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## FEMINISM IN FEMI OSOFISSAN'S PLAY 'WOMEN OF OWU'

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### Introduction:

Femi Osofissan is a famous Nigerian critic, poet, novelist and dramatist. In his writing we come across the reflection of African socio-cultural and economic problems. He is the most prolific dramatist in Nigeria. He is primarily well-known as a playwright. During his writing career, he wrote more than fifty plays. Many of his plays have been well received in many countries in the world. In his plays Osofissan employs various devices such as humour, irony, song, dance, folktale and fables. It is due to the adoption of these techniques and devices, his plays have attracted the reader across the world. They have brought him recognition as a prolific playwright. His dramatic career ranges from the year 1975 to 2006.

The present paper throws light on the various features of feminism depicted in Femi Osofissan's play 'The Women of Owu'. Femi Osofissan is primarily a Neocolonial playwright in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his plays we observe the reflection of various features of Neo colonialism. Neo colonialism is a prominent trend developed after colonialism and post-colonialism in the post-modern era. It is but a continuation of imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and post colonialism in a new mode. Like all these tendencies neo-colonialism represents colonial, imperialistic or post colonial rule of the established powers over the exploited ones. These include the politicians, emperors, imperialists, the capitalists, industrialists, land lords etc. who have dominated the workers' class, labourers' class, the middle class, low-middle class, the poor and the deprived or the oppressed class. All of them are but a part of the mass society that includes farmers, workers, artists, technicians, women etc. who have been exploited from time to time by the so called post-colonial and neo-colonial authorities. Here, the prime objective of the present paper is to throw light on the lives of women depicted in the play 'The Women of Owu' through feministic perspective.

### What is Feminism ?

Feminism is one of the most significant ideologies developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It aims at the emancipation of woman from the age old shackles of tradition, culture, religion

which deprived the woman of her natural rights. It represents that woman is as good as man hence it is necessary to bestow upon woman all rights and powers which are already given to man. According to the feminist thinkers hitherto woman has been dominated by man in socio-political, economic, cultural, educational and familial life. She has never been allowed to breathe free air of life like man. Under the influence of patriarchy woman has been oppressed mentally, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. She has also been exploited morally, socially, economically in the patriarchal system. As a result of male domination woman has undergone sufferings, tortures, entrenchment and what not. She has been treated as someone who is inferior to man, her subordination at the hands of man has resulted into insult and under treatment. In the patriarchal system woman has no identity of her own, different from that of man. The feminist thinkers have created a platform for bringing a different identity to woman from that of man. These thinkers opine that woman is free to live. She has ability to live, work, serve, learn and earn like man. She is as good as man is. At all levels in the society she is equal to man. In short, feminism anticipates for the liberation of woman and her freedom as a human being.

#### **Women of Owu (2006) : A brief outline of the play :**

Femi Osofisan published his play 'Women of Owu' in 2006. This play is an African re-reading of the play 'The Trojan Woman' by Euripedes. The play depicts the incident of the fall of the city of Troy or roundabout that one. In the north of Nigeria there are two Yoruba Kingdoms - Ijebu and Owu. Ijebu once attacked the city of Owu after a seven year siege with the help of mercenaries recruited by Oyo refugees. The city of Owu was a model city state. It was one of the most prosperous cities in those times. The city was attacked by the Allied forces by disguising themselves as the persons who are trying to make free the prosperous Apomu market from Owu's despotic movements. Owu had protected the city for seven years. As a part of this, the gates of the city walls were closed. During this period only drought situation had prevailed all over Owu and the citizens faced difficulties during the period of three successive years of drought. The Allied forces took this situation as favourable to them and they smashed the city of Owu. These Allied forces did not want the rejuvenation of the city anymore and hence they destroyed the city completely by setting it on fire. They slaughtered all the males, adults and children and made all females slaves. In short, the reconstruction of the city of Owu was not possible here onwards.

The play 'Women of Owu' deals with war in Owu Kingdom around 1821. It portrays bitter and bloodstained historical experiences. It is but a description of the experience of war and the sorrow and pangs of the survivors of the noble and beautiful women. The play

deals with an account of the miserable incident of the war that has completely devastated the Owu city. The old woman who went to fetch water told Anlugbua the whole history of the apocalyptic war. She also gave the account of the fall of the city at the hands of the Allied forces and the mercenary soldiers. Anlugbua was a former war leader from Owu. He was the son of the ancestral founder of Owu city (Orisa), Oba Asunkungbade. The women also told how they slaughtered young and old males. They spared only the beautiful women and women from royal family for keeping them as concubine for generals. Oba Asunkungbade showed them his real identity as God. He also showed that in the past he has protected his own town. Okunade (Maye) invited the allied forces under the pretext of saving and freeing the persecuted Owu people from Oba Akinjobi, the despot King. He put on a siege around the city for seven years. However, he failed to enter the city. Okunde's beloved wife, Iyunloye, was taken as a captive with others by Owu soldiers when they had conquered Apomy market. This very incident transformed the mind of Okunade. He took training as a soldier and became Maye, waiting for revenge. The city had big gates and walls but due to three successive famines, the curse of Gods in Owu, the city saw its own apocalypse. One night before this attack, Oba Akinjobi has eloped from the city secretly. Now there was nothing else in the city but destruction, death, smoke and moaning of the women survived for their dead husbands and children. They also had the sense of fear that in future they would be but slaves. The women had run to holy places in order to seek refuge but these places were also profane, the armies had killed men and women in the holy places as well. Among the dead there is a queen Frelu Afia, a great sufferer who thinks that she has lost too much in the war because she had lived a life of luxury of a queen. Now she will be a slave. Her five princes were slaughtered. Princesses were raped and imprisoned. They were to be made wives of Kings. She saw the death of her grandchild, the lone survivor and the hope of her community. The consequence of war was that the priestess, Orisaye, daughter of Erelu, because a lunatic and took an oath to avenge for the brutality by murdering the master who demanded her as his wife. The daughter-in-law of Erelu, Iyunloye's lust was the reason of the destruction. But at the end she is forgiven by her husband.

In this play we come across the following examples of various features of feminism reflected through the feminine characters in the play.

At first Osofissan highlights brutality of war and its disastrous effects on women. Osofissan is of the view that war is brutal and it is but a plague ravaging post colonial Africa today. He further opines that women undergo sufferings, agonies, betrayals, and deep wounds due to war. The brutality of war creates deep sorrowful effect on the mind women. Here, the

empt of Osofissan is to avoid war and its brutality and establish harmonious relationship between men and women. It is but a hope of the playwright to bring happiness and joy in the world by ending up the sufferings of woman.

The play 'Women of Owu' is an adaptation of the Greek play 'The Trojan Women' by Euripedes. As an adaptation of the Greek play it throws light on the theme of resistance, resolution, reconciliation and mourning. Through the Greek tragedy of Euripedes, Osofissan wants to motivate people for political change. The play throws light on the savagery in post-colonial Nigeria and the grief and sorrow of the women of Owu within and beyond Nigeria. It also throws light on the cultural, politics of Europe directed towards Africa. In order to end the influence of neo-colonialism in Africa, he says that it is necessary to relocate Africa's relation to imperial power in the context of the major challenges of sovereignty, freedom, justice and democratic governance in the post-colonial era. He wants to bring political justice and economic development by avoiding the recurrence of slavery and wretchedness of women and all others.

The colonial mindset shows the superiority of the West over the East. Osofissan reveals the grim truth of the survival and continuation of colonial structures and values in the play. It is but for the benefits of the colonizers. In the neo-colonial world still there is colonial mentality of white supremacy. For example, Helen is a beautiful woman representing the West. She is not mourning. However the men were quarrelling over 'the beautiful woman' in this play, Iyunloye. This represents how they are allured by the faithless West. In fact Iyunloye is a coquette who succeeds in changing the mind of her husband who was temporarily abandoned by her with the intention of enjoying the opulent of Owu rather than the wretched hut. At last her beauty attracted the heart of Mayo and joined himself in love with her. Mayo accepts her, pardons her and positions her as the supreme victor. In fact, Iyunloye loses nothing but bewitches one man after another and pulls them all in her trap. Here, her eyes were good enough for setting one city ablaze. The defeated women of Owu recognise this double dealing of Iyunloye. For them war is about the favours of a lenient female. However, she can face them as a rival against each other and prevail upon them. Osofissan criticizes this mentality through the character of Iyunloye. Osofissan says that a woman is not an enemy of another woman. One woman irrespective of her religion/colour has to maintain equality with other women. Equality is needed not only between male and female relationship but among all women.

**The role of women of Owu in Balkanization Policy :**

Belkanisation means division of territory into small and hostile states and rule over the conquered, divided territories. Even after the independence of many countries in the world the strategies of Balkanisation and divide and rule are still in vogue in the post-colonial era. It represents the western policy. The female character, Iyunloye is the symbol of west. She uses the western policy of divide and rule in all colonial and neo-colonial countries. This policy has worked in the historical Owu war also. The British help the Allies of Ijebu but Anlugbua is ignorant of this even though he wants to save Owu from their attack. The women in the play remind Anlugbua for this strategy of the British of dividing Owu. Here, the women display their deep attachment with Owu's freedom and liberty and their hatred for divide and rule or balkanization policy of the western power. Through the following dialogue of the women and Erelu we see the sense of disgust of Owu women against the western supreme authority and love for freedom.

Woman : Liars / You came, you said

To help free our people from a wicked king. After your liberation, here we are  
With our spirit broken and our faces swollen  
Waiting to be turned into whores and households  
In your town.

Erelu : Savages! You claim to be more civilized than us

But did you have to carry out all this killing and carnage,  
To show you are stronger than us? Did you.  
Woman No Erelu. What are you saying, or  
Are you forgetting.  
They do not want our market at all

Woman : They are not interested in such petty things as profits.

Women : Only in lofty, lofty ideas, like freedom.

Woman : Or human rights.

Woman : All they care for, my dear women.

All they care for, all of them is our freedom. (P.12,13)

Here, we observe that the women of Owu are worried about their freedom and human rights. Osofissan here anticipates for the freedom of women and their rights through the freedom of the city of Owu. It is but a feminist viewpoint of Osofissan.

**The hatred of women for war :**

In this play Osofissan points out that the western power wants to exploit Owu economically and develop their slave trade in Owu. They want the Owu people as slaves for their benefit. The Owu women dislike this attitude of the British. In this regard they don't want to be yoked down by the British. As a part of this they display a sense of disgust for weapons of war provided by the British. The feeling of hatred for war and weapon is noticed in the following dialogue :

**Woman :**

It was a war, such as we had never known before. The Allied forces came with weapons they call guns, Guns, Anlunbua ! Deadly sticks.

Which explode and turn a whole battalion  
Into corpses, Rags upon of bleeding flesh

The Owu women know quite well that internal conflicts in and outside the country give a chance to the neo-colonialists to take undue advantage of the situation. The chorus leader in the play appeals to the women of Owu to stop internal conflict so that the westerners will have little chance of dominating us. Here, Osofissan has tried to rule out the domination of the British :

**Chorus Leader :**

No. stop the wailing and brace yourselves.  
Me dear woman. The lesson is clear. It's us not the gods,  
Who create war. It's us, we human beings who can kill it.

Here, the women of Owu agree that due to internal conflict, we create war. They express their disapproval against the slave trade.

**The disapproval of God by the Woman of Owu :**

The Owu women expect for the freedom of expression and as a part of it they believe in their conscience. They want to follow their rationale in this regard. They want to be away from religious, cultural orthodoxies. They have lost faith in God and the West. It is but their struggle for a scientific and rational thinking. Through this Osofissan represents his typical feminist approach of improving woman's world with new ideas. For example, the following dialogue represents Erelu's attitude towards God at the time of the burial ritual of her grandson. Her attitude is totally changed here :



**Erelu :**

The Gods are not worth much, they lie and lie the time.  
And deceive us. Did wo not pray enough ? Did we not offer  
Sacrifice upon sacrifice !

-----The Gods are not much worth respect. (p.61)

Here, Erelu expresses her view that we should not rely on Gods. In order to solve their problems human beings should rely on themselves. In short, the gods like the neo-colonialists are the exploiters and the women here reject fanaticism or evangelism.

**The resistance of Owu women to foreign trade :**

The imperialists have invested funds in developing countries through their companies. In the words of Kwame Nkrumah "these are the forces that link with (----) mining magnates and industrialists and we see them now entering the development projects of many of the new African states, hiding their identity behind government and international agencies. They are the real defeaters of neo-colonialism (Nkrumah, 211). The play opens with oil politics in Nigeria. Even though Nigeria is the oil resource warehouse and 80% revenue and 90% total export come from oil yet many regions of the country are underdeveloped. The sordid condition of Nigeria due to oil politics is reflected in the chorus of the women as follows:

Lamp, yield your oil to the oil seller.  
The stars are down, the sun retires,  
the moon's refused to light the night A stranger's come -----  
brought his merchandise of  
Death -----he sells.  
And none of us can refuse to buy  
Lamp, yield your oil to the seller (69).

The chorus women infact, show the sense of fear and submissiveness ----- towards the neo-colonialists. They know quite well that they can't resist the super power any more. They have to get exploited at the hands of the super power. Osofissan here tries to make aware women of their rights for cowing down the super powers and their rule over undeveloped countries.

In the play 'Women of Owu' finally Osofissan tries to prove that women are as good as men are. He rules out the male dominance in the post modern era. Traditionally, the male gender has been considered as a prime decision maker. The playwright broadens this view by including women also as decision makers. He points out that there is no difference between patriarchy and matriarchy .Both are one and same. As a part of this he argues that the welfare

of the future generations of Owu is equally allocated among women because no man of Owu is alive to lead their community. The decision of war and all other allied decisions are taken by males and women have to bear only consequences of war. Osofissan further points out that such a monopoly of males results in colonialism and neo-colonialism. The masculine attitude of aggression is thoroughly in discord with the feminine attitude of gentleness, peace, love and comfort. So he expresses his view that the future of the human being is safe not in the hands of males but in the hands of female. This feministic approach will definitely try to end the dictatorial, neo-colonial, patriarchal system. In this play we come across a number of female characters struggling against the egocentric male characters. These include Lawumi Erelu, Orisay Adumandan Iyunloye and the chorus women. All of these women are strong and wise. They have their own identity separate from the male characters in the play.

The women in this play on the one hand display their submissiveness, tolerance, sense of fear and inferiority caused due to the long and persistent continuation of colonialism in the forms of post colonialism and neo-colonialism. However, for maintaining peace and harmony in the city of Owu i.e. in Nigeria they strive hard when the Allied forces along with the British attack upon Nigeria. They revolt against the west powers through resistance, through protest, through disobedience of the patriarchal and neo-colonial regime. It shows their aggression against religion, war, traditional mindset of the males, their mental and physical exploitation and the economic and cultural exploitation of the nation at the hands of the neo-colonialists. Through the portrayal of different women in the play Osofissan points out that human being not a puppet in the hands of God or religion. Human being is an architect of his own decision and he has a radical and powerful vision for changing the world, the society around him. Through the character of Iyunloye, a beautiful lady like Helen Osofissan succeeds in highlighting the lust of the west for the wealth of the East. Iyunloye is a symbol used for the western power who is free to select one husband after another only because the next husband is richer than the earlier one. It displays but the wealth and money motive of the West worked out- through lucrative business and former colonies.

In short, as an adaptation of the ancient Greek play 'The Trojan Woman' by Euripides in the play 'Women of Owu', Femi Osofissan struggles for the rights of women, comfort of women and ultimately hatred of lust for power, money and neo-colonialism that will bring peace in Nigeria and equality among men and women. It is obviously a feminist vision cherished by Osofissan here.

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