5.

FROM TROY TO OWU: WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND PATRIARCHY IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S *WOMEN OF OWU* AND EURIPIDES' *TROJAN WOMEN*

Adekunmi Obafunmi Adeleke

Department of Cultural and Media Studies, Institute of African Studies,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
obafunmi4real@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper adopts Femi Osofisan's (2006) play as the backdrop for this discussion. *Women of Owu* is an African Re-reading of Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Women experiences across the globe today are not too different from that of the past. Violence and subjugation of women have been institutionalized in the contemporary society; while in the past, women experience violence and war more. Beyond patriarchy, this paper teases out the part played by women and how they serve as gatekeepers in the violence, subjugation, and oppression of women. The paper exudes the patriarchy in action as captured in Femi Osofisan's and Euripedes' plays; portraying the universal conception that women are the weaker vessel and are objects to be owned (property). The womanism theory shows that women can be emotional, irrational, weak, and perceived as that to be owned; but they are altruist – fighting for the survival of their people and nation.

The substance of this paper is thrust towards understanding women in every society, how patriarchy operates, the women's experience and their resilience against violence. The paper is also set to portray the altruistic nature of women in the two plays; attributes that are considered to be against the norms of their respective societies and gender and demonstrating commitment to the survival of their people.

Introduction

To understand the experience of women in Euripides' play *Trojan Women* and Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, it is expedient to create a grand imagery and narrative of the 'women's experience' and to understand the ways in which 'patriarchy' shapes this experience and how it works against women in every society. The thrust of this paper is to establish a link between violence and patriarchy, from Troy to Owu, and to gesture at their universality and their relevance in contemporary society (especially in the context in which patriarchy works against women in societies).

Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is an adaption of Euripides' *Trojan Women*. The two plays portray the experiences and the ordeal of women in a war scenario, and also their (women's) commitment to their survival and that of their people. The subordination and oppression of women is universal and not time bound, as it can be traced from the time of the 'Trojan women', around 1184BC when Troy was sacked by the invading army of the Greeks, to the period when Owu was invaded and laid to ruins by the combined forces of Oyo, Ijebu and Ife between 1821 and 1826, and then to contemporary times and societies around the world.

Euripides' *Trojan Women* is a tragic play written to portray the aftermath of the War that took place in Troy between the Trojans and the Greeks. It was presented at the city of Dionysia of 415 BCE, with two other tragedies, *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*. *Women of Owu* was written by Femi Osofisan as an adaption of Euripides' play; Owu was invaded in 1821 – 1826. The play was written in 2006 by Femi Osofisan, adopting Euripides' concepts and perspectives and addressing similar issues, in particular issues around women's oppression. There have been several adaptations of Euripides play, all of them focusing on the plight of women and the violence they experience. Angela Belli (1969: vii), in the preface page of her book discusses the emergence and the intriguing development of modern or contemporary drama, in which playwrights use classical or mythological materials as the basis for new creations. Femi Osofisan's adaptation falls in the category of plays discussed by Angela Belli; that is, plays which adopt classical or mythological materials as grist for the mills of their creative (re)interpretations of human predicaments and conditions. However, the theory "womanism" for this paper argues that all women experience violence from men. Womanism is an offshoot of feminism, feminism claims to represent all women from sexist oppressions, and does not take into

consideration Black women. This gave birth to 'womanism', which gives room for the voice of Black women and see to their emancipation.

Theory

Traditionally, the defining agenda of feminism is the problematisation of patriarchy as an endangering discursive practice, and the valorisation of female subjectivity "through the transformation of gendered power relations (which) might involve reshaping socially determined categories of masculinity and femininity, addressing dominant forms of (hetero) sexuality and contesting material inequalities associated with gendered differences in employment, in institutional representation and in household and personal relations" (Robinson 2000:285). Historically, feminism began as a social movement constituted to fight the patriarchal system which assumes that women are naturally inferior to men by dint of their sexuality. It advocated a belief in the equality for men and women in all areas, including legal, economic, political and social affairs. As a social movement, it began in the form of liberation or women's right movement, in Europe and America, at a time when women were regarded as inferior to men. This inferiorisation of women was documented in the English Customary Law and one of its provisions pertained to the barring of women from voting, except for the few rich ones, and the closure of professional career for women. However, between 1800 and 1900, a remarkable turning point occurred in Europe and America as greater attention was drawn, by women themselves, to the debilitating injustice of the patriarchal system which rendered women as second-class citizens. Thus, in the intervening years, women won a good number of rights for themselves, including legal and economic rights which brought substantial changes to women's status, beginning with the granting of voting right to them in 1920. This was the period of "bra burning", when militant feminists, called suffragettes/ suffragists, fought in the streets, carrying placards and demanding more rights and social autonomy for women (see Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women,* 1792 (re-issued 1995). Over the years, the programmatic agenda of feminism has been reviewed and there have emerged several tributaries and alternative theoretical perspectives, most of which challenge the misleading assumption that patterns and forms of women's experiences of oppression are universal. Alternative theoretical positions such as womanism, motherism, and other 'isms' have been

proposed, especially by African scholars who essay to theorize their own realities due to the ignorance of the external world about Africa, her cultures and her women and due to the missionizing and condescending attitudes of women in the East and West that were perceived as another form of cultural imperialism (see Oyeronke (1997), and Ogundipe (2007)). The rupture with feminism and the construction of different nomenclatures to define and explain different realities of 'other' women, however, does not necessarily deny the fact of patriarchy being the number one source of women's oppression, only the logic and cultural protocols of oppression that is different. Indeed, patriarchy constitutes a cultural system of oppression, operating either brazenly in the open or subterraneously through other cultural systems and agencies. It is a social organization, in which men act as the authority figure, where men have authority over women, children, and their property. Adult men in a patriarchal society have power resided with them, and thus there is rule of male institutions and privileges are given to men over women. Patriarchy in a simple term could be seen as a social structure, in which men have power over women. A patriarchal society operates a male-dominated structure, which is observable and evident in today's society (offices and governance), and in individual relationships (marriage). In a patriarchal society, men hold the positions of power, head of government, head of offices, and most importantly, emphases are laid and men are termed as heads of the family (family being the smallest unit of the society) and so on.

Family as the smallest unit of the society, should be thoroughly analysed by scholars. According to Arundhati (1997), most violence that occur in the society are usually perpetuated by family members. Patriarchy, simply, is an avenue through which women are exploited in the society and could be traced historically. However, Maria Mies (1986: 38) argues that patriarchy is not universal, which is true to a certain extent. There are societies and organizations that give avenue or equity to women – it is observable that, lip service most times are paid to matriarchal societies. Ghana and some places in the South-south region of Nigeria operate a matriarchal society, having a thorough look and analyses of such society – one discovers that, women at the long run are at the receiving end and they are still being oppressed. Taking cue from some part of Benue State, Nigeria and Ghana as a case study, one discovers that, women eke-out a living and daily survival of the family while the men lazy around drinking and chatting. It is a known fact

that almost all parts of Nigeria operate a patriarchal society but comparing women of some part of South-south of Nigeria, and Ghanaian matriarchal society – it is apparent that it is a lip service, as women are still oppressed economically. This is why a womanist theoretical perspective may be more useful than any other perspectives for the apprehension of the universality of women's oppression. According to the womanist theory by Alice Walker, and as further expanded and corroborated by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985); who argued that racism is usually used as background to discuss womanism, Ogunyemi further affirmed that racism is seen as the cause of women oppression and not gender inequalities between men and women.

The first usage of the term 'womanism' could be traced to Alice Walker's quote: *Womanism is to Feminism as Purple is to Lavender*, she used the word 'womanism' in her article titled '*In search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Alice discusses that the word womanism is gotten from the phrase, 'acting womanish", which simply means acting contrary or showcasing traits that are not courageous, outrageous, and which are considered to be beyond the border of the societal norms and values. Womanism does not deal or look into woman alone, but humankind as a whole.

Womanism theory affirmed that, a woman is committed to the continuity and survival of her people – a womanist is one who desires where both men and women co-exist, each holding to their cultural distinctiveness. It is pertinent to also pinpoint that womanism is usually linked and affiliated with Black Feminism, but the scope of womanism theory is not limited to black women—womanism focuses on women as whole and the survival of her race. The care and the act of watching out for the survival of her race is acted out as seen in the literary work of Femi Osofisan. Womanism discusses the love and the resolve of women for the survival of her race and her people; this is applicable to the two plays. The love for the motherland or their state is obvious in the two plays, and the women displayed their feminine power to stay and survive the war – the women resolved to cajole their conqueror to stay alive.

War and Violence Against Women
Contemporary society, do not witness wars, like in the past. Present day warfare is guided by war code and ethics (laws and principles guiding military engagement), places experiencing war and violence, engaged in

battle without putting the military codes into practice – a case study is the Gaza bomb crisis by Israel, which claimed the lives of many civilians. It is a common military law that women and children should be protected and not attacked during a military operation. It is observable historically that from *Troy to Owu* and finally to the present day, women are always the target of warfare and violence. Cassandra was raped by Ajax in Euripides's play, Erelu and her children were shared among the warlords and some sold into slavery in Osofisan's play, the present society displayed violence against women at different occasions, from Rwanda Genocide, Biafra war, Angola, Sierra Leone, Republic of Congo and many more. Violence against women is not peculiar to Africa, it goes beyond the border of Africa. Women in Europe and other part of the world also experience violence; just as culture differs, people experience violence differently and there are different forms of violence (forms of violence will be discussed as a sub-topic).

Violence against women do not stop at war, it occurs at every given chance, violence against women in the contemporary society is common among married couples or in an intimate relationship. Krug et al (2002) corroborates that most violence against women is perpetrated by men, and with those they have intimate relationship with. Dobash & Dobash (2003:5) support the fact that violence against women is not peculiar to Africa, that women across different age, social class, races experience violence in intimate relationships. This also lends credence to the choice of theory to discuss this paper. Womanism theory is a universalist ideology that discusses the experience of women across all nations, races, ages and so on.

Pointedly, it is noteworthy to discuss the altruism of the women in the two plays; at the lowest point of their life, they resolved to live and fight for their people's survival. These women in the two plays, Osofisan's *Women of Owu* and Euripides' *Trojan Women,* Iyunloye and Helen were able to live and survive the war – they both resolved to cajole their conqueror to stay alive. This depicts the femininity that is considered to be weakness, has been converted by these women as their strength.

There are different forms and ways in which women experience violence. Dobash & Dobash (2003: 6-8) classified them as; Sexual abuse, Rape, Shoving, Slapping, and many more. All these could be put under the physical abuse of women. Physical abuse of women during and after war, and all these types of violence can be found in an intimate relationship. However, there are other ways in which women can be abused, oppressed

and checkmated by men's doing.

Different Forms of Violence Against Women
The types of violence against women are:
Physical Violence
Psychological/Emotional Violence
Economic Violence
Structural Violence

Physical Violence: Dobash and Dobash (2003) attempt a classification of violence against women, but all these can be put under physical violence. Sexual Abuse, Rape, Shoving, Slapping, and many more, are listed and classified as types or forms of violence against women, according to the Dobash(s). All these when thoroughly examined, could be placed and classified under physical violence. They all involve contact and touching of the victim of violence. Most times, it is often term as domestic violence (it occurs often between married couples or those in intimate relationship). Physical violence most times results in injury and psychological disorder for the victims.

Psychological/Emotional Violence: Emotional abuse includes harassment, verbal attacks, belittling, excessive possessiveness, isolation, deprivation of economic resources (Alexander; 1993).

Economic Violence: This is another means through which women are limited. Olufunmilayo I. Fawole (2007) affirmed that women often have limited access to, funds and credit – which controls access to health care, employment, and education. She further argues that there are biased traditional laws that limit women on inheritance, property rights, and the use of communal land. Even marriage, women are barred from working by their partners--economic violence against women is prolific in a poverty-stricken society. Maria Mies (1986) spoke and discuss expressly about how women in the 'Third World Countries', are marginalized and used economically. They are used as labour force without the proper pay and working condition – which is prevalent in Indian, according to Maria Mies (1986: 145-148).

Structural Violence: this kind of violence is a concept in literature that discusses gender-based violence. It important to know that all other forms of violence fall under structural violence. Structural violence came into existence as a result of the ills in the society, violence against women is usually treated as individual problem. But scholars like, Coomaraswamy (2002); Dauer (2006); and Kodikara (2012) all spoke and opined that, violence against women is a societal epidemic. According to Gil (2009) he posited that structural violence is the active means and utilizing all possible manners to entrench inequalities and consequently leads to the cultured way of thinking of the society towards women. Also, Paul Farmer discusses about structural violence, and his main discussion is the system of governance, the government, and the ills in the society. Gil (2009) corroborates Paul Farmer's opinion, that the violence against women is as a result of a structured society and government to oppress and subjugate women.

Women as Property
It is observable and evident in both plays (Trojan women and Women of Owu) that women are conceived as property and possessions. Certain extracts from Women of Owu and Trojan women corroborate this claim. Women are portrayed as those without a will or a mind.

> Women: And – Shame, oh shame! Our women were seized
> And shared out to the blood-splattered troops
> To spend the night. Only some of us – we two, and
> The woman you see there
> Were spared, those of us from noble houses And others whose beauty struck their eye:
> We are being reserved, they say, for Generals.
> > (Femi Osofisan, 2006: 3).

> 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.
> And so fierce.   (Osofisan, 2006: 6).

Erelu: In defeat, dear women, always expect the worst.
That is the law of combat. The law of defeat
(To herself)
Look at me! A slave! To whom will they sell me?
To the flesh merchants of Kano or Abomey? Or
Straight to the white masters in the cold castles
Of Cape Coast? Will put padlocks
On these wrinkled lips, and chains on these old and
Withered feet? Ah, they will brand me with their hot iron, Me! I
am going to be maid to some foreign matron:
I will watch night and day over her brats,
Or slog away in her kitchen, picking vegetables,
My body covered in sores! Me the Erelu of Owu
(Osofisan, 2006: 16-17).

The extracts corroborate the fact that women are seen as an object and property to be owned. Women and young girls are victims of war. In Osofisan's play, the fate of women is not different from that of Euripides' play. In both city, husbands are killed, children murdered and the women became slaves, and property to the conquerors. In Euripides's play, Trojan women faced violence, and rape – Cassandra was raped, which is one of the many instances.

The fate of women in a male dominated society is available in these plays, their experiences and narrations depict hopelessness for a war victim, who does not know what awaits her in a foreign land. A case of royalty becoming a whore to the warlords and maids to their wife, and worse scenario for those that are not royalty; all these points accusing fingers at men perpetrating and subjugating women, and using every available means to oppress women. The women face the brunt of the men's war and deeds; women are made to live within the men-structured system that do not reckon with them. However, there is a twist to this argument, a cue from Sembene movie titled: *Molaade*, one is able to observe and discover that women are also perpetrators of violence against fellow women. The women most times serve as a custodian to these horrific cultural practices that humiliate women. This also could be seen in *Women of Owu*:

Erelu: Have Iyunloye put to death, as you swore just now!
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

                    (Osofisan, 2006; 47)

Iyunloye: Get away from me! Leave me alone!
My husband, you see how they treat me!
(He turns his eyes away)
Listen, whatever may have happened, I am still Your wife at
least, and everybody knows it.
So, this contempt is also a slap on your face!

                    (Osofisan, 2006; 48)

It is important to say here that women also get involve in institutionalizing violence against fellow women, which is against the womanism theory motif - that speaks for women and all humans. Womanism is argued that women are the same everywhere, no matter the country or race and social class– and there should be equity among them and also with men.

Submission
This paper has been able tease out that patriarchy operates in all society; however, at different levels and forms. It is also pertinent to pinpoint that women are sometimes gatekeepers to fellow women's subjugation and oppression.

Evidently, women in all societies experience some forms of violence or discrimination; but, each peculiar to their culture and environments. This is not different in the case of Troy and Owu, the women faced violence; however, contemporary forms of violence are institutionalized to subjugation, oppressed and marginalized women. Also, these women displayed their altruism to their people and state; exhibiting traits that are considered to be against the norms of their gender and societies, demonstrating commitment to the survival of their people.

From the two plays, this paper has been able to note that there is an institutionalization of violence and discrimination against women, this position is argued by Paul Farmer (2004) and Gil (2009), they positioned that there is a well-structured patriarchal society organized by men and it is being rehearsed into people and they begin to conceive violence a norm.

References

Aduke, Adebayo. *Feminism and Black Women's Creative Writing*. AMD Publishers Ibadan, 1996.

Alexander, Pamela C. "The Differential Effects of Abuse Characteristics and Attachment in the Prediction of Long-term Effects of Sexual Abuse." *Journal of Interpersonal violence* 8.3 (1993): 346-362.

Beard, Mary. *Woman as a Force in History: A study in Traditions and Realities*. Vani Prakashan, 1987.

Belli, Angela. *Ancient Greek Myths and Modern Drama*. 1969.

Coomaraswamy, Radhika. "Are Women's Rights Universal? Re-Engaging the Local." *Meridians* 3.1 (2002): 1-18.

Dauer, Sheila. "Violence against Women: An Obstacle to Equality." *U. Md. LJ Race, Religion, Gender & Class* 6 (2006): 281.

Dobash, Rebecca Emerson. "Domestic violence: Arrest, Prosecution, and Reducing Violence." *Criminology & Public Policy* 2.2 (2003): 313-318.

Farmer, Paul. "An anthropology of structural violence." *Current anthropology* 45.3 (2004): 305-325.

Femi Osofisan. Women of Owu. University press PLC, Three Crown Building Jericho, P.M.B. 5095, Ibadan, Nigeria, (2006).

Gil, D. G. "Perspectives on Social Justice. Forum on Public Policy." (2009).

Kodikara, Chulani. "Only Until the Rice is Cooked? The Domestic Violence Act, Familial Ideologyand Cultural Narratives in Sri Lanka." (2012).

Krug, Etienne G., et al. "The world Report on Violence and Health." *The Lancet* 360.9339 (2002): 1083-1088.

Mies, Maria. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.

Minhaj, Sania, and Diwakar Prahaladaiah. "Misogyny in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things.", 1997.

Ogundipe, Molara. *Indigenous and Contemporary Gender Concepts and Issues in Africa: Implications for Nigeria's Development*. No. 2. Malthouse Press, 2007.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English." *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society* 11.1 (1985): 63-80.

Olufunmilayo, I. Fawole. "Economic Violence to Women and Girls–is it receiving the necessary attention." *Trauma, Violence and Abuse* 9 (2008): 167-177.

Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónk   . *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. U of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Robinson, Jenny. "Feminism and the Spaces of Transformation." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25.3 (2000): 285-301.

Wollstonecraft, M. A. "Vindication of the Rights of Men, With a Vindication of the Rights of Women, and Hints/M. Wollstonecraft." (1995).