fisher men) are pitted against Elusu, Olokunsu the goddess of the inland rivers. And by a dint of resilience, courage and struggle they defeat the fiendish goddess.

Elusu is depicted as a goddess who thrives and glories in the destruction and waste of her subjects. The play opens with the catastrophe she vented on her own subject:

OLOKUN: look at your work Elusu!

ELUSU: Yes, am I not beautiful?

OLOKUN: Beautiful! Look at the wreckage you've made of the town. For how many months now, you've surrounded them, suffocated them, till their hand has ceased to breath. You've spread your water everywhere, like a terrible carpet, so that wherever they put their feet, even within their doors, they swim in you

ELUSU: And more! You should see their farmlands, which I have turned to swamp. Roots of their precious crops, iheld so in my embrace till they rotted away. I am a terrible goddess of vengeance.

OLOKUN: They will starve to death!

ELUSU: All the fishers, I have driven them away to other shores. And more! When they put their boats out, seeking to escape, I simply heave my chest, a simple effort of breaking, and they are lost forever. Husband, I am beautiful!

Inspite of the entreaties and pleas by her husband Olokun, she continued to afflict her people, her own subjects:

ELUSU. On whose side are you anyway?

OLUKUN. You know yourself on whose side I can be. You know that like or not, I am condemned always to be on the side of justice. Which is why I hope that in this matter, you have been rash-

ELUSU. You were not there, to see the humiliations they piled on me. Have waited for twenty five years

OLUKUN. That is not too long for a god's patience, my dear- there are still questions to be answered.

ELUSU. What questions? What does it all mean to you anyway? They are not your people.

OLUKUN. I know they are yours but in times of tribulation such as this, it is my name they call. The air rings with the name of Olukun, smells with offerings to me.

ELUSU. All the more reason why they must be punished! Olokun, I am surprised at you. When we burstout from the bleeding gash of our mother Yemoja were we not each given our laws and taboos...(77)

It is very pathetic to note that the pain and calamity that Elusu has heaped on her subject is as a result of a little stain on her beauty:

ELUSU... You've been away, but see, look at my face! See what human beings have made of me, a cesspit of rotten flotsam... so what has happened to the age long in junction that they must honour my beauty and not fish in me?

Eventually, just for her vile and vane desires, her ego and personal aggrandizement the land was condemned to a waste land, a cesspool of disease and calamity and inspite of all the people who had died of hunger and starvation, in spite of the pain and tragedy traversing the land, she insists that a carrier must die in the unforgiving turbulent waves of the sea for her beauty to be cleansed

ELUSU... Olokun I have been patient for too long and they think its weakness. This

time they must pay the price in full.
My waters will be cleansed, restored to
purity before I relent.

Elusu herself came to land with her husband and demands the carrier ritual be carried out for her pride and beauty:

ELUSU. It's the sign given to your family down
your generation

TOGUN. It's the sign of the chosen

SALUGA. Yes, but chosen for what?

TOGUN. Chosen to save the land, to carry it
across troubled waters and set it
down again on the other side
(97,98)

ELUSU. She of the timeless sea her patience has
run out, she demands immediate
reparation.

SALUGA. Indeed!

ELUSU. Let her carrier go and all will be
restored. The water will withdraw
and the fishes return. All the dying
will live again.

SALUGA. He's going no where

BIOKUN. Saluga...

SALUGA. It's a trick, Biokun

BIOKUN. I have no choice but to take the risk.
Look at so much suffering in the
land. if I could do so little to end
it...

SALUGA. You'll not end anything, don't
believe that, you'll not end anything
but your life- look at the water
(104-105)

Disgusted by Salug's insolence, Elusu strikes him to death-Biokun in anger lashes out at the heartless, pitiless and impetuous action of the goddess. He points out the Elusu constantly abandoned her worshipper by neglecting them and treating them with levity, languidity and insolence always taking and taking, and never giving back. At this strong argument, Olokun had no choice but to revive Saluga and condemns Elusu to death since she's devoid of her worshippers.

CONCLUSION

Yemonja, in this play is emblematic of female empowerment and ascendancy. Yemonja generates strength, love, mentorship and harmony almost opposite of the stereotypic image of goddess especially African and Greek goddess in the Hellenic world in which gods play a central role in human affairs and turn humans into birds of prey and ferry them willingly into disasters, like grasshoppers in the hands of wanton boys. Yemonja is a benevolent mother bestowing abundant blessings on her devotees and energizing them to victory unlike other gods who destine their subjects to catastrophe and doom. Yemonja is an iconic representation of kindness, good motherliness, love and affection which ensures a harmonious social order.

Elusu like Yemonja is a goddess of the sea. Very much the like the African and Greek gods, she is unkind, heartless and fiendish. Her major source of Joy is to heap pain sorrow and catastrophe on her devotees. She is a prototype of the typical African, Hellenic and Greek gods who find delight in the sufferings and tragedy of their people. To her, humans are weak, frail and vulnerable and must be taken advantage off. They must be tormented regularly at the slightest provocation or for no reason at all. Their fate is always bleak and hopeless, just like the fate of a cockroach in the hands of humans. She is metaphor of hate, malice death and destruction who wantonly and maliciously design a disharmonious social order in her universe.

In several of his plays, Femi Osofisan has continue to give women a leading role and a voice in society he projects the virile, strong and intellectually matured woman who is potent in the restricting and reconstruction of a just and egalitarian social order. His women are not oppressed, subjugated and sentenced to the kitchen and 'the other room', butanagents of change and progress and prosperity in the modern society. This Osofisan's is position projects him as a feminist engulfed in the politics of the representation of the female image from the stereotypic and patriarchal status of a defeated race. When we take a deeper look at his drama, one comes to the realization of the fact that Osofisan is not afeminist but a socialist canvassing equality and egalitarianism for the, oppressed and voiceless in society which the female gender typify. Unlike the feminists

that see the woman as all good, blameless and spotless, Osafisan's most heinous, dark nefarious and unsavoury villains are often women. This removes him from the feminist appellation and definition. Osafisan's strong portrayal of women is akin to the strong portrayal of the poor and oppressed who lack the voice and potency to speak and against oppression. The female image in his drama becomes a metaphor of the oppressed, dispirited and subjugated poor in society that needs to be given a voice and character to ensue praxis.

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