



# Ethnicity, conflicts and peace strategies in African post-colonial theatre: a reading of Femi Osofisan's *Women of owu*

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**Abstract**—One of the particularities of the post-colonial African societies is their multi-ethnic dimensions and their pluralistic-religious groupings. This article investigates the extent to which Femi Osofisan in *Women of Owu* explores ethnic conflicts to envision peace strategies in Nigeria. Diversities of ethnic and religious identities are contingent upon multiple intersecting factors, ethnic, linguistic, historical, demographic, politico-economic and ideological that, if badly handled, sometimes trouble peace and put into peril years' efforts of socio-economic development. The present study analyses how Femi Osofisan uses drama to explore ethnic conflicts and envisage perspectives for peaceful settlement and social cohesion. The article studies how Femi Osofisan uses theatrical art to explore the consequences of ethnic conflicts, religiosity and economic disparities as potential sources of conflicts in Africa, to call for their peaceful settlement, and to project his literary message that mediation and dialogue are sustainable peace strategies in African settings.

**Key Words:** Ethnicity, conflicts, mediation, religion, inter-tribal war, peace strategies, social cohesion

**Résumé**—L'une des particularités des sociétés africaines postcoloniales est leurs dimensions multiethniques et leurs regroupements pluriconfessionnels. Cet article fait une investigation de la manière dont Femi Osofisan explore les conflits ethniques pour envisager la paix au Nigeria. Les diversités identitaires ethniques et religieuses pour la plupart dépendent du croisement de facteurs multiples, notamment ethniques, linguistiques, historiques, démographiques, politico-économiques et idéologiques qui, s'ils sont mal gérés, troublent dès fois la paix et mettent en péril des efforts de tant d'années de développement socio-économique. L'article étudie comment Femi Osofisan utilise l'art théâtral pour explorer les conséquences des conflits ethniques tribaux et religieux pour envisager les perspectives des règlements pacifiques des conflits en Afrique et diffuser le message littéraire que la médiation et le dialogue sont des stratégies durables de paix en Afrique.

**Mots clés:** Ethnicité, conflits, médiation, religion, guerres intertribales, stratégies de paix, cohésion sociale

## Introduction

Much literary documentation on conflicts has examined the multifaceted aspects of African conflicts without paying due attention to the problem from ethno-religious vantage point, taking history as witness. Going from the grassroots of the causes of conflicts, Femi Osofisan offers a dramatic perspective of their remote causes and explores their impacts on modern African societies. Some critics of Osofisan have spotted out the corroding aspect of African conflicts in his art, but seem to overlook the necessity of mediation in a context where ethnicity and religiosity stir the wheels of sociopolitical cleavage. Chidi

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Amuta (1989) asserts that Femi Osofisan's new writing is characterized by his accent on political commitment and by a certain ideological predilection that is class-partisan, as he sees socio-political salvation mainly in terms of the revolutionary transformation of society.<sup>1</sup> He overlooks ethnic conflicts in Osofisan's art. J. Ndukaku Amankulor (1993) on his part thinks that Femi Osofisan is a leading voice of new generation of playwrights who advocates radical social change<sup>2</sup>, a position that does not include Osofisan's mediation policy in literature. Elaine Savory (1998) goes a step further to propose that Osofisan's commitment to social change in Nigeria has been evident since his earliest writing<sup>3</sup>, without however specifying the aspect of social change targeted by his art. Alexander Kure (2012) takes a different position to point out that violent conflict in Femi Osofisan are "a recurring decimal" and that they can be mediated through a spirit of forgiveness.<sup>4</sup> It appears that in the ecology of their readings, only Alexander Kure slightly touches conflict mediation as important issue in Osofisan's work; thereby making a new critical analysis that will offer in-depth examination of conflicts and their mediation necessary. From a postcolonial perspective, Femi Osofisan in *Women of Owu* and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* has shown the harmful aspects of ethno-religious and tribal conflicts and calls for peaceful mediation. My analysis will focus on the nature and causes of conflicts in Africa as viewed by Osofisan in *Women of Owu* and the solutions suggested in there.

### **1. Ethnic Diversity: The Informing Rationales of Tribal Conflicts in Nigeria**

Post-colonial literary criticism and theory offer to the reader the possibility to apprehend in Femi Osofisan's literary texts the cultural and political impacts of European conquest and partition of Africa, foregrounding the ethnic problematic. Approaching ethnic problem from post-colonial theoretical perspective, Siân Jones quotes Wallman S. to make the point that Ethnicity frames ethnic identity and that identity involves the active maintenance of

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<sup>1</sup> Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1989), p.169.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ndukaku Amankulor, "English Language Drama and Theatre" pp. 138-172 in Oyekan Owomoyela (ed) *A History of Twentieth Century African Literatures* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Savory "Femi Osofisan" pp. 374-381 in Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne (eds.) *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 376.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Kure "Conflict Resolution in Femi Osofisan's *Another Raft* and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*: Models for the Attainment of Peace in Kaduna State, Nigeria" pp.80-98 in Kinde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola (eds) *Emerging Perspectives in Femi Osofisan* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2009), p. 80

cultural boundaries in the process of social interaction.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, it means that ethnicity which is supposed to be a source of cultural enrichment can become a source of conflict if it is not well handled. The critic goes further to state that “As a *process* ethnicity involves a consciousness of difference, which, to varying degrees, entails the reproduction and transformation of basic classificatory distinctions between groups of people who perceive themselves to be in some respect culturally distinct.”<sup>6</sup> The points made by Siân Jones enable us to understand that ethnicity which entails cultural differences among different ethnic groups can be source of conflicts especially when conflicting interests divide stakeholders.

Many of the post-colonial conflicts in Africa are of ethnic or religious origins. That theory serves as a lens for me to examine in Femi Osofisan’s plays *Women of Owu* and *Red Is the Freedom Road* the aftermaths of the ethnic groupings in African countries issued from the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) partition of the Nigerian nation by the British. To be exact, Africans were never consulted nor associated to the partition of the continent. It follows that the partition of African was done in conditions that ignored African realities related to ethnicity, religiosity and tribe, to be modeled on the sole desires and wish of the colonizers. In such conditions the smearing divisions of people of the same ancestry and the grouping of different ethnic groups under the same national bordering seem to have done more harm than good to Africans, considering the upsurging of inter-tribal and inter-religious conflicts that undermine African societies to the present date. In search for definitional orientation of the Post-colonial theory, Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia write that

Post-colonial theory investigates, and develops propositions about, the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonised societies, and the nature of those societies’ responses. The ‘post’ in the term refers to ‘after colonialism began’ rather than ‘after colonialism ended’, because the cultural struggles between imperial and dominated societies continue into the present. Post-colonial theory is concerned with a range of cultural engagements: the impact of imperial languages upon colonised societies; the effects of European ‘master-discourses’ such as history and philosophy; the nature and consequences of colonial education and the links between Western knowledge and colonial power.<sup>7</sup>

In particular, add the critics, it is concerned with the responses of the colonized: the struggle to control self-representation, through the appropriation of dominant languages, discourses and forms of narrative; the struggle over representations of place, history, race and ethnicity; and the struggle to present a local reality to a global audience. Although it has been heavily oriented

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<sup>5</sup>Siân Jones, *The Archeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84

<sup>7</sup> Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Routledge Critical Essential Guide for Literary Studies: Edward Said* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999/2002), p. 14

towards literary theory, since it was prompted by the flourishing of literatures written by colonized peoples in colonial languages (particularly English), it is becoming widely used in historical, political and sociological analyses as its relevance to these disciplines grows.<sup>8</sup>

Femi Osofisan has chosen ethnic and social conflicts and their aftermath as subject matter in *Women of Owu* and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*. It seems undeniable that ethnic conflicts in Africa have done more harm to people and society than any other type of social crisis. But the manner leaders look at these conflicts and the mediation they opt for have proved inefficient to remedy that evil. Conflicts for some critics have important role in literary works since they help develop the plot. But beyond that role, the representation of conflicts in drama is first and foremost a means of initiating debate for social problems because, in literature, we find an opportunity to talk, to give our critical appreciation of the conflicts being presented.

The Nigerian society like any other society in Africa shaped by the ex-colonizers is cosmopolite and diverse, with various ethnic and linguistic groups living together and sharing the same geographic zone. This situation can be traced back to colonization where the Whiteman – the British colonizer-partitioned the African countries without paying respect to our ethnic groupings. The first step towards conflict resolution is the awakening of awareness that conflicts are piece and parcel of humanity. Conflicts are inherent to human society, and scrutinizing the history of Africa, the continent has always faced conflicts. In seeking the informing spirit of conflicts in Nigeria, just like in any other African country, they are due to the diversity of interests among people of different ethnic groups, tribes or regions, interests which are often time opposed to each other and the stakeholders positioning themselves to defend such interests, collide with one another, a situation which usually degenerates into open conflicts. Chinua Achebe corroborates this critical stand by saying that “Nothing in Nigeria’s political history captures her problem of national integration more than the chequered fortune of the word *tribe* in her vocabulary”.<sup>9</sup> Femi Osofisan staying in the logic of Achebe sees tribalism as a serious problem that deserves to be addressed with a due attention in art, especially in a way of peaceful settlement. From the worldwide conflicts to quarrels inside a family tissue, people have always been called upon to sit down and talk about conflicts resolution. In *Women of Owu*, Femi Osofisan insists of the aspect of neighboring conflicts as generated by opposing interests. His notes on the play’s genesis read that

In 1821, the combined forces of the armies of Ijebu and Ife, two Yoruba kingdoms in the south of what is now known as Nigeria, along with mercenaries recruited

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 5.

from Oyo refugees fleeing downwards from the Nigerian savannah land, sacked the city of Owu after a seven year siege. Owu was a model city- state, one of the most prosperous and best organized of those times. The Allied Forces had attacked it with the pretext of liberating the flourishing market of Apomu from Owu's control. Owu closed the gates of its formidable city walls, but it soon had to face the problem of drought when the rain stopped in the third year of the siege. (WO: vii)

And commenting on the havoc and destructions engendered, he adds:

This was a boon in the Allied Forces of course, and finally, in the seventh year they entered the city, and it was all over. The Allied Forces, determined that the city must never rise again, reduced the place to complete rubble, and set fire to it. They slaughtered all the males, adults and children, and carried away the females into slavery. Owu was never rebuilt. So it was quite logical therefore that, as I pondered over this adaptation of Euripides' play, in the season of Iraqi War, the memories that were awakened in me should be those of the tragic Owu War... (WO: vii).

This is an outline of the historical event and facts that have inspired and fuelled the storyline of Osofisan's *Women of Owu*. At the center of this conflict stands the Apomu flourishing market, which opposes the population of Owu to those of Ijebu. Owu has built its prosperity on that market and has been enjoying the bliss of life before being attacked, wrecked and vandalized by the Allied Forces. What is being highlighted here is history as a frame of reference, a way for Osofisan to underscore the importance of history in the writing of literature. History serves as a mirror in which we human beings can look in order to understand the past, to interpret the present and to construct the future. Past mistakes that have caused ruination to society should be corrected and avoided in the present and future times. Osofisan shows that literature and history entertain important relationships and in literature we are given the opportunity to learn from other people's mistakes in order to improve our lives.

Femi Osofisan berates war and decries its dehumanizing nature. *Women of Owu* is a personal and communal tragedy. A tragic play deals with grave issues and often ends in deaths or grief while leaving the audience with a feeling of sorrow and a deep thought about life.<sup>10</sup> The play opens with the tragic consequences of the seven year siege laid at the gates of Owu city by her enemies, the Allied Forces of Ijebu, Ife and Oyo extractions. There has been massive destruction of the property of the people as well as of the environment: "There is a smouldering over there and the proud city of Owu reduced to ruin yesterday" (WO: 1). Lives have also been decimated. But more crucially, "not a single man is left now / in Owu except those who escaped the night before / With our king, Oba Akinjobi" (WO: 3). Even those who are seen late are rounded up and slaughtered. Not even shrines and groves of respected gods and goddesses have been spared. The major grievance of Lawumi against the Allied Forces is that upon the Owus running into her shrine for protection, "the

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<sup>10</sup> J O J Nwachukwu-Agbada et al *Exam Focus Literature in English* (Ibadan: University Press, 2010), p. 138

allied soldiers did not care for that, they seized them all and finished them" and to cap the insult, complains Lawumi, "they set fire to my shrine" The play is a personal tragedy because, certain individuals take the brunt of the tragic ruination. The Oba Akinjobi family seems to have been the most affected as individuals. He is not only killed, his five sons, two daughters and a grandson are killed in cold blood as well. As Scene two opens, we observe Erelu Afin, the wife of Oba Akinjobi "sprawled on the ground.../ in the dust, like a common mongrel. She has lost her splendor as a king's wife and asks rather rhetorically, "who will look at me now, and remember / I was once a queen here in this broken city..." (WO: 10). Erelu does a lot of talking in the play, which is justifiable, judging by the weight of the tragedy that has laid indelible scars on her psyche and mind. As the play is about to end, she considers herself already dead by asserting that "This is no longer the Erelu you knew but just another corps still talking. Erelu suffers the indignity of being allocated to one of the victorious generals, notwithstanding her age, her sorrows and her status before the conquest of Owu city.

At communal level, the tragedy reads in the fact that, apart from the destruction of the entire environment of Owu city as well as setting fire to cultural sites and religious groves, norms and communal ethos have been trampled upon. Women are raped and later distributed out to various generals of the Allied Forces. Because of the crisis, the dead hardly receive their due reverence as demanded by custom. Hence, as soon as Adumaadan informs that she has performed the ritual of pouring sand on the dead body of Adeoti, Erelu is very thankful to her daughter-in-law: "Thank you again, I wish I knew what deity to pray to now to reward you / for the kindness you show to my daughter." Later Erelu herself is called to perform the ritual of pacifying the dead meant to forestall future eternal damnation of the people. This ritual, it seems, is the provenance of appropriate males but since there are no more males, Erelu takes up the role saying that "it shall not be so while I live".

The entire breadth of the play is tragic. The songs, the dirges, dances and dance movements evoke sadness and despair. All that is heard from time to time is the death of one person or the other or the suspected madness of somebody. Part of the tragedy is also manifested in the loss of respect by the gods. Apart from chasing victims into shrines and killing them there, the gods' underbelly has been exposed by the war. For instance, Erelu remarks that she has just observed that "the gods are not worth much! They lie and lie all the time / and deceive us" (WO: 59).

War dehumanizes, because in war no infringement or misdeed is really considered indecent if it is committed against the losing side. This is what Erelu Afin calls "the law of combat" or "the law of defeat" (WO: 16). Let's note the unprecedented wickedness of the victorious forces transpiring in the amount of

destruction they unleash on the conquered people. On that point, it is propitious to see the relevance of Wole Soyinka's lament over violent ethnic conflicts perpetrated by leaders, an atrocity which he terms ethnic cleansing which the Ogoni were victims of<sup>11</sup>. Not only is the city of Owu on fire as the play opens, but also desperate Owu men and women who run into sacred shrines for protection are not spared. It is not just in the current Owu war that this kind of thing has happened, but even in the war the Owus had fought with the Ife people earlier, "recklessly, The [Owus] looted the stalls of Ijebu, killed many / and sold the others into slavery (WO: 20). At war, human beings turn maniacal and devilish. We are told that the invading forces not only cut off the heads of male Owus, they stick these heads on stakes and dance away with them in their camps. Adding to that, they killed the "five splendid sons of Oba Akinjobi, killed himself and raped his daughters, before sharing out the surviving women to some officers among them. Erelu Afin hitherto the queen of the city is about to be sold into slavery. She wonders if she will be "sold to the flesh merchants of Kano or Abomey" or "straight to the White masters in the cold Castles of Cape Coast (WO: 16). At war, men develop strange tastes. Later we hear that Erelu a very old woman with fallen breast (WO: 25) is to be given out to Balogun Derin as his own war booty. Orisaye, the half-mad daughter of Erelu and the vestal votary of Obatala is to be inherited by Balogun Kusa who is "determined to taste the food/ Reserved for the god" (WO: 32). Ordinarily this desire would have been unthinkable because a god does not share anything with a human, least of all a wife. War not only dehumanizes the loser, but it also turns the victorious into a monster. I hold this critical stance because the soldiers' dashing the head of toddler Aderogun against a tree just to ensure that no son or heir to the Oba Akinjobi survives. This, they do by crushing the boy's little skull because "it is a taboo to shoot him/ or cut his skin with a blade" (WO: 45). It is the extent of the dehumanization of the invaders that has resulted in the current heated argument among the winning generals as to the acceptable sharing formula for the loot out of the war.

## **2. Literary Apprehension / Perception of Mental Disorders, as Effects of Tribal War**

From post-colonial theoretical approach, I suggest that Femi Osofisan has shown that many mental disorders occur in society as effects of tribal wars; and this apprehension reads from his representation of mental and psychosomatic disorders in the play *Women of Owu*. Such disorders include, hysteria, melancholy, fright, hallucinations, shame, disgrace, guilt, sorrows, despair, all

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<sup>11</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 6.

these disorders culminate into madness, a state of uncontrollable psychosomatic-disorder. War is the real cause of trauma and bewilderment. Due to the havoc done by the Ijebu soldiers to Owu population, many characters especially women have developed the symptoms of mental disorders, ailment near schizophrenia. My target character will be Orisaye, presented as the half-mad daughter of Erelu, votary of the god Obatala. Jean Du Verger in his essay "Hamlet and Melancholy" has shown how a situation of disarray, worry and anxiousness can lead to madness:

If the heart became over-contracted under the effect of a cold and dry passion (coldness and dryness were believed to be hostile to life), it would draw off the vital spirit from the rest of the body. Sorrow, fear and despair, cold and dry passions would then rise through the body, which would obscure the clearness of reason.<sup>12</sup>

This critical stand traces one of the sources of madness which can be an over-contraction of the heart under the pressure of sorrow, fear and despair. The fact that Orisaye is a devotee to the gods unlike other family members, hints to the inter-religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims. This issue of inter-religious cleavages is also developed by Osofisan in *Another Raft* and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* where he shows that violent ethno-religious conflicts are a recurring decimal in Kaduna State. The conflicts result from different [religious] perceptions of the call of duty. The playwright shows that people may perceive differently religious duty, but in seeking to discharge that duty, they should be mutually tolerant. For Osofisan it urges for the survival of Nigerian society that Christians and Muslims tolerate one another and coexist peacefully. This means settling religious conflicts without recourse to violence. Religious conflicts affect family ties, the faith and psyche of the victims. That is what has exactly happened to Orisaye, who lost his brothers and sisters in the hideous Owu/Ijebu war. From fear of facing facts of her life, she has progressively developed the symptoms of melancholy which later becomes madness. I totally agree with critic Jean Du Verger's position that melancholy is an illness whose most potent form is madness.<sup>13</sup> Femi Osofisan represents this image on stage in *Women of Owu* through the mental disorders afflicting Orisaye, now half-mad, due to the accumulation of emotional tensions of fear, sorrow, and despair. This argument finds justification from the play where Erelu acknowledges that melancholy is a sickness which borders on madness in her daughter Orisaye (WO: 23). Isolation is indeed another symptom of the melancholic disease of Orisaye, since she seeks to avoid the society of men. The melancholic's attributes are also shrewdness and secrecy which are a response

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Du Verger, "Hamlet and Melancholy" pp. 81-106 in Pierre Iselin ed. *William Shakespeare Hamlet* (CNED: Didier Erudition, 1997), p. 84

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.



to a diseased world seen as hostile to her. The full depiction of that character (Orisaye) in her insane state emphasizes the victimization of the mentally sick as discriminated people of the society who must avoid public places for fear of exposing their life incoherence.

ERELU: [...] At least, let my poor Orisaye continue to remain inside, out of sight for now. These events, as you know, have made her even more delirious than she was, and her state of incoherence would only worsen to see her mother like this (WO: 16).

Two states of mind of Orisaye are important to underline here: delirium and incoherence of mind. Incoherence of mind here is what French critics term "*la maladie de l'âme*"<sup>14</sup> to mean man's existential bewilderment before a world in which all is evanescent and in which he has lost his central position. On the basis of this testimony, Femi Osofisan gives Orisaye a careful etiological description of the progress of the disease – fear, depression, insomnia, delirium, debility, delusion and finally raving madness. He shows that the resort to violence to settle such conflicts has always been chaotic and disastrous. Femi Osofisan is one of the drama scholars who believes that art can be used to raise awareness among the populations on the nefarious consequences of unsettled human conflicts. His grudge is against the resort to violence instead of peace talks to address quarrels of the same nature. Among the many plays that Femi Osofisan writes to attract attention on the havoc of war and conflicts *Red Is the Freedom Road*, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* and *Women of Owu*, occupy a place of choice. The vibrancy and vitality of his art on peace strategies are revealed through the playwright's criticism of the negative aspect of recourse to violence in conflicts resolution and gives a couple of ideas on the advantages of peace maintenance. I maintain that it is the future that one needs to look into to better weigh the need to settle conflicts peacefully.

### 3. Self-Indexation/Criticism: A Step toward Appeasement

Human beings tend to rely so much on the gods and to ascribe their fortune or misfortune to supernatural forces. Osofisan is trying to make the point that this tendency by humans is misplaced. In such tragedies like war, human beings are unquestionably responsible for all the havoc and damage that come out of these. From fabricating war armaments to bombing a whole city reducing it to ashes, man is at the center of the drama. Therefore it is out of question to transfer the responsibility of disastrous conflicts on the supernatural forces. Osofisan conveys this message through several images. For instance, in creating a character god who totally ignores that there is war in the land where he is god, while in fact he was supposed to be omniscient about the conflict: "I

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Du Verger, op cit, p. 86

don't understand" he replies to the women informing him about the actions of the Allied Forces, "you said all this happened only yesterday?" (WO: 2) Not only do the women give him an update information about how Owu males have been decimated "whether old or young", they even draw his attention to the desecration of his own shrine. "All your shrines drenched in the blood/ of your worshippers /All your sacred symbols wiped out by fire" (WO: 6). Anlugbua takes the news just as a typical human being could have done. In other words, it is wrong for human beings to rely on the gods to save them from all the misfortunes which may visit them from time to time. Before coming to art, Femi Osofisan has already indicted the political leader for standing aloof in front of the devastating effects of inter-ethnic wars: "Those were, you all recollect the decades of harsh suppression of human rights everywhere, when to dare to speak out at all was more or less to put your neck in the nooze in the face of horrendous laws and decrees<sup>15</sup>." The revelation by Chorus Leader when she admonishes her fellow women "to stop wailing and brace yourselves" is instructive here. According to her,

CHORUS LEADER: No, Stop the wailing and brace yourselves  
My dear women. The lesson is clear. It is us not the gods,  
Who create war. It's us, we human beings, who can kill it. (WO: 15)

It transpires from this extract that the cause of the war and the level of destruction are the results of human folly. Owu which is now on the receiving end had once been brutish to the Ife people when they conquered the latter. This was in spite of the fact that Ile Ife played a role in her establishment as "one of the seven kingdoms/of Yorubaland (WO: 19). After their founding and flourishing as a city, the Owus took to arrogance, "an insufferable display of arrogance" (WO: 18). According to Lawumi, Owu forgot its history, forgot its origins! They began to sell other Yoruba into slavery (WO: 19). Upon sacking the Ife army and taking back the Apomu market, the Owus looted the stalls of the Ijebu, killed many and sold the others into slavery. In response, the Ijebus sent their dreaded army up against the city, thus resulting in the present military siege against Owu city (WO: 20). Another reason for the current impasse is Maye Okunade's sworn stand to punish Owu people for one of her sons, Adejumo, taking his wife away during the attack on Ife. Because of the disgrace and the humiliation, Okunade caused this havoc (WO: 5). He has abandoned his vocation as an artist and embraced violence as his next calling. For seven years he mounts a military campaign against the Owus, and when he achieves the purpose, all the Owu men are slaughtered and their women shared

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<sup>15</sup> Femi Osofisan, "African Theatre and the Menace of Transition: Radical Transformations in Popular Entertainment" pp.362-373 in Anne V. Adams (ed.) *Essays in Honour of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70: A Reader in African Cultural Studies* (UK: Ayebia, 2012), p. 364.

among the officers with whom he captured the Owu city. Osofisan conveys the message that Human beings are the architects of their own woes; a message he releases through Anlugbua: "You human beings always thirst for blood, always eager to devour one another, history will teach you. I hope you will learn (WO: 67).

Another discernible message Femi Osofisan highlights in the play is one which appeals to all the oppressed and the cheated to do something to rescue themselves from their downtrodden and repressed status. This is more than calling for self-reliance; it calls for people's discovery of the source of their burdened state and thereafter to dismantle it. The gods in Femi Osofisan's plays essentially stand for political leaders and the master/servant relationship between human beings and the gods (their leaders) is emphasized. The playwright energetically condemns man's folly in his promotion of war and violence without. By so doing, man does not realize that love is superior to war. One of the oppressors whose antics would have to be discouraged is exulted, comprising the generals, the rich and the rulers. Gesinde complains about the generals who sit back and give their orders while "we poor ones face the victims and spill the blood (WO: 45). Chorus Leaders also complains that it is the rulers who write history just as the hunters compose the story of the hunt and the revelers record the fable of the feast (WO: 66).

In *Red Is the Freedom Road*, Femi Osofisan has complemented the message of *Women of Owu* by laying emphasis on the aftermath of war as experienced by families. Osofisan has brought down the message close to individuals' understanding by showing that war split couples, divide father and children, sisters and brothers. For instance, Akanji and Ibidun once a harmonious couple have been separated by a civil war and Ibidun spends years without seeing her husband Akanji. Akanji's mother dies out of grief because of the disappearance of her son. These are the facts that Situation One highlights (RFR: 116). Due to war atrocities, says Ibidun, "we have our wounded slaves; ... We have only our wounded slaves... we have only our empty hands, hands all gaunt and hollow (RFR: 124). War can reduce the whole of a king into slave. War can reduce even an army general to a slave. For instance, Jengboran, a king who once owned thousand slaves, has been captured a slave himself:

Akanji: You, soldier, I see your marks, and they are foreign, not of this land  
I know you well. Your house is at Akatan, home of heroes. Why, only  
Yesterday...your name rocked us like thunder. So you are fallen too?  
You were a king wherever you came from. I think your name is  
Jengboran, the One who owned a Thousand Slaves. Is that you, just another  
Slave? (RFR: 130).

In this excerpt, it is perceptible that war pulls people down. From a high position one can totally decline to nothingness. During war, people easily lose

their relations, even the dearest ones. War annihilates all efforts of development. Femi Osofisan may have taken inspiration from the Nigerian civil war to ponder over the content of *Red Is the Freedom Road*. For in the play, characters suffer from death, hunger, deprivation, wastage of property the same way people in human society suffer from the same scourge of war, disease and poverty. And the central question remains, until when the populations who are the true victims of war will ever find relief? The soldiers themselves who are the war emissaries are aware of the hell fire that the civil war has rained on the innocent victims:

1<sup>st</sup> Soldier: O when will men learn the truth? War is not the only means of Dialogue.

2<sup>nd</sup> Soldier: Nor can peace be won by warriors.

1<sup>st</sup> SOLDIER: No prosperous harvest from battlefield.

2<sup>nd</sup> SOLDIER: But corpses only. Stench and horror. But corpses there from.

1<sup>st</sup> SOLDIER: And the wailing of widows, of children abandoned?

2<sup>nd</sup> SOLDIER: Hunger and horror, disaster and death. When will men learn the simple truth?

1<sup>st</sup> SOLDIER: You cannot reap cocoyams when you plant blood. All feet flounder when the road runs red. The flower must wither in its season. O when shall we learn? (RFR: 135)

Here, we note that corpses, stench, horror, disaster, plunder and contrition are the reflections of war in society. The soldiers are leveling a criticism on the corrosive nature of war, but especially on human beings' unwillingness to learn, to draw teachings from the past. All the people on the human planet agree on the fact that war is evil and anti-life. No society can ever develop in an atmosphere of belligerent tensions. Yet, the alarming remark is that the more people become aware of the evil of war and its destructive nature, the more they perpetrate scenes of violence and resort to war to look for peace. It is contradictory and appears meaningless to seek peace through war. Femi Osofisan's art is meant to teach us these important lessons. The recurrent question in the soldiers' conversation is 'when will men learn the truth?' This question is raised oftentimes because human beings are unable to change their behavior by learning from the past.

#### **4. Conflict Resolution: A Means for Peaceful Coexistence**

Osofisan's drama is geared towards socio-political change, a complete overhauling of the mental decay that belittles the fundamental values of peace strategies. His drama recommends that one goes at the root of conflicts to dig out their causes for a complete cure. In his selected plays under consideration, *Women of Owu* and *Red Is the Freedom Road*, he condemns the tragic use of armed forces to repress, kill and oppress. He locates the responsibility of the human lives wastage within the realm of political power. Osofisan's ideology falls in

line with Edmund Burke's proviso that Nigeria's failure to successfully settle inter-ethnic cleavages can be traced to two main sources:

- a. The fact that the politicians played too much politics, often ignoring national interests in their quest for power or personal or regional aggrandizement.
- b. That ethnic conflicts were not paid due attention to by political actors.<sup>16</sup>

David Bloomfield while asserting that democracy is a system for managing difference without recourse to violence means a profound understanding of a pacific coexistence that uses cultural differences, diverging political opinions and contradictory social interests as sources of mutual enrichment, to achieve viable human society.<sup>17</sup> Though difficult in practice, pacific coexistence amidst differences is not impossible to achieve. Femi Osofisan in *Women of Owu* develops the philosophy of pacific coexistence as the primeval condition informing the bedrock and mainstay of a viable development in Nigerian social fabric. If war is anti-social and anti-life, peace is the cornerstone for enjoyable social life and development. The starting point is reconciliation. Reconciliation is both a goal and a process; it is an over-arching process which includes the search for truth, justice, forgiveness, healing and possibly compensation. In this respect, educating young generations of the twenty-first century to the ideals of pacific coexistence in multi-ethnic regions is fundamental. Jean Bosco Habiarimana's suggestions of strategies for attaining sustainable peace compel attention. I am indebted to that critic in the following ideas he develops. For him, there should be a fostering of culture of peace through education by promoting education for all, focusing especially on girls, revisiting curricula to promote the qualitative values.<sup>18</sup> Education should also aim at developing attitudes and behaviours inherent to a culture of peace, and training for conflicts prevention and resolution, dialogue, consensus-building, and active nonviolence. A sustainable peace seeking strategy should also include the promotion of long lasting economic and social development by targeting the eradication of poverty, focusing on the special needs of children and women, working towards environmental sustainability, fostering ethnic and inter-ethnic cooperation, national and international cooperation to reduce economic and social inequalities.<sup>19</sup> In this perspective, social justice resting on meritocracy

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<sup>16</sup>Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War : Facing the Future* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1976), p. 113

<sup>17</sup>David Bloomfield et al, *Reconciliation after a Violent Conflict: A Handbook* (Sweden: IDEA, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Bosco Habyarimana, "Educating for Twenty-first Century: Peace Education for the Post-genocide Rwanda" pp. 75-92 in Samuel Kale Ewusi (ed) *Weaving Peace: Essays on Peace, Governance and Conflict Transformation in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* (USA: Trafford Publishing, 2012), p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> Jean Bosco Habyarimana, op cit, p.85

– fair rewarding based on merit, not on ethnic favoritism or regionalism should be encouraged. Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer and critic himself, acknowledges the presence of the virus of nepotism in the country's social fabric and recommends its destruction:

The motive for the original denial [of merit] may be tribal discrimination, but it may also come from sexism, from political, religious, or some other partisan consideration, or from corruption and bribery [...] it is sufficient to state that whenever merit is set aside by prejudice of whatever origin, individual citizens as well as nation itself is victimized.<sup>20</sup>

Achebe's relevant remark on the denial of merit to those who deserve it is in line with Osofisan's critical position, a position that helps to explain the propensity and persistence of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and Africa in general. If ethnic rivalry is to stop, nepotism and regionalism, inhibitors of intellectual and professional excellence must be discouraged. A step towards sustainable conflicts mediation is the promotion of respect for human rights, at least the inalienable ones. This proceeds by vulgarizing, disseminating and explaining in details the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at all levels of society and fully implementing international instruments on human rights. For this reason, it urges to ensure equal opportunities between men and women by integrating gender perspectives and promoting equity in economic, social and political decision-making; eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women; supporting and aiding women in crisis situations resulting from war and all other forms of violence.<sup>21</sup> To successfully implement peace strategies, Jean Bosco proposes that one should foster democratic participation, by educating responsible citizens, reinforcing actions to promote democratic principles and practices, establishing and strengthening national institutions and processes that promote and sustain democracy.<sup>22</sup> A further step will be the advancing, and understanding of tolerance and solidarity by promoting dialogue among civilizations, ethnic groups, and tribes. It also includes undertaking actions in favour of vulnerable groups, migrants, refugees and displaced persons – indigenous people and traditional groups, and respect for difference and cultural diversity.<sup>23</sup> In *Women of Owu* many such people pain to find asylum. All these can be possible if there is supporting participatory communication and the free flow of information and knowledge. In the process this should be done by means of concrete actions, say by supporting the media in the promotion of a culture of peace. For an effective and efficient use of media and mass communication, measures to address the issues of violence

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<sup>20</sup> Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (USA: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 78

<sup>21</sup> Jean Bosco Habyarimana, op cit, p.85.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

should be taken and knowledge and information sharing through new technologies encouraged.<sup>24</sup>

Local peace will last long only if it fits in a global policy of international peace and security. Through actions like the promotion of general and complete disarmament, greater involvement of women in prevention and resolution of conflicts, and the promotion of a culture of peace in post-conflicts situations, African societies can attain peace and development. There should be initiatives in conflicts situations, to encourage confidence-building measures and efforts for negotiating peaceful settlements.

### Conclusion

The essential ideas developed in this article are that Femi Osofisan shows through *Women of Owu* that ethnicity is a delicate problem in Africa. Its mishandling can breed inter-ethnic conflicts with dire consequences like manslaughter, division and property destruction. Africans can exploit their ethnic diversities to make them a source of enrichment. Peace attainment should be a participative struggle. By creating conflicts and resolving them, Osofisan passes the message that amicable settlement of conflicts can only be better achieved through the acceptance of the spirit of forgiveness and accommodation.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

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