

## THE WOMEN OF OSOFISAN: BEYOND FICTION

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**Abstract:** *Women in the African past, contrary to being domesticated were not only achievers in their own right but also pillars of society. A voyage into African and especially Nigerian history gives a picture of outstanding women who contributed to trade and governance in their various communities and societies. Moremi in pre-colonial Ife kingdom, the Aba Women, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti and the Egba Women during the colonial era not to mention other outstanding women in Yoruba and Hausa kingdoms such as Queen Amina, Madam Tinubu and Efunsetan Aniwura (Iyalode Ibadan) demonstrated that women are not mere domestic servants who should be suppressed, subjugated and thrown about. They too have a place in the society. In modern times, women are still performing such leadership roles and are depicted in such roles by writers, like Femi Osofisan, in their writings. In an interview session, Osofisan, a prolific, renowned and outstanding African writer, discusses his motives in creating the female characters in his works the way he does. He explains and analyses the roles he ascribes to women in his writings and how his female characters like Morountodun, Tegonni, Wura, Alhaja, the Women of Owu and others serve to project leadership roles, serve as innovators and societal consciences. He also comments on the impact and significance of these women characters in society and the conditions that would make it possible for women to achieve such outstanding roles in real life. This paper therefore, presents Osofisan's women as conceived by the playwright himself.*

**Keywords:** African Women, agent of change, gender, women empowerment, feminism

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## INTRODUCTION

The general Assembly of the United Nations in 1999, with the intention of raising the public awareness of violation of women rights set aside November 25 of every year as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Stressing the need for such a move, the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, as reported in *Awake* January, 2008, page 3 said:

*violence against women is global in reach and takes place in all societies and cultures. It affects women no matter what their race, ethnicity, social, origin, birth or other status may be.*

Yes, everywhere, women all over the world are subjugated oppressed and no tradition is against it. As observed by Annan, such violence does not leave any woman out irrespective of her race, tribe or socio-economic status. Little wonder then that women liberation is ubiquitous. In literature this has translated into feminism, womanhood, motherhood and womanism. Women treatment notwithstanding, women have played prominent roles in Nigeria. From the tender role of a mother who feeds, cradles and nurtures the child including the man of the house to the powerful role of a warrior, saviour and rescuer and the delicate life threatening political champions. Names like Moremi, Queen Amina, Madam Tinubu, Madam Atinuke and others may come to mind and many more too numerous to mention. It should be noted that nowhere else have women role in society been projected and brought into sharp focus as in literature, especially in drama. Although there are women dramatists like Zulu Sofola, Efua T. Southerland and others, men dramatists seem to blaze the trail in the promotion of women. Among the leading figures in recent times has been Femi Osofisan. This paper is all about him and his concept of women in his works.

### **Women and Themes in Osofisan's Works**

The issue of themes in Osofisan's works are diversified and it is in this diversity that women find relevance. It would be wrong to assume that Osofisan set out to write specifically on themes relating to women knowing fully well that beyond the entertainment lies the real meaning of his plays. Since there are only two sexes in the animal kingdom, he has no other choice than to include women in his works. However, a most outstanding feat attained by Osofisan in his treatment of women in his plays is the revolutionary roles assigned to them. The true African in him recognises women as mothers, wives and sisters. They are indispensable and always nestle men folk throughout their lifetime. This could probably account for Osofisan's liberality in giving women a voice in his plays not out of pity or obligation but out of a strong conviction that women are a voice to be heeded. Little wonder then he has ridden comfortably on the wings of women in conveying his messages. He has made a departure unlike other male writers like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Achebe, Clark etc, from the 'insidious software for the enslavement of women (Osofisan,2001:4) This he attributes to the cultural font not only in Africa but worldwide and this he says:

*has been one of the most active In the women's struggle...as several scholars have recognised, both prejudice which endures against women as well as the laws which consolidate and encode this prejudice, are born from mental attitudes inculcated in the individual by the cultural processes of his or her development.(2001:5)*

In plays where Osofisan idolises women, he attempts to correct the injustices society inflicts on them based on gender. This is why many women flood his stage in his works. Fortunately, Osofisan is not alone on this mission. Other writers like, "Tar Ahura, Bode

Sowande, Wale Ogunyemi, Tess Onwuemu, Stella Oyedepo...have displayed some interests in positive and healthy female characteristics” (2002:80).

Iyabo (in *A Restless Run of Locusts*) Altine (in *Altine's Wrath*) Tegonni (in *Tegonni... an African Antigone*) Titubi (in *Morountodun*) Ibidun ( in *Red is the Freedom Road*) Alhaja (in *Fires Burn and Die Hard*). His women are strong, determined and ready to make hard decisions in the face of impending dangers. Most of the representations of women in Osofisan's works advocate for freedom from oppression and ask for changes. They have stood upright against hard and conflicting situations and institutions. Tegonni successfully withstood the Governor by defying his order to bury her brother, Oyekunle. Tegonni's guts:

*gives her enormous mortal strength and  
the courage to change what she must  
and face the crushing social reality... (2008:179)*

Part of these strength and courage is derived from her intelligence. She makes a clarion call for other women to be empowered economically as a member of the guild of careers. This is a very strong statement by Osofisan that women need to liberate themselves from biologically imposed restriction of men like Lawal (in *Altine's Wrath*) who are full of conceit and contempt for the women folk. Consider some excerpts below:

**Lawal:** ...And in case you've forgotten, I'll remind you!

*Women here don't dare raise their voice where  
men are speaking! And you'd better get that back into your head!*

Altine courageously retorted:

**Altine...** I made my own plans. Yes! That's why I grew  
*dumb so suddenly! O yes, you too Lawal, you're  
going to suffer! You'll be reduced to abject  
poverty, to dust, to nothing....He can't stop me  
(laughs). Tomorrow, when you go to the bank, you'll  
find out! You won't find a single kobo left there.  
I've transferred the money to a new account.  
(italics ours)*

The last minute revelation about Altine's show of outward submissiveness is finally discovered having been equipped educationally to fully combat the unsuspecting, scrupulous, greedy and corrupt Lawal. Here, Altine is the voice of the deprived and humiliated domesticated woman caught in the frivolities of middle class, denouncing its abrasive Carthaginian idiocies as well as its self destructive nihilism (2002:46)

Most times Osofisan projects his women as loving and forgiving which could be a further portrayal of their God given role. They always allow love to prevail irrespective of circumstances not as a show of weakness but rather as a vital ingredient for human survival. Olabisi, after Akanbi's resolution to break up their relationship based on the revelations surrounding his father's death and his mother's insanity, allows good reasoning to prevail by clinging on to love. The devastating end of political intrigues that trailed the relationship of Sanda and Iyabo is best described in Mrs. Kuti's words "*That's what men live for. To die. To*

take their women and suck them dry of all affection, all tenderness. And then to abandon them" (1975:51) Olabisi in *Farewell...* Another agent of peace put it thus;

**Titi:** Then you love him so much

**Olabisi:** He is my life mother

**Titi:** And the past?

**Olabisi:** Let it be buried because of us.

The women in these two plays (*Farewell...* & *A Restless...*) go through the traumatic effects of conflict and crisis as victims of circumstances. Both plays finally heed the advice of Sanda in (*A restless...*) "*Listen after a war, , there is reconciliation. After a war there must be reconciliation*". Women are seen as peace lovers and peaceful. And in the light of the quest for peace Iyabo decides to keep the pregnancy being concerned with prosperity.

**Iyabo:** *Mother, help me! Let this child live , so he too may live.*

Of course, in a war situation women are the worst hit. They are left to nurse the wounds and loss of dear ones. Osofisan had laden them with the task of a new beginning, building from the ruins all over. Examples abound in *Women of Owu*, and *Birthdays Are Not for Dying*. (2002:134)

**Kunle:** Ah my head! Where ....where am I?

**Mother:** In my arms, my son! God is great. You're alive!

**Kunle:** ...They're gone? Come, help me mama. Our life is just beginning

In *Once Upon four Robbers* (1991:92)

**Mama Alice:** So who will pay the bills, if the market doesn't?

**Binta:** Where shall we turn, if not to our stalls?

**Mama Toun:** How can we live, if profits lower or cease?

**Mama Alice:** How shall we survive, if the price control officer refuses to be bribed?

Osofisan lends a voice to his women in his works. They are brave and courageous in confronting difficult tasks or situations. Tegonni dares to withstand British imperialism and fires the spirits of her mates even while facing death while Isokun and other elders were pleading for her.

**Isokun:** ...So I beg you, don't be in a hurry...so when they have strayed, it is their parents who must step in to clear the mess. That is why we have come to you in this matter of Tegonni and her friends, to plead with you to please consider their youth (2007:61-62)

Tegonni spits fire and refuses to be silenced. We have this conversation between her and the Governor:

**Gov:** Think of the possible consequences to your people. You are young but I'm sure you've heard about what happened to the great Benin City...

**Tegonni:** Shut up, and listen Historian. Why do you think it will matter to me if you wipe out our town? What you've done already to our men, and to our pride, is that not sufficient damage?... I don't care if your queen herself leads the entire British army down here...(2007:86)

Osofisan projects his women as leaders who possess innate qualities and abilities to be in charge. Alhaja in *Once Upon Four Robbers* took up the mantle of leadership and went under

disguise to source for information from the soldiers and she remains loyal to the group which her husband forms.

In the next few pages we shall get a clearer picture of Osofisan's women as he provides answers himself to some knotty questions on his position of women in his works, though in diasporas.

### **Interview with Professor Femi Osofisan**

#### **QUESTION: Is there any difference in your treatment of women in your plays**

**F.O:** I<sup>1</sup> don't quite understand this question. Are you asking if I am writing to demonstrate or support feminism? If so, I will have to say no. I have no intention of demonstrating any particular concept or movement. My sole aim is to portray women as I believe they are – some strong, some weak; some heroic, and some villainous – in fact, just like the men are! If this fits into someone's theory, all well and good, but that's all purely coincidental.

#### **QUESTION: Going by your rapport with the many women in your plays especially the high pedestals on which you place them, why do you have great expectations that women are agents of change? (*Tegonni, Morountodun, Women of Owu* etc).**

**F.O:** Again, the same thing. Some women, [note that I say, SOME women], are like this: courageous, daring, outspoken, and willing to fight for change, for liberation from oppression, whether of the broadly political, or the narrowly patriarchal type (sometimes both are the same thing anyway!). Perhaps I give them a particular emphasis in my works, but that is simply because in previous works I noticed that such women are rarely portrayed, or kept in the shadows, while the male heroes take all the limelight. That for me is not right. Such a picture distorts history; it presents only a partial truth; it can give the women who read such works a false model of social and political passivity which is completely at variance with what we know for instance of women activists in Yoruba society.

#### **QUESTION: From the above don't you see yourself going against the societal view of a true African woman?**

**F.O:** This is what I mean. This so-called "societal view of a true African woman" is a totally false one, which was, I'm sure, only a recent construction, probably invented in the colonial schools or the missionary institutions. Traditionally our women were never seen as weak, as being unconcerned with social and political change. Look at the Yoruba pantheon for instance; you will see many goddesses side by side the gods, all just as active as their male counterparts. Or look at history, where you'll find the story of the Aba Women confronting the colonialists or Mrs Funlayo Ransome Kuti taking on the Alake in Abeokuta! Even in trade, on the obverse side, you ad strong and prominent figures like Madam Tinubu or Efunsetan Aniwura, etc. There were female warriors, doctors (or 'herbalists'), Obas, and so on. The "true African woman", who is docile, meek, a-political, and so on, is a false image; and no doubt deliberately created for particular ideological reasons. It is important, for the liberation of our people in Africa that such a myth be de-constructed, exploded. And to reveal that, yes, some women may be like that (there are such women in every society all over the

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, F.O is the abbreviation for Femi Osofisan

world); but there are also numerous others who are not; who are just the opposite in fact; and who are in fact better models for our youths to follow.

**QUESTION: How do you represent the Africanness of the African woman in your plays?**

**F.O:** I can't say I have a particular formula. Once I create a character, the next thing is to locate him or her in a familiar culture, a credible one. Which means that some real investigation must be made to find and represent the true features of that culture, beyond of course the distortions of anthropologists. Because quite often what you and I are told is "African" may not be so at all; may just be the convenient interpretation of someone with his or her own interests.

**QUESTION: Has there been any remarkable difference in the socio-political empowerment of women especially in Africa as advocated in your plays?**

**F.O:** Well, to be frank, I am not sure that my plays 'advocate' anything with regard to the image of women. As I said, what I believe they do is highlight a certain reality that was already present, was already there, but which was previously suppressed, kept in the margins, or blatantly denied. The gradual opening up of society in recent times, the spread of democratic practice and increase of human rights groups, all this has helped to empower more women, and make them more active and more visible in political and other public roles. It will be too much of immodesty, I think, to attribute this development to the impact of my plays alone. But I do hope, at the same time, that some of those who read or watched them were positively affected. I know for certain that some of them are active participants in the on-going struggles to empower women.

**QUESTION: Would you consider gender as constituting class struggle?**

**F.O:** Not at all. They are related of course, and one is necessarily implicated in the other; but they are not the same thing.

**QUESTION: How do you place the strength of women in *Tegonni*.. And the determined quest for change in *Yungba Yungba*... against the vulnerability and pains of women in *Women of Owu*?**

**F.O:** I don't see any fundamental difference at all. They represent different facets of the same struggle—that is the same basic struggle in different contexts. Each situation, each challenge, dictates its own mode of action, imposes its own strategy of combat. That is just logical.

**QUESTION: *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, an all female cast play by you is still among the first of its kind. What are the major challenges in the performance of this play?**

**F.O:** Interestingly enough, I haven't yet directed it myself. Contrary to my usual practice, it was Dr Sunbo Marinho in fact who did the first production at the Arts Theatre in Ibadan, and I must say he did a marvellous job of it. I only watched from the fringe, and honestly I cannot say what particular challenges he had. Gathering a cast may have been one of them. Not in terms of numbers though because, as you know, the majority of our student population nowadays in the department is female. So I imagine that the question of numbers would not

have been among Sunbo's worries. The problem may have been that of finding the right talents. Dancing and singing being the central metaphor of the play, casting may have been problematic since, increasingly; we are producing children in our modern society nowadays who can neither dance nor sing! That old notion that every black person can sing or dance is of course—perhaps regrettably—a racial myth, a grand fallacy, as we can now see. In a situation where the middle class does not use its mother tongue—Yoruba, in this case—even at home, where the children are banned from speaking in “the vernacular”, and are exposed instead to a steady barrage of Western popular culture, I can well imagine the difficulties a director would have with casting a play like *Yungba Yungba* on campus, among undergraduates actors.

**QUESTION: In your comedies especially the midnight series we see you from a totally different angle in your portrayal of the women folk in contrast with other plays where you almost deified them. Why this sharp fall in the status of women**

**F.O:** Ah, so you see—there are also these kinds of women too! (As well as the negative men). These plays are meant to caricature such people and reveal their nefarious roles in society.

**QUESTION: Has there been any significant change in the trend of your treatment of women in some of your First generation plays( like, *Altine's Wrath, Restless Run of locust, Red is the freedom Road* etc) and recent plays?**

**F.O:** This is something you should tell me, as critics!

**QUESTION. What has been the audience reaction to the roles women play in your plays and what are your justifications?**

**F.O:** Again, you should provide me with this information. You are critics, but also actors who have taken some of the most prominent roles in these plays. What are your reactions?

**QUESTION: Can the many women you created in your plays and have brought to life on stage actually be real?**

**F.O:** My belief is that all of them are real. They may not be the majority in the society. But they exist and will continue to exist.

**QUESTION: In what ways did the strong bond between you and your late mother influence your creation of the various women characters in your plays?**

**F.O:** Difficult to give a straightforward response. I was deeply attached to my mother of course, but she was not a model for any of my strong women figures. My mother was loving and fiercely protective but she did not participate directly in any political movement, and certainly not in any leadership role.

**QUESTION:.. And finally, are you gender biased?**

**F.O:** I don't know what you mean by “biased”. I think I have created both positive and negative women, just as I have done for men. I don't believe women are “good” just by

being women; as men are not necessarily heroic or admirable just by being men. It is our actions and our characters that define us.

### IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

This paper has some implications for gender studies and feminism. Masculinity as a theory of men machismo and women subservience is cast in the mode of antiquity and must be jettisoned in an age of gender parity such as ours, where both men and women have to sit in political offices, play the role of bread winner in the family and excel in education, policy matters, and other areas of life dear to humanity and perpetuation of society. Osofisan himself said: “*My sole aim is to portray women as I believe they are – some strong, some weak; some heroic, and some villainous – in fact, just like the men are!*”

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although Osofisan has not pronounced himself a feminist or as being gender biased, his works has definitely spoken volumes in favour of women. To him women are not as a weaker sex as misconstrued by their male counterparts, but as a force to be reckoned with in all spheres of life. Women have always been in the forefront of struggles and agitations for freedom from oppression even in the traditional African society. Therefore, Osofisan’s use of women in his works is not fortuitous; it is purposeful. Osofisan believes that through his works, he can properly situate the true African women who are anything but docile and apolitical. To him, being successful or becoming a figure to reckon with in any society is not dependent on sex - both men and women can and have emerge(d) powerful forces to reckon with in political, social and educational aspects in any society or community. Interestingly, the feminist theories have also in no small measure re-positioned women in modern times. The awareness for equity, fairness and recognition is on the increase and we are certain that the many women of Osofisan (both in fiction and real life) are glad to be a part of the reconstruction of societal values.

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