

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)

Ethiopia

Vol. 7 (1), S/No 24, JANUARY, 2018: 62-70
ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v7i1.7>

Humanism of the Nigerian Womanist: A Cultural Appraisal of Femi Osofisan's Tegoni: An African Antigone

Odi, Christine, PhD

Department of Theatre Arts,

Faculty of Arts

Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island

Bayelsa State, Nigeria

E-mail: Christineodi67@yahoo.com

Phone: +2348037150588

Abstract

The evolution of global societies in this age is taking alarmingly negative turns that seem to be catapulting the world into inevitable self-destruction. The incessant violence, terror, horror, disease and deprivation that have enveloped most societies in the world bear testimony to that. Within the Cultural context of the Nigerian worldview human life used to be greatly valued above all else. In contemporary times, human life is fast becoming worthless and cultural values meaningless. Against this bleak global reality, this essay attempts to examine Femi Osofisan's portraiture of Tegoni and the humanist ideals that he endows her with. The essay investigated the motivational force behind the actions she takes, the consequences of her actions in the throes of the cultural clash prevalent in her society at the time, and her inordinately firm resolve to take full responsibility for her decisions and actions in the face of certain death. The essay's conclusions revealed that the true Nigerian Womanist as exemplified by Tegoni and a host of other Womanist heroines, will against all odds, strive to nurture and preserve human life and accord it, at all times, the respect, esteem and dignity it deserves in a world where the worth of the human life has become inconsequential.

Introduction

The Nigerian society in recent times is undergoing grave challenges that are affecting every sphere of the Nigerian society. The economy is collapsing, there is insecurity in the land, poverty, hunger and strife is the order of the day across regions, the death rate in Nigeria in recent times is by far higher than has ever been witnessed in non-war situations. In all of these, the human being is one of the worst affected. At the drop of a hat, human lives are being taken with impunity. And the machineries of state security seem helpless to stem this tide of wasting human life.

Dramatists have been in the business of using their tools of trade to bring to the fore, issues that are playing out in their societies. Nigeria has a plethora of dramatists who have in various works highlighted the evolution, people and events taking place in the Nigerian society. Professor of Drama, Femi Osofisan is one such playwright whose plays discuss the Nigerian people and society. In this essay, we examine Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone* as the voice of one who advocates the sanctity of the human life. The essay investigates the motivational drive of a young woman who chooses to honour life even in death, the repercussions of her actions and the lessons for the Nigerian society. To achieve our purpose, the essay takes a cursory look at two movements that advocate the entrenchment of confidence and respect for the abilities of the human person; the state of the contemporary Nigerian nation; Thematic Exploration of *Tegonni: An African Antigone*: Tegonni's Womanistic Ideals in the context of Present Day Nigerian Society: The Repercussions; Lessons and Hopes of the Nigeria of Tomorrow.

The Ideals of Humanism and Womanism

Humanism caught the medieval era on its heels, but both existed side by side for some time before the renaissance spirit toppled the medieval era. The church's firm grip on society became dislodged with the revived interest in the concerns for the worth of the human life, not merely in preparation for eternity, but concerns for the human life as valuable in itself as a complete independent entity.

Humanism's focus of engagement was justice, courtesy, magnanimity, integrity, loyalty, courage and duty to self and others. In other words Humanism is the renewed confidence in the ability of human beings to determine for themselves truth and falsehood, their ability to manage their affairs without undue dependence on the gods. Interest in human capabilities were aroused and championed by humanists. Humanism was a fourteenth and fifteenth century movement in the Renaissance period. Academic concerns of the Renaissance were the development of the universal human being skilled in various endeavours: sciences, politics, sports and the Arts (Brockett & Hildy 121).

If Humanism was a fourteenth and fifteenth century movement, Womanism on the other hand is a more recent movement that emerged in the twentieth century with firm roots in Feminism. The splintering of Feminism became inevitable when on closer more critical scrutiny, it was revealed that the issues of white Feminists were quite different from those of black Feminists. The distinction was hinged primarily on cultural and racial factors as they affected women of the different societies.

With the departure of Womanism from Feminism, Womanist theorists and scholars emerged with various theories of their conceptions of Womanism. Alice Walker the author to whom was ascribed the coining of the term "Womanism" described the Womanist as "a woman who loves another woman sexually and/or non-sexually. She [the Womanist] appreciates and prefers women's emotional flexibility, commitment to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female..." (Walker xi).

Some other Womanist theorists include the likes of Clenora Hudson-Weems, Pearl Cleage, Alicia Boisnier, Delores Williams and Linda Hogan. According to Linda Hogan, the term Womanism represents a Feminist of colour, specifically the black woman. To support her claim, she averred that "Feminist movements have been experienced by many as intrinsically racist". She goes further to add that "while Feminism can be alienating to black and minority females, Womanism allows them to affirm, celebrate their colour and culture in a way that white Feminism does not permit them to. In the words of Pearl Cleage, "Black Feminism

(Womanism) is the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic” (Wiki 6 of 15). Delores Williams, a Womanist theologian, associates Womanism with the traditions and activism formed from the conditions, events, meetings and values within the African American Community (Wiki 3 of 15).

From Alice Walker to Linda Hogan the thrust of their brand of Womanism has been on women of colour. Women of colour in this context, refers primarily to women of African American ancestry and other minority black groups. The strongest reason advanced for the separation of Womanism from Feminism was the issue of race and its attendant discriminations arising there from. But between women of African American Ancestry and African women there is also a divide that is cultural and has led to the emergence of another strand of Womanism.

Basically, the culture of the African woman is distinct from that of the African American woman. This is easily attested to in a line from Alice Walker’s definition of who the Womanist is. In her definition, Walker described a Womanist as: “a woman who loves another woman sexually and/or non-sexually. This statement throws up a strong African apathy to lesbianism and homosexuality. Within the African cultural worldview these sexual leanings, while they exist, are as at today clandestine and abhorred in most societies across African continent. Some African countries, Nigeria inclusive, have constitutional jail terms for people caught engaging in homosexuality and lesbianism.

Therefore, for Alice Walker to say “a woman who loves another woman sexually is a Womanist, means that there is an immediate alienation of a vast majority of African women from such a theory. Nigerian Womanism is championed by scholars like Stella Oyedepo, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Catherine Obianuju Acholonu and others of that ilk.

Catherine Acholonu’s brand of Womanism which she labels Motherism best serves the purpose of our discourse. For Catherine Acholonu a Motherist is that person who “defends and protects family values, seeks truth and true knowledge, is courageous, yet humble, loving, tolerant, powerful, yet down to earth. The Motherist Acholonu continues, must of necessity be one who is willing to protect the natural and cohesive essence of the family, the child, the society and the environment” (<http://www.ismaeledpub.com/CatherineAcholonu.html>).

Humanism advocates the value of the human life as complete entities whose focus was justice, courtesy, magnanimity, integrity, loyalty, courage and duty to self and others. Womanism is the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual spiritual and economic.

From the above discourse, Humanism and Womanism have similar ideologies both of whom are hinged on the recognition of the worth of the human being, his abilities and capabilities. For both these movements, the human person is one that should be accorded great esteem, respect and honour at all times and in every situation.

The gender issue has become a constant in most conversations in virtually all human academic discourses. On the dramatic realm, many playwrights have woven their works around women who believe in the tenets of African Womanism. While some writers still do not give positive attention to their female characters, there are many now, who make conscious efforts to empower their female characters positively. One of such pro-female-character playwrights is Femi Osofisan.

The Contemporary Nigerian Society

The entity known as Nigeria is by every record the largest black nation in the world. It is a nation that has suffered the ignominy of slavery, a bloody civil war, military dictatorship and even now is tottering on the brink of self-annihilation. It is not the intention of this essay to delve into the history of the Nigerian nation, but rather its intent is to look at the state of the nation today in order to relate it to the issues that form the crux of our discourse.

The Nigerian economy is taking a serious bashing as crude oil, its mainstay has been nose diving in the last months. With the fall of crude oil price, the Nigerian economy is failing. With the collapse of the Nigerian economy, the attendant repercussions are having rippling effects in every sphere of the society. There are protests on daily bases across the nation to decry the sorry state of the nation's institutions: Medical Doctors and Health workers are going on strike, Teachers, Lecturers and non-teaching staff in the education sector are perpetually on strike to protest shoddy treatment meted out to them and their institutions by their proprietors, lives and properties are no longer safe as there is no longer security in the land. Religious and ethnic intolerance are stoking deadly suicidal and murderous killings of thousands of citizens regularly. On the political realm, Nigeria is foisted with a crop of leaders who seem not to know why they were elected or appointed as most of them are incapable of performing the functions for which they were elected or appointed to function in the first place.

Over 70% of state governments in Nigeria currently cannot pay salaries of their workforces; cost of living is getting out of the reach of the common man. There is sickness, hunger and starvation in the land. At the heart of the problems plaguing the nation lie greed and corruption which has made it practically impossible for the system to work.

The contemporary Nigerian situation is the staple of dramatic intrigue. Dramatists over the years have drawn their inspirations and muses from the people and events of their society. And many Nigerian playwrights have dramatically x-rayed and recreated them to make dramatic sense to their audiences. Even though our case study is an adaptation of a classical Greek original, the issues treated in it are clearly direct replications of events that are at home in the Nigerian clime. The issues treated in *Tegonni: An African Antigone* are as relevant now as when Sophocles' wrote *Antigone*.

Thematic Exploration of *Tegonni: An African Antigone*

This segment of the essay will briefly look at Femi Osofisan the playwright, the character of Tegonni the eponymous heroine before delving into the exploration of the two major themes of the play.

Femi Osofisan the author of *Tegonni: An African Antigone* is a Nigerian Professor Emeritus of Drama at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. He has written well over fifty plays which have been performed under different climes locally and internationally. *Tegonni...* was written in 2007. A special skill of the author, like William Shakespeare, is his ability to borrow materials from other authors and recreate it to become his unique intellectual property. Femi Osofisan is a skilled adaptor of existing works. When interviewed about his adapted works, he had this to say:

I am inspired to write from the impulse of a powerful and mutual recognition, like the thrill of love, or an unplanned re-union between long-separated friends. That is, I read some work, and both the work and I come to what I call a delicious understanding, a glowing accord, immediate or slow, but irresistible anyway... from that meeting, a

conversation begins between the text and me. And the work won't let me rest until I have brought it back again to the ears of our present times... (Obafemi 15-16).

Another speciality of Femi Osofisan is his crafting of the female characters in his works. While there are characters that conform to the traditional mold of the docile intimidated African woman, there are some female characters that Femi Osofisan endows with amazing vision, strength and ideologies which they pursue with all their being. Some such female characters of Femi Osofisan include: Altine in *Altine's Wrath*, Titubi of *Morountodun*, (Evwierhoma 80) and a host of others including the major character of our current study Tegonni.

The character of Tegonni is that of an extra-ordinarily brave young Princess, the daughter of late Oba Abiodun of Oke-Osun, who defies tradition and constituted authority to achieve her goals. She is a happy, loving and much loved Princess who has a retinue of loyal friends for whom she would willingly sacrifice her life. At a young age, she discovered her passion for Bronze Casting and Sculpture. But at a time when it was unheard of for a woman to be interested in anything other than being an obedient daughter a good wife and a loving mother, her aspirations seemed unattainable. However, with the intervention of Chief Isokun, a trusted ally and member of her late father the King's Council, she not only got to have formal training for her passion, she was provided with a Factory where she could ply her trade. Aside from being the first woman to be initiated into the guild of Bronze Casters, she mentored and trained interested girls/women in the art of Bronze Casting. She also founded the first Guild of Women Bronze Casters. She was also the first woman in her traditional society to marry a white man (*Tegonni...28*).

Tegonni: An African Antigone is set in Oke-Osun "a fair sized Yoruba town" in south western Nigeria in the colonial era. The play is an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. The two major themes of the Play are basically the same as Sophocles' *Antigone*. *Tegonni...* explores the themes of love and duty to family in equal proportions.

Tegonni finds love when in pursuit of her desire to be a Bronze Caster, Chief Isokun takes her to Captain Allan Jones, the British District Officer (D.O) who protects her and even establishes a Factory for her to gainfully engage in Bronze Casting. Even though the feeling of love between Allan and Tegonni is mutual, Chief Isokun was uncomfortable with the union because it had never happened that any woman of the community let alone a Princess had married "a white ghost from across the seas" (13). Tegonni agrees to marry Captain Allan in spite of the objections of Chief Isokun and members of the community.

On the day of her marriage, Tegonni encounters the corpse of her slain brother, Prince Oyekunle on the road. She discovered that her brother had been killed in battle. She also learnt that the colonial Governor had decreed that the corpse must not be buried as punishment for the Prince's alleged treasonable felony. Being the extra ordinary character that she is, Tegonni chooses to bury her brother regardless of the governor's proclamation of death for whosoever buries the body. Tegonni symbolically buries her brother by closing his eyes and sprinkling sand over the corpse. This culturally significant gesture of Tegonni results first, in averting a calamity that might have befallen the community if Prince Oyekunle had not been buried. Chief Isokun acknowledges as much when he pleads with Tegonni to apologise to the Governor:

my daughter, of course we know the meaning of your action. It is not only the dead in fact who will profit from it. The living too have been saved from a malediction that

would have taken several seasons to cleanse. So we know and salute you for it, daughter of Alarape (77-78).

A second repercussion of her action is incurring the wrath of the governor who had decreed death to anyone who buries the Prince.

Tegonni's Womanist Ideals in the Context of the Present Day Nigerian Society

Humanists believe in the dignity and worth of the human person; his/her ability and capability to effectively manage his/her affairs in his/her environment without undue recourse to the gods. Womanists also believe in the fundamental worth of the human person irrespective of race, sex class or creed. Tegonni within the short span of time that the play lasts exhibits very strong Womanist and Humanist qualities that stands her out from her peers and other members of her society.

Tegonni lived at a time when society had no space whatsoever for women's active participation in any sphere of society apart from the home in their exclusive roles of wife, mother and care giver. To that extent, Tegonni was an enigma to the traditional mold of the African woman. Growing up, Tegonni was willful, outgoing and talented in a manner that totally confounded the people of her community. She developed a passion for carving in bronze, an esoteric profession engaged in by men only. She was a phenomenon that her society could not comprehend. Chief Isokun handed her over to the D.O hoping he could make sense of her peculiar quirk. In that singular act, Tegonni became the perpetrator of yet another aberration. She falls in love with Allan of the race of the "ghostly people". Allan nurtured her talent and even opened a workshop for her to practice her passion.

The Humanist in Tegonni came alive when her desire and quest for knowledge in the arts pitched her against the traditions of her people. In spite of the fact that she lived in a time and society when women were treated as insignificant extensions of men, she challenged tradition and rose above the prescribed destiny of women of her time.

Tegonni showed genuine concern for the welfare of her people because as an astute young Princess she understood that culturally, the unburied body of Prince Oyekunle portends grave negative consequences for the community. Her sense of duty to her family and kingdom compels her to bury her slain brother howbeit symbolically. The symbolic burial of the Prince averted the calamity that would have befallen the community and also sent her brother on his final journey to the afterlife. The Womanist/Motherist according to Catherine Acholonu

defends and protects family values, seeks truth and true knowledge. (S)he is courageous, humble, loving, tolerant, powerful, and down to earth. is willing to protect the natural and cohesive essence of the family, the child, the society and the environment.

Drawing from Acholonu's description of the Womanist/Motherist, and the theories of other pro-African Womanist scholars, Tegonni fits neatly into the cast of a Womanist, judging from her character traits and disposition: i) she is concerned with the wellbeing of everybody in her community; she advocates the peaceful coexistence of her people and she tries to bridge a racial segregation with her marriage to Allan. Her love for her family and community compel her to undertake a dangerous venture that will cost her, her life. From the angle of a protector of nature, family, society and the environment, she resolves to bury her brother and sacrifice herself because to do otherwise, means her royal family will be disgraced and the community will suffer gravely the consequences of not burying Prince Oyekunle.

The Nigerian society today needs thousands of Tegonni to save her from the self-destruct mode she seems to have activated. There is no sector of the Nigerian nation that can be said to be healthy. Because the economy of the nation is in shambles, there is hunger and want in the land, families cannot meet their obligations to their families. Children are being withdrawn from schools for lack of funds to meet their tuition needs while some are being taken out of expensive private schools and enrolled in less expensive ones. And even that is being done in the face of a bastardised educational sector. It is not news that the educational sector in Nigeria is ailing. Daily, workers of the educational sector take to the streets to protest the sorry state of the schools and neglect of the facilities and welfare of teachers and staff of the sector; the ineptitude of the political class has witnessed times where salaries are not being paid to workers for months on end; medical practitioners are striking; workers of the oil and gas sector are perpetually on strike; on top of all of these misfortunes, the integrity of the judicial sector is being called to question.

There is strife in the land. Lives are being taken all across the nation. In the north there is the menace of members of the Boko Haram sect who persist in snuffing out lives with their suicide bombing missions. In the southern parts militant youths are relentlessly blowing up oil pipelines thereby polluting and destroying the environment. Then again there is the menace of cattle herdsman who in the bid to graze their Cattle destroy farms, lives and properties of the citizenry in the path of their grazing routes.

In Nigeria today, no one is willing to sacrifice for the collective good of the Nigerian society. The priority of people are so warped that majority of the populace are striving to protect their personal interests.

In recent times, the only example of a genuine Womanist that readily comes to mind is Dr. Ameyo Stella Adadevoh the Senior Medical Consultant who instinctively sacrificed herself to protect Nigeria from the spread of the deadly Ebola virus that struck the nation in 2014. Without thought to her own safety, she used her entire body weight to hold down Patrick Sawyer, the Librarian American who imported the Virus into the country. That singular action cost Doctor Adadevoh her life (The Guardian Newspaper of August 18, 2014). A Womanist: is courageous, humble, loving, tolerant, powerful, down to earth, protects the natural and cohesive essence of the family, the society and the environment.” Dr Adadevoh, in the spirit of a true Womanit, gave her life to protect her society from the spread of the Ebola scourge in Nigeria.

An Ebola patient let loose on society signals considerable damage in human life for that society, just as the exposure of an unburied corpse portends imminent death for the whole of Tegonni’s society. To prevent calamity befalling her society and to fulfill her obligation to her brother, Tegonni, just like Antigone and Dr Adadevoh, sacrificed herself. Having been arraigned by the colonial governor, she had the option of rendering a public apology in order to regain her freedom, but she vehemently stands by her actions and proclaims as much to the gathering assembled to hear her public apology:

I have thought deeply about what I am going to say, of the implications. Elders, our parents, my dear companions, you’ll have to forgive me if I embarrass you. But neither today, nor anytime forever and ever! Never, as long as I live, will I be sorry for having done my duty to my brother. Let the governor kill me! I am proud that I buried my brother (*Tegonni...* 104)

Her only plea was that her friends be spared as she acted alone. By offering herself up, she restored equilibrium to her society (environment), protected her friends and society and in burying her brother did her duty by him and saved her society from imminent doom.

The Repercussions; The Lessons and The Hopes for Tomorrow

Of all the creatures and resources in the universe, the most important are human beings. When humanity begins to undermine the importance and worth of the human person then the world is losing equilibrium. The reckless abandon with which human life is being wasted pose serious threats to the continued existence of the human race. There is hardly any society across the globe that does not have one form of violent activity or the other going on that challenges the peaceful coexistence of people in that society.

Humanity has to retrace its steps to those times when the human life is sacrosanct and accorded all the dignity and respect it deserves. This feat can only be achieved when all forms of biases, discriminations, and violence against the human person is stamped out.

Even though it seems as if there is no hope left for humanity, a universal reorientation, moral and positive cultural rebirth will go a long way in reversing the hands of the clock to that time when human life is revered.

Conclusion

The world is experiencing global violence in astronomical proportions. There is hardly any human society today that is not experiencing one form of violence against the human person or the other. Within the cultural worldview of the Nigerian people, human life used to be sacred. No matter how small or poor that person is, life is respected, esteemed and revered above all else. That the world today has reached a point where that once esteemed life can be snuffed out without feelings of any sort seriously challenge the cultural base of the Nigerian society. The character of Tegonni, the eponymous heroine of the play exhibits strong humanist qualities that endear her to the Womanist ideology of Catherine Acholonu.

As a new bride on her marriage procession, tegonni draws inner strength as accords all the respect and dignity deserving of a human being to the body of her slain brother even though she knows that embarking on such a mission would mean certain death for her. Even though her action meant death for her, she does it all the same. And that singular gesture of hers saved her friends and her community in the long run. For the overall good of the collective – her community and the environment, to ensure a cohesive whole she sacrifices one individual – herself.

In a society like the present day Nigeria, altruism is a scarce commodity because the Nigerian system has not done well by her citizens. Yet Nigerians have to mobilise and begin each from his/her little space to exhibit more of the character of Tegonni and Dr.Adadevoh. The characters of these two women put love, loyalty, respect, and esteem of the Nigerian human society ahead of their own personal safety or survival.

Works Cited

- Brockett, Oscar & Frank Hildy. *History of the Theatre*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.
- Catherine Acholonu's Motherism Retrieved 10/7/2016 from <http://www.ismaeledpub.com/CatherineAcholonu.html>
- Evwierhoma, Mabel. *Female Empowerment and Dramatic Creativity in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications (Nig) Ltd, 2002.
- Jebb, Richard Claverhouse. (Translator) "Antigone", in *The Complete Plays of Sophocles*. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.
- Osofisan, Femi. *Tegonni: An African Antigone*. Lagos: Concept Publications, 2007.
- Obafemi, Olu. 'Interview with Professor Femi Osofisan' *African Performance Review. A Journal of the African Theatre Association (AfTA)*, Vol.3, No 1, 2009, PP 15- 25.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mother's Garden*. London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1983.