

HISTORY AS A TOOL FOR SHAPING HISTORY: THE EXAMPLE OF FEMI OSOFISAN’S *WOMEN OF OWU*

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Abstract

The use of history as a robust resource material in the African literary creativity is as old as the advent of modern African literature itself. This trend re-affirms the inevitability of the convergence of history and literature. In the symbiotic relationship, history feeds literature with factual events of the past the same way literature brings fullness to bear on such facts. Be this as it may, it is viewed that the use to which history is put by literature has taken diverse shades under different literary phases and/or canons. While we have writers, predominantly within the foremost African literary coterie, whose employment of history revels in the conventional historiography of “render it and leave it at that”, we also have writers (predominantly in the emergent radical canon) who employ the resource of history basically for the purpose of its dialectical dissection. In this connection, this paper seeks to investigate the radical use to which history is being put by writers of the latter canon. Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* shall be our representative literary piece. The thrust is to unravel how the text has employed the instrumentality of the historical resource of the war in the ancient Yoruba Kingdom of Owu to vehicle its revolutionary message.

Keywords: History, African literature

Introduction

Across the globe, the relationship between literature and history, since time immemorial, has been that of inevitable convergence. As an art that enjoys the universal conceptualisation as a mirror of the society, literature is at times crafted to mirror in retrospect through a writer’s deliberate recourse to factual events of the past. Apparently, this is in recognition of the importance of history to the writer. Philip Bagu reports David Gordon as capturing this reality thus: “literature sources itself from such historical events the same way it seeks to affect the social realities of the present” (The Ker Review 44-55). This view also concurs with Fischer’s

assertion, contained in Akachi Ezeigbo, that “literature is born of reality and acts back upon reality” (10). As a further corroboration of the interdisciplinary convergence, orthodox historians have also opined that the events of the past are taken into account for the primary purpose of connecting them with the present for common good. For instance, Arifalo contends that “history is part and parcel of the general philosophy of life. It is concerned with the unity of the past and present, not with the past for its own sake. In short, history is seen as an unending dialogue between the past and the present” (qtd. In Eds Oguntomisin and Ajayi 25). With this in mind, it will not be any surprise having a historical fact as the source or background for a literary output. The world over, this trend flourishes till date.

A recourse to a genuine sense of history has revealed that the use of history as resource material for literary creativity in Africa actually predated the inception of modern African literature itself. This claim can easily be validated in the fact that orature which is part and parcel of the African people’s life has its resources drawn from individual heroic exploits, communal epochs as well as other events in the histories of the societies. All of these had existed long before the advent of the literacy culture, the harbinger of modern African literature. However, while modern African literature has been a collective beneficiary of the bounteous historical reservoir, the different canonical leanings kept by different writers who employ historical resource have influenced such writers’ diverse approaches to the socio-political and economic purposes such past events are made to serve. Hence, most of the African literary forerunners who have made use of historical events exhibit a penchant for merely celebrating the exploits of the dramatis personae of the epochs. In the circumstance, a celebration of individual heroism, part of which may even be negative human values, thrives. This literary paradigm concurs with the ideals of bourgeois historiography. In this category is Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1926) which is a fictional recreation of the epochal exploits of Shaka, the great king of the ancient Zulu Kingdom. Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* (1971) is also cast in the mould; being a dramatic enactment of the Yoruba history as it concerned the rebellion staged against the then Alaafin of Oyo by his own generalissimo, Kurunmi. Also, closely knitted to this in history is Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) which poignantly dramatises the historical account of the undue interference of the then white colonisers in the Yoruba rites of passage particularly with regard to the cultural burial of the Alaafin in the Old Oyo Empire. The list is long. In all of such works, rather than delving into the socio-economic dynamics of the issues at stake at the particular epochs being recreated with a view to cross-examining contemporary realities, what we have is, in Osundare’s words, “an

overwhelming nostalgia about the past, a helpless jeremiad about the present, but hardly a suggestion as to the way out of the wilderness, hardly a vision of tomorrow” (25).

Coming on the heels of this literary canon are few contemporaries and many emergent ones whose use of history is from a sharply different ideological standpoint. The paradigm shift became noticeable when revolutionary writers came up with works which also draw resources from the historical reservoir but with a practically radical approach. Such works employ history like others but, beyond others, do a post-mortem on history along dialectical lines and even move ahead to show the way forward. In this wise, their use of history as a literary resource is imbued with a revolutionary tenor not witnessed in either of the cultural nationalist and critical realist canons. They heed charges like one posited by Ngugi, in his *Writers in Politics* (1981), that “the writer should not only explain the world, he should change it” (75). Little wonder, while Sembene Ousmane can be cited as the trail blazer of revolutionary writings that amply drew from the resource of history among literary forebears in Africa with the publication of his seminal novel, *God’s Bits of Wood* (1960), Ngugi Wa Thiong’o is another. His *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) is outstandingly in this mould. Our target writer, Femi Osofisan, features prominently among emergent African writers whose radical employment of the resource of history is noteworthy. A leading protagonist of the radical literature in Africa, Osofisan is particularly renowned for his almost unparalleled experimentations in dramaturgy.

Apart from demonstrating an uncommon skill in the use of history for its revolutionary effects, he has also excelled as a master metatextualist. Interestingly, his *Women of Owu* (WOO henceforth), our sampled text, enjoys the dual orientation of being a product of history on one hand and, on the other hand, an artistic creation modelled after a classical literary output, *The Trojan Women* (TTW henceforth) by Euripides. Definitely, this especial background of the text is capable of raising issues. In other words, how has metatextuality been truly made to bear on the dramatic piece? Are there allied experiences which have combined to propel the writing of the play and to make it a true product of history? How is the use of history radicalised in the text? Needless to stress that a critical attention to these posers shall form the fulcrum of the discourse in this paper.

Women of Owu and Metatextuality

Set in the early nineteenth century Owu Kingdom of Yorubaland, the play is a dramatic enactment of the historical reality of the destructive war imposed on the ancient Owu Kingdom by the combined forces of the other Yoruba species of Ijebu, Ife and Oyo. To be precise, the actions in the play are the aftermath effects of the war which had taken the invaders seven years

of siege to prosecute. While all actions take place within the first two days of the sack of Owu town by the allied forces, the aftermath experiences are given expression in the pains and pangs of the war survivors who are mainly women. The sack is so annihilating that the only surviving male human being in Owu is Aderogun, the little royal baby (being a grandson of the already slaughtered King of Owu, Oba Akinjobi) who, strapped to Adumaadan's (his mother's) back, is only awaiting his own death in a matter of hours in the hands of the conquerors. Just as the real Owu war marked the end of a monolithic Owu Kingdom in Yoruba history, the play also draws a conclusion that, consequent upon the war, Owu people become a scattered species of the Yoruba race. Anlugbua, the god and ancestral father of Owu Ipole people, finally makes a frantic effort at raising the hope of an already war-ravaged and despondent Owu women when he emotionally predicts that:

Owu will rise again! Not here,
 Not as a single city again –
 I know – but in little communities elsewhere,
 Within other cities of Yorubaland. Those now going
 Into slavery shall start new kingdoms in those places. (67)

While the plot of the play clearly lends credence to its heavy dependence on history as resource material, a corollary is its metatextual orientation. No doubt, the playwright confesses to the contemporary inspiration from the Iraqi War of the early 1990s consequent upon what the international community considered an aggressive occupation of the less powerful but oil-rich Kuwait by Iraq. The alleged affront triggered an international coalition of forces led by the United State of America which intervened and subdued the aggressor, Iraq, in a prolonged military action that culminated in the deposition, arrest, trial and eventual execution of the then Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, in November 2006 (*Journal of the Literary Society of Nigeria, Issue 4* 65). Nevertheless, the play is crafted in the mould of the classical piece, *TTW*. As a matter of fact, the similitude of the material forces that propelled both the actual Trojan War (re-enacted in Euripides' *TTW*) and the actual Owu War (recreated in Osofisan's *WOO*) is obvious. While in *TTW*, the immediate factor that triggered off the war was the abduction of Helen (the very beautiful Spartan princess) by Paris (the Trojan prince) from Sparta and elopement therewith to Troy, the bone of contention at the immediate level in *WOO* is the seizure of Iyunloye (Maye Okunade's beautiful wife) during one of the raids on Ife by the Owu warriors and her eventual engagement to Dejumoo (the Owu prince). Also, the plots of both plays are rendered from the point of view of the war vanquished. In both, the blows of the wars are so devastating that mainly women are left on the sides of the conquered to be taken captives. The destruction of the facilities of the defeated sides is nothing but colossal. The desecration of the

groves of the gods and goddesses, the modus operandi for the sharing of the noble women caught in the abyss of destruction by the victors, the respective fates of little Aderogun and Astynax, the respective predictions by Orisaye and Cassandra, the eventual emotional subdue of the respective war lords (Maye Okunade and Menelaus) by their lover-betrayers (Iyunloye and Helen) in the midst of the strong warnings by the respective conquered queens (Erelu Afin and Hecuba), the annihilating inferno visited on Owu and Troy by the respective conquerors as well as the eventual departure of the respective woman-captives, among other features, all combine to lend a strong credence to the metatextual character of Osofisan's *WOO*. All these combine to bemoan the sorrowful consequences of wars in general and, in particular, the ignoble fates of those defeated in wars (across the globe).

Deconstructing the Myth of Conventional History

Beyond the metatextual content of *WOO*, of a great relevance is the reinterpretation of history by the play. In the author's note on the play's genesis, Osofisan unequivocally hints at this thus: "... it was quite logical that, as I pondered over this adaptation of Euripides' play, in the season of the Iraqi War, the memories that were awakened in me should be those of the tragic Owu War" (*WOO vii*). In the first instance, this shows Osofisan as a writer who imbues his work with a sense of history bearing in mind the Achebean thesis that for us to dry up very well in our present circumstance, there is a need for us to know where the rain started to beat us. This is a clear recognition of the inevitable immersion of literature and history. Eldred Durosinmi Jones lends his voice to the thesis when he asserts that "the contemporary writer in Africa is primarily immersed with the African present; but in getting to grips with it, he like every other social being around him is heavily dependent on his past" (*ALT Vol.II 1*). Corroborating that what has been is ultimately knitted with what is and, by projection, what might be or what ought to be, Osundare comes out more forcefully in his figurative assertion that "a writer without memory is like an alphabet without its letters, a face without a nose. For it is needless to say that it is memory, which grounds us in history, the root which feeds the manifold branches of human experiences" (qtd. in Eds Osofisan et al 380). Without mincing words, literature does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, as articulated by Ngugi, "it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (qtd. in Ed Heywood 23). For literary historians, some of these forces come in form of past events which are brought to the fore to influence the present. Elsewhere, Ngugi addresses himself to the propelling force of his incessant recourse to the importance of the writer's past. Although addressed to the prose genre, the import of the view transcends genre boundaries. Sounding emphatic, he

asserts: “I talk about his past because actually I am interested in the present, and also talk about his past because I find on the whole that African novelists especially are quite good when they are dealing with the past” (qtd. in Ed Ogunbesan 8). Quite instructive here is the attention the writer-critic draws to the interest in the present via a reflection on the past. In other words, the literary historian’s recourse to factual events of the past is geared towards influencing the present. Arguably therefore, the literary artist, on a general note, is in concurrence with the orthodox historian himself (e.g Arifalo earlier quoted) who sees history as a means of affecting the present. Frederick Powicke represents this historical school in his assertion that “the craving for an interpretation of history is so deep-rooted that, unless we have a constructive outlook over the past, we are drawn either to mysticism or cynicism” (qtd. in Carr 103).

At this juncture, the crucial question is: what manners of use abound in the ways various historical witnesses report factual events of the past in the bid to affect the present? Put differently, while all historians and/or literary historians may lay claim to a genuine intention to affect the present, differences abound in the accounts given of the same events. Particularly, differences abound in the approaches adopted by different canons of literary creativity. According to Adewale Adepaju, an orthodox historian, this is “the burden of the historian” which is traceable to the historian’s bid to dissect history. In his words,

The burden of the historian is closely linked with the pursuit of facts. In the contemporary world, he seeks to ascertain what happened in the past as well as explain how and why it happened. In the attempt to do this, it has however been discovered that different and even conflicting or confusing interpretations to the same events are available to the historian. (*Anyigba Journal of Arts and Humanities, Vol.6* 30-31)

To the extent that such differences are noticeable in the approaches adopted by different categories of writers who have employed history as their resource material, it can be argued that the differences are ideology driven. Hence, in the African literary firmament, we have works that canonise their writers as literary historians but whose articulation of issues either border on cultural nationalism or, at best, stop at mere criticism of the situation at stake – the critical realist writers. We also have works by the other category of literary historians whose use of the factual events of the past is from an entirely radical paradigm. The writers in this latter category also criticise like the former; but, beyond the former, they go a step further to proffer solution to the situation at stake in revolutionary terms – the socialist realist writers. This is a reinterpretation of history as we have in *WOO*.

The Owu War that is brought to bear on the present is given a dialectical analysis by Osofisan. Just like the critical realist would do, the playwright has delved into the material and spiritual undercurrents of the devastating Owu War. But beyond this, the writer prosecutes a radical shift from the bourgeois historiography of the critical realist canon by asking fundamental questions which interrogate the material causes as well as the propriety or otherwise of the war. By so doing, the socio-economic circumstances surrounding the war are given a dialectical analysis with a view to coming up with theses that are pro-people. Such theses are pro-masses to the extent of their capacity to proffer ways out of the quagmire of senseless wars, wars that profit only the strong in the society. In the cosmos of the play, immediate and remote reasons are advanced for the declaration of the war on the hitherto united, peaceful and prosperous Owu Kingdom by the joint forces of Ijebu, Ife and Oyo under the command of Maye Okunade, the sculptor-turned-warrior from Ife. As the play opens, we see the god Anlugbua (the ancestral father of Owu Ipole) in conversation with the two women who (out of the other surviving women) are sent to fetch water from the local stream. The conversation reveals the immediate factors for the war. Probed by an astounded Anlugbua on what has become of Owu city (now in its smouldering ruins), one of the women – the duo still ignorant of the true identity of the figure before them – responds:

Yesterday, old man!
 For seven years we had held them off,
 These invaders from Ijebu and Ife, together
 With mercenaries from Oyo fleeing south from the
 Fulani forces. *They said our Oba*
Was a despot, that they came to free us
From his cruel yoke!
 So for seven years they camped
 Outside our walls, but were unable to enter
 Until yesterday, when a terrible fire engulfed the city
 And forced us to open our gates. That was how

They finally gained entry and swooped on us (my emphasis, 2)

Clearly, the song of liberation struggle on the lips of the invaders is instantly rubbished as the war events unfold. For instance, it becomes illogical seeing freedom fighters, which they would want us believe they are, unleashing so annihilating a havoc on a city they purport to be liberating. A situation where the life of no male human being is spared calls to question the target-beneficiaries and, indeed, essence of such a liberation struggle. That the claim is one which stands no test of time is soon confirmed. In the second scene, we see woman-captives in broken hearts, bemoaning their collective plight and the fate that awaits them in the hands of their captors. Their

exchange which is nothing short of cries of anguish is quite sarcastic and revealing. Part of it runs thus:

WOMAN: Liars! You came, you said,
To help free our people from a wicked king. Now,
After your liberation, here we are
With our spirits broken and our faces swollen
Waiting to be turned into whores and housemaids
In your towns. I too, I curse you!

ERELU: Savages! You claim to be more civilized than us
But did you have to carry out all this killing and carnage
To show you are stronger than us? Did you
Have to plunge all these women here into mourning
Just to seize control over our famous Apomu market
Known all over for its uncommon merchandise?

WOMAN: No Erelu, what are you saying, or
Are you forgetting?

They do not want our market at all -

WOMAN: They are not interested in such petty things
As profit –

WOMAN: Only in lofty, lofty ideas, like freedom -

WOMAN: Or human rights –

WOMAN: Oh the Ijebu have always disdained merchandise –

WOMAN: The Ifes are unmoved by the glitter of gold –

WOMAN: The Oyos have no concern whatsoever for silk or ivory –

WOMAN: All they care for, my dear women

All they care for, all of them, is our freedom!

WOMAN: Ah Anlugbua bless their kind hearts!

WOMAN: Bless the kindness which has rescued us
From tyranny in order to plunge us into slavery!

WOMAN: Sing, my friends! Let us celebrate
Our new-won freedom of chains! (12-13)

Apart from the women's confirmation of the flimsiness of the excuse given by the conquerors for the Owu invasion, there is a Marxist streak to the scenario. The tone of the women signposts a steady development of consciousness on their part. This tendency which tilts towards a radical reinterpretation of history is a paradigm shift from what obtains in the conventional way of playing a historical witness from the perspective of the dominant ideology.

At the remote level, there is a multiplicity of factors as advanced by the temporal and spiritual lords in the *theatre of the absurd* which the war turns out to be. In other words, there are material and spiritual undercurrents to the invasion of Owu by the allied forces. While these factors intertwine at

both spiritual and temporal levels, they are essentially underpinned by material considerations by the actors in the carnage. It is also discovered that each of the kingdoms that have networked to form the allied forces has its own axe to grind with Owu. For instance, the Ijebus are enraged because Owu had earlier killed many of them in an earlier battle, raided their market stalls and sold many into slavery (*WOO* 20). The Ifes are angered because Owu had earlier waged war against their venerated soil and took away the popular Apomu market from them (*WOO* 19). The Oyo factor is premised on the allegation that Owu warriors had earlier defiled Alaafin Sango's anti-slavery order by selling war captives (fellow Yorubas) into slavery (19). A corollary here is a personal grudge against Owu by Maye Okunade, the popular Ife sculptor. It is alleged that, during one of the earlier raids by Owu warriors at the Apomu market, they had seized Maye Okunade's wife (Iyunloye) and married her to the youngest Owu Prince, Dejumoo. Extremely angered, the sculptor abandoned his art work and started mobilising forces against Owu. Upon the alignment of the forces, Maye Okunade emerges as their General. The conversation between Anlugbua and the two women on the water-fetching mission is quite revealing on this:

WOMAN: Ancestral father, the armies of Ijebu, Oyo and Ife,

Who call themselves the Allied Forces,
Under the command of that demon
Maye Okunade,
Caused this havoc.

ANLUGBUA: Okunade? Not the man I knew? Gbenagbena

Okunade, the one endowed by Obatala
With the gift of creativity, to shape wood
And stone into new forms? The fabled artist
Who also dreamed those arresting patterns on virgin cloth?

WOMAN: The very one! But when his favourite wife,

Iyunloye, was captured and brought here, and given as
Wife to one of our princes, Okunade became bitter, and
Swore to get her back. Shamed and disgraced,
He abandoned his tools and took to arms. And so fierce
Was his passion for killing, that he rose rapidly
Through the ranks, and soon became the Maye!
An artist? He's a butcher now! (5-6)

The spiritual dimension is factored into the war when the goddess Lawumi (grandmother of Anlugbua) reveals to the devastated Anlugbua in their post-mortem conversation that she actually egged on the allied forces against Owu. To Lawumi, Owu had become carried away by their hitherto economic prosperity and military prowess that they arrogantly launched offensive on revered Yoruba kingdoms and mores. Considered as affront to

the Yoruba cosmology are the war against the Yoruba ancestral home of Ife and attendant snatching of Apomu market, the indiscriminate massacre of the Ijebus and sale of fellow Yoruba (captives) into slavery (18-20). Thus, the goddess weakens the resilience of Owu to withstand the long siege by the allied forces by causing a mysterious inferno which forces Owu to open its gate to the invaders and, in the process, open itself to its very annihilation.

The above factors taken together and juxtaposed with the backdrop of the Iraqi War (among many other such wars across the globe) which inspired this artistic and radical recasting of history by Osofisan, it can easily be deduced that, in virtually every war, there are socio-economic undertones. Also, there is a crucial need to interrogate the genuineness of the interventionist bids in many wars across the globe. Even the spiritual dimension brought in can easily be explained off as riding on the vehicle of other issues that are essentially foregrounded in man's materialist tendencies. This is easily verifiable at two levels. First, we see a sudden twist on the countenance of Lawumi, the goddess that had hitherto camped with the invaders. This is upon her realisation that the allied forces are, after all, not the moderate arbiter she would want to have in her grouse with Owu. She thus changes camps and begins the process of mobilising celestial forces against the war victors (20-22). Secondly, we see Anlugbua making a case for the spiritual world. In the process, he tries frantically to exonerate supernatural forces from any blame for the human tragedy. Instead, he deposits all the blame at man's door post; blaming the war on man's inordinate ambition for power and other material possessions, man's inability to control his ego and desires of the flesh given expression in "a senseless quarrel over a woman" (65), man's inability to jaw-jaw over their differences instead of taking to arms at the slightest provocation, lack of consciousness on the part of the toads of war to understand the dynamics of class relations in wars so as to be decisive in action against the ruling class, and the general lack of a good sense of history. All these are brought to the fore as the women's ritual dance culminates in the possession of Erelu by Anlugbua during which we have a serious radical exchange involving Erelu (now Anlugbua's mouthpiece) and the chorus leaders (64-66). Even when this climaxes in Erelu's eventual death, the god Anlugbua himself mounts the stage with a final statement which does not only encapsulates the plot of the play but also, very importantly, illuminates on the ideological direction of the play. His statement which ends the play runs thus:

ANLUGBUA: Poor human beings! War is what will destroy you!

As it destroys the gods. But I am moved, and I promise:

Owu will rise again! Not here,

Not as a single city again – Mother will not permit that,

I know – but in little communities elsewhere,

Within other cities of Yorubaland. Those now going
Into slavery shall start new kingdoms in those places.
It's the only atonement a god can make for you
Against your ceaseless volition for self-destruction.
You human beings, always thirsty for blood,
Always eager to devour one another! I hope
History will teach you. I hope you will learn. Farewell. (67)

Anlugbua's farewell message is quite instructive. Wars and related crises across the globe are caused basically by man. As such, it is only man, and not any metaphysical force, that can settle them or even prevent them from breaking out. Again, the self-exoneration by the spiritual realm showcases a form characteristic of Osofisan's dramaturgy. In the socialist tradition of the playwright's literary cosmos, employing the supernatural for the radical purpose of subversion is a commonplace. In one of his critical moments, Osofisan himself has the following to say in this regard:

Obviously I may use myth or ritual but only from a subversive perspective. I borrow ancient forms specifically to undermine the magic of superstition. All these gods and their pretended inviolability ... one is tired of them. We have been hearing of them for too long. (Awodiya 20)

Beyond trading blames, Anlugbua's final word consciously touches on the radical inclination of the play vis-a-vis the use of history. It is Anlugbua's final admonition that history is enough for man to learn from. However, the history in contention here is not the one that revels in "the canonisation of terror" (a la Soyinka). Rather, it is one that glorifies the collective spirit of the people to wrestle free of the shackles of oppression and exploitation. That is why, earlier on, Anlugbua, through Erelu whom he has possessed, canvasses a demolition of bourgeois historiography which distorts facts and celebrates the misgivings of the past as though they were genuine acts of heroism. The canvas is that such fraudulent histories be replaced by a people's history which pursues the cause of the common man who often bears the brunt of the intra-class squabbles of the bourgeoisie. In Anlugbua's words,

A father can only chew for a child; he cannot swallow for her.
If only you had read your history right, the lessons
Left behind by the ancestors! Each of us, how else did we go
Except by the wrath of war? Each of us,
Demolished through violence and contention! Not so?
But you chose to glorify the story with lies! Lies!
Our apotheosis as you sing it is a fraud! (66)

As the speech by Anlugbua recalls, there is an authorial disgust for the history that is rendered from the point of view of the bourgeoisie

hegemony. This is a kind of history that glorifies epochs of individual heroes and conquered territories. To the extent that a history rationalises wars and/or crises that do humanity no good at the end of the day, it is condemned in the play. It can therefore be argued that what we have in *WOO* is a furtherance of the thesis accentuated in Osofisan’s *No More the Wasted Breed* (1983). In order to achieve a stoppage of unwarranted carnage, the thesis, as handed down through Anlugbua, calls on the masses who are always war victims to have a proper sense of history so that they can rise to challenge the bourgeois hegemony. This is a radical way of intervening in the course of history. Indeed, this is how people can rise up to intervene in history and change the unjust social order. This must be because, as noted by Osundare,

...the people who shake the world so, who provoke all this change, are not the blue blood titans we have grown accustomed to in bourgeois literature. They are the peasants, the proletarians usually slotted in for brief “comic relief” in conventional literature. The writers here give them new dignity, a new purpose, and since they are usually the “wretched of the earth”, a new will to smash oppression. They are organised, aware, and united. Therefore, their struggle is collective; so is their victory – and their heroism. (34)

Osundare’s charge is adaptable to the situation in *WOO* since it is a charge on all who are oppressed to be conscious of their plight, be united and challenge the bourgeois hegemony that seeks to perpetuate their oppression and exploitation. In the cosmos of the play, the toads of war are essentially women which is only incidental. In so many other wars the world over, the peasants across gender boundaries bear the brunt. So, the women in *WOO*, being so physically weak, are just symbolic of the proletarian class. Hence, Anlugbua similarly challenges the toads of Owu war – and, by extension, toads of any war – to rise up for the purpose of rewriting history from their own perspective. Let us hear them out:

CHORUS LEADER 2: We did not know, we common folk! Forgive us,
It is the rulers who write history –

CHORUS LEADER 1: It is the hunters who compose the story of the hunt
–

CHORUS LEADER 2: It is the revellers, not the slaughtered cows.
Who record the fable of the feast!

ERELU: Then the deer must train themselves to seize the gun from
Their hunters! The cows to take over the narration of
Their own story. Perhaps
After the punishment that’s coming for you – (66)

Reinterpretation of history for the primary purpose of salvaging the common man and, by implication, the society is a process. As articulated in the play therefore, the thesis prescribes that the consciousness of “the

wretched of the earth” (a la Fanon) be raised so that rousing them for a collective struggle could be easy and effective. In other words, instead of wars which celebrate bourgeois heroism, what is needed is revolution which has the capacity to reorder the dynamics of social relations and which celebrates collective heroism of the oppressed. For this to be effectively achieved, proletarian consciousness and unity are essential ingredients. As a matter of fact, sacrifice will have to attend the struggle. It is this sacrifice that Anlugbua alludes to while raising the hope of Owu rising again. According to him, “Owu will rise again” but “not as a single city...but in little communities elsewhere” (earlier quoted). This prophecy has come to pass in history because, today, we have Owu-Abeokuta (in Ogun state), Orile-Owu (in Osun state), etc. Simply put, in the socialist character of the play, it ends on a note of hope for the downtrodden; in this context, the seemingly despondent victims of war. There is hope of the eventual proletarian victory. This will however be hard-won and sweet to the extent of the level of consciousness and unity galvanised by the oppressed class itself. Finally, it is in this hope that the interrogation of the bourgeois historiography, the rewriting of history from the side of the people and, ultimately, the change in the social order sequentially culminate.

Conclusion

The primordially destructive tendency of any war is the focus of *WOO*. Through this, the play preoccupies itself with the need to confront and reject the conventional lens through which wars and other crises in human societies are viewed. Because this conventional lens often seeks to perpetuate the dominant ideology where the “ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas” (a la Karl Marx), the play offers a new lens thus: first, we should view wars and other crises from the perspective of their victims who are the dregs of the society; and, second, we should analyse the socio-economic undercurrents which belie these wars and crises. Through this radical approach to the diagnoses of wars and other social upheavals, the play believes, we stand the hope of making proper prescription: that the toads of war should attain consciousness, get organised, challenge the bourgeois hegemony that seeks to perpetuate the diminishing of their life, and, ultimately, change the social order. Being an African adaptation of a classical piece and with the immediate inspiration coming from the Iraqi war, this thrust “gives the play both local and universal appeal” (James Dung in *JLSN* 65). Finally, through this play, Osofisan has played the role of the writer as a historical witness. Beyond this, there is a radical leap by the literary historian because there is a didactic inquiry into the essence of war. In making a literary harvest of the human tragedy of war, Osofisan asks questions such as those posed by Ernest Emenyonu – “Why are wars fought?

Do wars achieve their declared initial objectives? Who benefits from war? Who are the toads of war? Who are the innocent victims of war? Is war inevitable in a human society?" (*ALT* 26 xi). It is the right answers to these posers that invariably serve as a prelude to the revolutionary prescription noted is the play. Invariably, it is the revolutionary prescription which scores the literary historian as one who is all out to prosecute a radical confrontation of bourgeois historiography.

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