TRAUMA UNSPEAKABLE: *WOMEN OF OWU* AND THE ECHOES OF A TIMELESS LAMENT

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Abstract

Many of the oldest and most lasting forms of literature in human history have been laments. Laments are present both in the **Iliad** *and the* **Odyssey** *and have continued to be used in elegized poems and dramas. This paper seeks to place lament in the context of modern dramas as they construct core theoretical issues in history and sociology of literature, therefore articulating the composite nature of the tragic genre in drama.* **Women of Owu**, *the specimen text, is used to explore the genre of lament as a form of address that channels emotion through ritual. Using the framework of the Aristotelian conception of tragedy, the paper explores* **Women of Owu** *as a trauma play of lamentation which depicts both a moment and a language. The concept of a moment and a language is used to portray how past and present overlap and swirl around each other in dramatic narration, making the play derive its aesthetic completeness in psychosocial interpretation. It is argued that the play has a low dramatic action in its construction and is imbued with thematic overstatements, thus, relying heavily on lament as symbol rather than on action.*

A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. This serves as the basis for a larger argument that suggests that identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma. However, a discursive dependence upon a single psychological theory of trauma produces a homogenous interpretation of the diverse representations in the trauma play and the interplay that

occurs between identity, language and lamentation. Collective lamentation of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains shared social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of both the self and the collective. This paper presents lament as a form of genre in trauma theatre, using Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* as a specimen text.

Trauma is an emotional and psychological response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. The term 'trauma play' may then be described as a literature in dramatic form that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. A defining feature of the trauma play is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that informs the new perception of the self and the world. Trauma plays are not limited to any particular theatrical genre, and oftentimes, they reconstruct a tragic experience. Both as an art form and as a social expression of grief, the lament is a genre deeply rooted in traumatic discourse. Laments have been analyzed in different, overlapping ways in trauma discourse. The features of lament are generally suspected to the brief periods of intense mourning within larger works, such as those in the 'Book of Job' and 'Lamentations' in the *Bible* and Homer's *Illiad.* Even in literary discourse, lament as traumatic expression is ancient. Longinus first described it in his treatise on the sublime. In the second half of the eighteenth century, when to critics and philosophers the sublime became not just elevated language or a particular landscape of imaginative event, some writers explored the dramatic possibilities of lamentation in the form of the lyric. The traditional structure of a lament has "a three-pattern structure, which consists of a direct address, a narrative of the past or future, and then a renewed address accompanied by reproach" (Due, 2006:10). Laments were accompanied by physical

and vocal gestures which set the style apart from the traditional speech; the accompanying wails and howls as well as the "tearing of hair, the laceration of cheeks, and the beating of the chest" (Mclure, 1999:44). These laments were often known to inspire revenge for the dead as they offered accepted form of social protest.

The term 'lament' derives from the Latin word 'lamentum' which can be equated with expressions such as to mourn, to grieve, to wail, to moan, to weep or to cry. Artistically, the term is closely linked with the Italian term 'lamento', which stands for a piece of music in which somebody expresses his grief over something, mainly over another person's death. The formulations of Margaret Alexiou (1974) have shown us the history of the ritual lament in ancient Greece. However, in modern history of literary lamentation, lament has no generic line. While essentially always an expression of mourning, it can take many forms, from a calculated performance of hysterics to rhythmic incantations of sorrow, and can have a wide variety of subject matter, including people and communities. Laments have served many times in transforming suffering but it has also provided literary avenues (even if it is marginal), and legitimated public venues for voicing discontent or exercising resistance. The genre can thus sometimes provoke repressive counter-discourses. While the main thematic reason for the structure of *Women of Owu* was an attempt to express the chaotic structure of war and its aftermath, trauma and lament unwittingly become its leitmotifs. On these premises, Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* can be regarded as a play of trauma as well as a lament.

Women of Owu as a lament questions the society's ideologies about war and its traumatic aftermath and as such it is expedient to understand the play's artistic and historical context. Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is "An African Re-reading of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*".[i] The plot of *The Trojan Women* (the parent text) is simple. The story does not follow one hero, but rather a chorus of Trojan women who have survived the Trojan

war and now await a future of slavery. The women are led by Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, along with her daughter Cassandra and daughters-in-law, Andromache and Helen. The play, essentially a lament for Troy and those who fell with it, presents the women bemoaning their fates. As the plot unfolds, the audience learns that the Greeks will share out Hecuba to Odysseus, Cassandra to Agamemnon, Andromache to the son of Achilles, and Helen to Menelaus. Impelled by the circumstances they find themselves in, the Trojan women repeatedly question their faith in the traditional pantheon of gods and their dependence on them. The futility of expecting wisdom and justice from the gods is expressed repeatedly. The laments of these women – for their fallen city, their deceased loved ones, and their dark futures – can certainly provoke an emotional response, but the intention of the play is not to inspire pity and fear but to question the events of war. Though the message is timeless and universal, it has repeatedly been criticized for its little plot development, little construction or action and little relief in terms of variety of tones.

Like *The Trojan Women*, *Women of Owu* is also based on an historical event. "In 1821 or thereabouts, 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 from Oyo refugees fleeing downwards from the Nigerian savannah land, sacked the city of Owu after a seven-year siege"(Osofisan, 2006:vii). The play opens as the god, Anlugbua, appears as an old man to two Owu women who are on their way to fetch water. Through their conversation, the women reveal the event of the previous day, when the city of Owu was sacked by a besieging army. In their narration, the women describe how the enemy set the thatched roofs on fire, killed the fleeing men, entered the town, and went from house to house killing all male children, raping and killing or taking the women as prisoners. Anlugbua has repeatedly been called upon in the past but he has heard nothing. The surviving women lament the deaths of their husbands and children

and fear for their own future as slaves. One of the women is Erelu Afin, the former queen. She considers herself to have lost more than the others, since she has had a better life. Her daughter, Orisaye, partially deranged but greatly influenced by the gods, vows to avenge the atrocities by murdering the victor who has demanded her in marriage as part of the booty of war. The god Anlugbua, meets with his mother, the goddess Lawumi, who admits to having started the war because Owu has gone into the slave trade. Now she wants to punish the soldiers she sent to destroy Owu, among other reasons because they have desecrated her own priestess. Before the final signal for the captives to be taken to the waiting caravan en route slavery, the women go into a funereal ritual and Erelu Afin, already in a trance-like realm, is overtaken by unseen forces. She collapses and dies to the consternation of the other women.

Like the parent text (*The Trojan Women*), *Women of Owu* has a low dramatic action in its construction. The text is imbued with thematic overstatements, relying heavily on lament as symbol rather than on action, thus deriving its aesthetic completeness in psychosocial interpretation. In interpreting lament as a specific genre in *Women of Owu*, a peek into the conception of tragedy is apt. This is because lament is a tragic derivative. Aristotle's conception of tragedy will provide a framework here. He defines tragedy as "a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude – in language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts – in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative – and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the catharsis of such emotions" (Aristotle, in Halliwell, 1987). The combination of 'feeling' and 'pity' is central to the understanding of lament in *Women of Owu*. This centrality is premised on the interpretation that feeling and fear constitute the poles of catharsis, and catharsis is the basis of lament. Though the term 'catharsis' is often used in contemporary theatre and performance scholarship, Aristotle only refers to it once in his initial definition of tragedy. In that context, catharsis means

purification, and scholars have agreed that Aristotle intended it to mean the psychological cleansing of emotions after witnessing a tragedy. "The cathartic principle itself, in maintaining that pity and fear are not merely to be aroused but to be purged, is evidence of the need in tragedy to have dissonance exploded, leaving only the serenity of harmony behind" (Krieger,1960: 3). The women of Owu witnessed a devastating tragedy and, in cleansing their souls and emotions psychologically, they resorted to lament. By this very thesis, it is easy to articulate that lament is portrayed in the play through songs and dialogues, whereby the dialogues are mostly deployed through the narrative technique. The narrative structure of the play links the previous unseen events. Every small component forms part of the whole; when one episode has been narrated, it is not over because it keeps reverberating, influencing the rest of the plot, commenting on the central themes and reflecting the values incorporated in the rest of the story. Every part is reflected in the whole, and vice versa.

The author begins the play by establishing a site for the composition of lament. The opening stage direction reads:

> *SITUATION: It is the day after the sack of the town of Owu Ipole by the Allied Forces of Ijebu, Oyo, and Ife./ The night before, the king, Oba Akinjobi, had fled from the town, with some of his high chiefs and soldiers, leaving his family behind. The Allied Forces slaughtered all the men left in the town, including the male children; and only the female children and women have been spared and made captives./ The scene is an open space close to the city's main gate, which used to serve as a market but has now been demolished. Visible in the background is the city itself, in ruins, and smouldering. Along the broken wall are the temporary tents of the old market, built of wooden and bamboo stakes, and straw roofs, in which the women are being kept./ The chorus of women, still visible in the dark, is singing the dirge,*

> *'Atupa gbe nle felepo'./ The god ANLUGBUA appears as an Old Man to two women sent to fetch water* (p. 1).

The foundation for lament has obviously been laid by this opening direction. The author then uses the narrative technique as an embodiment of trauma to elicit lament. In *Women of Owu*, emotion seems to overwhelm speech, supplanting it with a cry more visceral than only the narrative structure can ideally convey. Right from the opening of the play, the author engages his characters in narrating events. The two women, who meet with the ancestor Anlugbua, endlessly narrate the ordeal of the war:

> **WOMAN**: 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 gate. That was how/They finally gained entry and swooped on us… (p. 2).

The streak of lament is quite evident in this narrative. As described earlier that there is a rhythmic incantation of sorrow in lament, the dialogue sampled above is a build-up to one of many sorrowful depictions of a massacre that occurred the previous day. Even in Anlugbua's long response to the women, which is itself a narrative, the lament is built gradually and rhythmically such that the import of the narrative against the present reality by the women is enough to heighten cathartic impulse.

> **ANLUGBUA**: *(Softening)*. Listen, this city was very dear to me./I was there when your grandparents built up/The little old village of my father into a fortress,/And called it Owu./I, Anlugbua,/Great grandson of Oduduwa, progenitor of/The Yoruba race./Together with my great

> uncles/Obatala the god of creativity/Orunmila the god of wisdom/And Ogun the god of metallic ore,/We came down from our house in heaven/And lent our silent energies/To the labour of the workmen. Unseen, of course./ Then Esu bore our wishes up to Edumare,/ The Almighty Father, and/Slowly the bricks and the stones and the clay/Grew into a city enclosed within two walls/ And a moat around it like a girdle: Owu,/ The safest place in the entire Yorubaland./ But now I return to see – the unimaginable!/ A city reduced to rubble./ How did this happen? (p. 5).

The last three lines in this narrative may be contextualized as lament for the purpose of clarity; "But now I return to see – the unimaginable!" If this line is injected in the train of the preceding narrative where the character gives a soothing diachronic rendition, then it constitutes a shattering of the visual imagery. It is nothing short of a lamentation. "A city reduced to rubble" gives an emphatic assertion to the shattered image which succeeds an emotive narration. And then; "How did this happen?" This last statement can psycho-aesthetically be interpreted as mourning rather than an inquiry. The build-up of emotion from the beginning of the narrative up to that point obviously signifies an intense emotional attachment to the subject of narration. In reality, a speaker in such position (and to some extent the listeners) might have been driven to tears. Even where the dialogues are less narrative, the dialogic text is a meeting point for the women to interweave their efforts to articulate their pains:

> **CHORUS LEADER**: Erelu, worse trials are still ahead. Help us./ Preserve your strength so we too can preserve ours.
> **WOMAN**: Worse trials than these? Is that possible?
> **WOMAN**: It will be hell for me, I know, away from these familiar streets.

> **WOMAN**: And me! Even if these hands can weave again, Anlugbua./ It will never be here in the joyous looms of Owu?
> **WOMAN**: Ah, just to think of having to clean their toilets! (p. 17).

Though the Aristotelian conception of tragedy is premised on the one-man tragic hero formula, the plurality of voices and characters in *Women of Owu* only serve to further deepen its tragic vision. The factor of the collective as tragic protagonists automatically yields collective lamentation in the period of trauma. This communal solidarity in lamenting in traumatic period is what has been described as "enigma of survival" (Caruth, 1996: 58). This factor, to utilize the collective as protagonist, is a crucial dramatic element in distinguishing a trauma play from the classical model of tragedy. Though, Erelu is pitched in the play as a dominant figure, her previous position as queen and mother is diminished while her role as leader of the lamenting women is heightened. This change draws the story even farther into the voice of the masses rather than a single lamentable protagonist. It is the entire women, in their collective, who lead the play, setting the underlying rhythm and themes. Throughout the play, Erelu in the context of a lament is only present to give the audience a personal, historical figure on which to centre the story, but the voice of a community is heard above all. Her character vividly depicts and validates a communal experience, thereby making the memory of the war fragmentary and nonlinear:

> **WOMAN**: And that was it, Erelu! You know yourself:/ That was the story of yesterday/And of our last moments of happiness.
> **WOMAN**: That was how our city went down,/ The city in which we were all rejoicing/ With our husbands and our children/ Only yesterday...*(The dirge rises for a while.)*

> **ERELU**: You are right. Happiness is a fake./ The gods employ it as a mask to trick us each time/ They are about to plunge us into grief (p. 37).

At a particular instance, she turns her stature into a specimen in which the communal sorrow is gauged and aggregated:

> **WOMAN**: But what will they really do with us, Erelu? Please,/ Say something! My imagination is killing me!
> **ERELU**: In defeat, dear women, always expect the worst./ That is the law of combat. The law of defeat./ *(To herself)*/ Look at me! A slave! To whom will they sell me?/ To the flesh merchants of Kano or Abomey? Or/ Straight to the white masters in the cold castles/ Of Cape Coast? Will they put padlocks/ On these wrinkled lips, and chains on these old and/ Withered feet? Ah, they will brand me with their hot iron,/ Me! I am going to be maid to some foreign matron:/ I will watch night and day over her brats,/ Or slog away in her kitchen, picking vegetables,/ My body covered in sores! Me, the Erelu of Owu! (pp. 16-17).

As it is with laments, evident in *Women of Owu*, sentences rephrase sorrow, words may be descriptive or merely exclamatory, but always they return to the scene of death or the utterance of grief. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman stresses survivors' "challenge to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events" (1992: 3). The genre of lament helps to ground the characters in *Women of Owu* in the war they have just lived through. By nature, laments capture the tension between the past and future for the lamenter. "The structure of lament forces the lamenter to revisit the events in the past that have led to the lamentation and also look to what will come once the mourning period ends" (Suter, 2003:17). This composite effect is the result of the lament elements which are always bubbling just below the surface of the text and

constantly breaking through. This is so even for individual lamentation.

When Orisaye, Erelu's daughter enters, she joins in the lamentation. Her tirade becomes a self-lament under extreme alienation. "In such situations, lamenters are, or feel themselves to be, so cut off from their family (who normally would be the ones to lament them) that they feel they must lament themselves" (Wright, 1986:130). This is the case with Orisaye where her madness alienates her in the present scene, giving her emotional intensity as she delivers her strange prophecy and laments her own fate:

> **ORISAYE**: All right, I will keep quiet./ They have heard enough anyway/ To know what's coming to them. I will say no more./ But wipe your tears, mother, and all of you./ Victory for our conquerors will be a very brief affair./ Orunmila has revealed it to me. *(Laughs)*./ Only a few will ever make it back home, and when/ They do, they will find, waiting for them there, not peace/ But new rulers, strange conquerors/ Who in their absence would have taken over/ Their land and their wives! *(To GESINDE)* This will be the harvest of your escapade here:/ A defeat worse than our own./ At least our men died on our soil here,/ Where gentle hands could close their eyes/ And cuddle them home to our ancestors. But you!/ You are cursed already to end on the road of battle and plunder./ How I pity you!/ So my dear women, suspend your dirges! Let us sing and/ Dance instead for the victory that is coming! (p. 30).

Even, the special aide to the general and herald to the victorious allied army who destroyed Owu, Gesinde, is used to manifest some form of self-lament. The technique employed is to access the trait of buried goodness lurking beneath monstrous acts of human behaviour. The lamenter feels a high sense of guilt and unblemished passion.

GESINDE: It is hard, this life of a soldier, when one/ Has to witness a scene like this. And it is going to be/ Harder still, I know, when we bash/ The child's head against a tree,/ And crush his skull as we've been ordered to do./ They say it's a taboo to shoot him/ Or cut his skin with a blade./ Yes, the generals sit back and give their orders, But it's we poor ones who have to face the victims/ And spill the blood./ *(To ADUMAADAN)*/ I know how you feel, ayaba. But I am a soldier/ And I must do my duty. Try and be brave. (p. 45).

This kind of lament is also evident in Erelu and the women's fervent emotional outpour when the child's battered corpse is handed over to them.

ERELU: Ah, is this your body I hold in my hands,/ You innocent child?/ *(She sings his oriki:)*/ Cowards! How can you be so frightened of a child?/ Even when we were strong, and had all our bravest commanders/ Around, you still conquered us and sacked our city./ Now they are all dead, felled by the bullets of your conquering/ Soldiers! Yet you would not let a little child live!/ How can you claim to be strong, when your minds/ Are so feeble? O child, how shall I mourn you?/ Insane animals, the Ijebus and the Ifes have crushed your brain,/ Made a mess of those lovely tresses that your mother/ Spent several fond moments braiding! You could have grown/ Into a splendid man. You could have been successful and happy,/ At least as happy as the gods permit us in this world./ You could have inherited your father's estates,/ Prolonged his reknown. But, my child, all that you have/ To inherit now is this garment, which I wrap about you./ Ah life is a joke, my friends. Let no one count herself lucky/ Till she finds herself on her death bed./ Come forward now, one by one, and pay your homage./ A little sand on his eyelids is all we can

manage,/ And your songs to see him home./ *(The dirge, 'Se mba mo' rises, as the women file around the body.)*
CHORUS: Child, please forgive us for bringing you to the world/ And having to send you away so early and so harshly.
WOMAN: You have fallen, not for your skill in the field of war like your father.
WOMAN: Gone, not for standing tall on the trunk of some memorable ideal.
WOMAN: You have gone, son, because of the errors of a wanton woman!
WOMAN: Boys of your age should be learning how to say your first words.
WOMAN: Learning the riddles the Owu alone speak to the wind to tame it.
WOMAN: Boys of your age should be growing muscles for handling a spear.
WOMAN: A chest to dare danger, and a heart to hold the tender moments.
WOMAN: But here you are already a corpse, far from your initiation night!
WOMAN: Tears! See how our tears are falling...
WOMAN: Forgive us for not covering you in magnificent robes as you deserve.
WOMAN: Forgive us for not decorating you in the coral beads of kingship.
WOMAN: Forgive us, child, for dressing you only with sand and our tears (pp. 59-60).

By using startling theatrical imagery and equally powerful lyrics, the songs in the play constitute their own form of lament. They serve to mourn the object of loss and, to some extent, reveal the repercussion of the subject's grief:

Ara mi, e woro tiku fi se wa — *Come, see the pain they put on us*
Paga, e woya ta waye wa ba! — *That we came to meet on earth*

Eyin le pe ka loko lo to
Eyin le pe koloko loyun
Eyin le pe koloyun ko so?
Koloyun so, ka bimo saye

You taught us it's right to wed
Right too to become pregnant
And afterwards give birth
And have children on earth

Seyin le tun lo sile Iku
Seyin le tun peku ko da wa loro
Eyin la da'na ogun saye
E fomo sofo, so won di eeru.

Was it you also went to Death
And brought him here to strike us?
Was it you also lit the fire of war
And burnt our young to ashes? [ii]

The paradox in the depiction of lament in the songs from the play is that the personal and the collective laments become a spectacle. The real feeling with its negative implication stays in the background and is transformed into something much more beautiful, but which still has a sad subtext.

Lesi gbo gbigbi lereko o?

- gbigbi
Boo gbo gbigbi ko wa so o
- gbigbi
Won wipe igi nla wo – ehn!??

Emi gbo gbigbi lereko o gbigbi!

Emi gbo gbigbi lereko o -

gbigbi
Lesi gbo gbigbi lagbala o?

gbigbi -
Boo gbo gbigbi ko wa so o -

gbigbi! -
Won wipe eni nla subu -

ehn!??

Who heard the frightening sound on the farm?
- gbigbi
If you did, come and say o –
gbigbi
They say a big tree's fallen –
ehn!??
I didn't hear the sound at all – gbigbi
I certainly did not hear the sound!
gbigbi!
Who heard the sream in – the yard?
gbigbi!
If you did, come and say so –
gbigbi –
They say a giant has fallen –
ehn!??

Emi gbo gbigbi lagbala o - *I heard no scream in the yard –*

gbigbi! *gbigbi!*

Furthermore, lament is used as a technique for keeping memories alive and contesting present realities. The author himself states that; "... 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..." (vii). In the play, the characters bring memories and present realities to play in their bitterness:

> **CHORUS LEADER**: You that have turned our once-flourishing city/ Into a relic of history, may you all without exception/ Suffer the indignity of unremembered graves!
> **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? (p. 12).

Lament as an artistic genre expresses and recontextualizes lamentation. It is ritualistic rather than being mere traditionally theatrical. It is a ritual language that claims a privileged relation to a singular, catastrophic moment. It is both a kind of language and a kind of time, and that is why the whole of the dramatic time of *Women of Owu* is essentially one moment, the moment (to use an Aristotelian term) of the realization of a turnabout of events, of a drastic alteration in life. This is also the function of the "dramatic

moment" of a lament, which is made up of the efforts by the bereaved to realize and to articulate to themselves a new state of affairs.

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[i] The playwright uses the phrase on the auxiliary title page.

[ii] All the songs in the play have been translated by the author and they are printed at the concluding pages of the text.

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