



# Prisoners of Conscience: Music, Trauma, and Memory in Femi Osofisan's 'Women of Owu'

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## Abstract

Studies have shown that music is an effective therapy in the treatment of traumatised moods and emotions of an individual or a group of people. This becomes very evident in how music artists and others in the performing arts such as theatre practitioners engage music in narrating traumatic experiences in their works. Consequently, this study engages *Women of Owu*, a dramatic work by Femi Osofisan, in which music is deployed to express the female gender's experience of psychological trauma in violent situations, especially war. It interrogates the psychological trauma experienced during such violent situations and the extent to which the affected women experience social justice after such traumatic experiences. Primary data was collected through content analysis of purposively selected compositions in the dramatic work. Secondary data was generated through the existing body of published and unpublished literature. To situate his audience in the emotion of the female characters, Osofisan employed the medium of music to express their anger, vulnerability, sorrow, pain, hopelessness, reflection and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The play features dirges used to mourn the dead; victory songs used by Erelu, to celebrate perceived justice for the promiscuity of Iyunloye, bridal serenade sung to express hope for a good marital experience in the hands of the oppressor that would marry the vulnerable women and songs with which they reflect and express their post-traumatic stress disorder. The study offers fresh perspectives on the global management of trauma.

## Introduction

There are a lot of interests in the music therapy discourse, as well as the use of music to express emotions. Notwithstanding the available studies on this subject, there is a need to engage the artistic deployment of music to represent trauma as used by African playwrights. To this end, therefore, the focus of this paper is the musical representation of trauma in Femi Osofisan's dramatic work which is entitled "Women of Owu".

Scholars such as Babikian et al. (2013) have acknowledged music as one of the oldest art forms that have benefited from the time-honoured acquaintance of impulsive and intuitive acts of human creativity. i.e., from the construction of musical instruments to the fluidity of speech/song expressions. All of these may be employed to express or facilitate myriads of inert emotional responses (including joy or trauma) of the musician(s) or the audience. This is because empirical research has shown that listening to sad or happy music is capable of not only affecting the listener's mood but



also changing their perception (Nigerian Tribune, 2016:25). In the field of medicine, music has been used in the treatment of varieties of illness and trauma "...including pain management [and]... also to facilitate mental health and well-being..." (Babikian et al., 2013:251). As has been mentioned elsewhere, the concept of music among the Yorubá involves the tripartite performative elements of *t'orin*, *t'ijo*, *t'ilu* i.e., singing/chanting, dancing and drumming herein referred to as musical motifs (Ọ̀gúnsanyà, 2021). "*Àì f'èsò ké 'bòsí ni kò jé'k'a rí eni joo*"; among the Yorubá this means that a non-stylized utterance cannot be danced. It is also pertinent to state that the preceding usage of these musical motifs (either unilaterally or in consort) for therapy is possible because their sensation is being processed in different areas of the human brain. Consequently, since it is usually psychological, these are the same areas most affected by trauma and the effects of trauma.

### **Trauma**

The American Psychological Association (APA) described the medical condition known as trauma as an impulsive reaction to a horrible incident like an accident, rape, or natural disaster (APA, 2017). It can also be defined as "... an emotional upset caused by an extrinsic agent, a disordered psychic or behavioural state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury" (Gerber & Gerber 2019, p. 4). In other words, it can be an isolated, repeated or ongoing situation where the helpless victim suffers an emotional breakdown because (s)he is overwhelmed by the unfortunate incident. Examples of such events are child or gender (physical, emotional, or sexual) abuse, war, or any other type of violence, accident, or natural disaster. Others include grief over the loss of a dear one, cultural and intergenerational trauma, as well as witnessing an act of violence. It is pertinent to state that though this traumatic experience is usually personal, the common response of the victims is that of vulnerability, shock, and intense trepidation. These symptoms may resolve after a few weeks in some people, while others will develop more long-term effects.

Before the 1980s, the general belief was that the incidences of traumatic experiences were "transient situational disturbances" that would wane over time (Gerber & Gerber 2019, pg. 4). However, research has proven that when not properly managed, it can lead to what is now known in the medical circle as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (APA, 1980). For instance, this PTSD may develop after exposure to a serious traumatic event known as a "Criterion A" event, where the victim had been exposed to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, through either direct exposure or witnessing the trauma (Yehuda et al., 1998; Breslau & Kessler, 2001; APA, 2013).

Several treatments, one of which is music therapy, have been proffered to help people with this ailment cope with their symptoms and improve their quality of life. Scholars such as Porges (2011) and Van der Kolk et al. (2007) assert that participating in musical motif activities can fulfil this function by reawakening feelings of pleasure and engagement dulled by prolonged trauma exposure. When properly administered by a trauma-informed therapist, such treatment stimulates the patterned, repetitive neural brainstem activity necessary for restoring brain functioning. This further reconnects the patient's mind, body, and spirit, thereby modulating his/her social engagement positively. In addition, Perry (2009), an expert on brain studies, posits that music therapy serves as one of those vessels, vibrating through the senses, making sense of the brain, and creating a sensual, spiritual experience.



### ***“Women of Owu”: The Synopsis***

According to the playwright, this work is an African re-reading (i.e. an adaptation) of Euripides’ play “The Trojan Women”, where the Dorian Island of Melos took up arms against the city of Troy. Melos “laid a long siege which conquered the quiet and immemorially ancient town, massacred the men, and sold the women and children into slavery” (Watson & Wright, 2011). The dramatic work, ‘Women of Owu’ (Osofisan, 2006), is a historical play set in the southwest of Nigeria to commemorate the invasion and destruction of Owu, a city that was very close to Iwo in the present-day Oṣun State. This dramatic work reveals the unnecessary destruction, post-war chaos, and suffering of women and children who are the vulnerable ones in any war-torn society (Chinke, 2017). These people are generally prisoners of conscience who usually encounter grave tragedies that follow the acts of destruction committed by two opposing human forces.

A prisoner of conscience is unwillingly held in captivity or any other detention by the authorities (for example, under internal exile) because of beliefs or religion although he or she has not encouraged such violence (Amnesty International Annual Report, 1985; Human Rights Quarterly, 1991). The traditional Yorubá gender philosophy stipulates that men are stronger than women (Ogúnsanya, 2021) and are, therefore, expected to go to battle. However, the women folk usually bear the resultant consequence(s) of such war.

Historical facts have shown that the Owu kingdom was annihilated between 1817 and 1824 by the Ife and Ijebu allied forces. This was done with the support of “... reinforcement from the Ègbá and the Oyo refugees whose homes had [earlier on] been devastated by the Fulanis... (Johnson, 1976, p. 208). Osofisan stated that the battle was so ferocious that the allied forces reduced the city “... to complete rubble... [T]hey slaughtered all the males, adult and children, and carried away the females into slavery” (Osofisan, 2009: vii). This incident left the remaining Owu survivors to become permanent refugees all over Yorubá land, including some parts of Ijebuland (Ayandélé, 1992:5) and Abeokuta in the present-day Ogun state. The playwright asserts that the inspiration for the play came about during the season of the Iraqi War, which resuscitated in him the sad memories of the tragic Owu War (Osofisan, 2009).

### **Method**

To ground this study on illustrative discourse, purposive sampling is used to select Femi Osofisan’s Women of Owu, being one of Osofisan’s most popular plays, and having the theme of war and traumatic experience by characters, which is expressly communicated through the use of music by the playwright. The songs in the play are analytically discussed using content analysis of the texts and structural analysis of the songs, some of which are notated in the appendix, using a standard staff notation system.

### **Discussion**

#### ***The psychological trauma of the Female Gender in ‘Women of Owu’***

Similar to the opening scene of Euripides’ drama, *the Trojan Women*, this adaptation was also based on a day after the city of Owu has been destroyed by the Allied Forces led by Okunadé, the Ifè war General. Everywhere was in ruins; the houses were still burning, while the corpses of the male adults and children lay scattered around. This means that it was the women and the female children who were left behind to experience such a psychologically traumatic situation. Suffice it to state that exposure to such harrowing experiences can trigger extreme post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Muldoon et al., 2019).



The play opens in a scene where two women are seen with an old man (Ánlùgbuà) who inquires about the cause of the smoldering in the city (p. 1). The women innocently narrated how invaders from Ijebu and Ife, together with mercenaries from Ọ̀yó fleeing south from the Fúlání forces, had laid siege on Ọ̀wu for seven years on the ground that their King was a despot, and the citizens had to be freed. She added that the forces had been unable to enter the city until the previous day, when terrible fire engulfed the city, forcing them to open the gates.

In Euripides' drama, the elderly men serve as the Chorus and give advice. However, in Ọ̀sọ́fisan's adaptation, *Women of Ọ̀wu*, the Chorus is formed by elderly women of wisdom, and this comprises the Chorus Leader and Chorus of Ọ̀wu women. This is to show that Ọ̀wu's men have all been slaughtered in the siege that leads to the annihilation of the entire town (Johnson, 1976; Àyándélé, 1992).

Ọ̀sọ́fisan used music in this dramatic work to recall and represent the traumatic experience of the women concerned. In addition, he incorporates humour into it to assist the audience in dealing with the distress associated with the initial violence and the resulting displacement effect of the tragedy on the survivors within the play. It is pertinent to state that there are sixteen musical motifs sung as dirges and chants (pp. 68-78) in Yorùbá and with English translations with which the playwright explains the traumatic experience of the women. However, we shall only make use of some selected few for illustrations.

Scene One (pp. 1-9) opens with the Chorus of women singing the following dirge, (p. 1).

(1) *Àtùpà gb'ẹ̀po nlẹ̀ f'élépo*

**(Lamp, yield your oil to the oil seller)**

*Refrain (to be sung after each line)*

*Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, Ọ̀rùn ò ràn,*

The stars are down, the sun retired,

*Ọ̀supá ò ràn mọ̀ o,*

The moon's refused to light up

*Alẹ̀ lẹ̀ lẹ̀...*

The night...

*Àlejò ló dé l'ọ̀gànjó Ọ̀ru*

A stranger comes in the dead of night

*– Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, etc...*

*Alágàngan lo k'ọ̀já rẹ̀ dé o*

*Alágàngan\** has come with his wares

*– Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, etc...*

*Ọ̀já oró rẹ̀ ló mà kó dé o:*

Has brought his merchandise of pain

*– Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, etc...*

*Oró ikú dẹ̀ ni t' Alágàngan!*

Pain of Death, of course, is what he sells

*– Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, etc...*

*Kò mà s'eni tó le yèé bó o!*

And none can refuse to buy

*– Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, etc...*

*Àtùpà gb'ẹ̀po nlẹ̀ f'élépo:*

Lamp, yield your oil to the oil seller

*– Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, etc...*

As evident from the preceding dirge, it is obvious that all the female genders in that city are affected and are heavily traumatised in the said war, having lost both their husbands and male children. In the dirge, the women lamented that *Alágàngan* (Death) came upon them suddenly in the middle of the night like a trader to peddle his sorrowful wares within the community. The linguistic device employed is personification, where the Lamp is implored to yield its oil to the oil seller.



Another such dirge that showcases the women's vulnerability and helplessness is "*Lèsí ma gbà wá ò?*" (Who will save us?). In the song, the meiosis or litotes and the rhetorical questions describe how dumbfounded and confused the women are on realising there is fire ravaging everywhere and no help in sight. Even *Ánlùgbuà* (the god of the land) confesses that he cannot help bringing back *Òwu* since he cannot be venerated or praised without a shrine (because his worshippers have been slaughtered and his shrine burnt down).

**(2) *Lèsí ma gbà wá ò?***

*Lèsí ma gbà wá ò*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Lèsí ka re dì mú?*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Afàrà já l'Òwu!*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Ogun iná ti gb'òde!*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Yéèpà, òkò mi!*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Yéèpà, aya mi!*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Mò yàgò, omò mi!*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Ogun iná ti gb'òde!*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

**Who will save us?**

Who will save us?

-*Tere jìnnà!*

Who shall we hang on to?

-*Tere jìnnà!*

*Òwu's bridge has collapsed!*

-*Tere jìnnà!*

The war of fire has broken out!

-*Tere jìnnà!*

What a calamity, my husband!

-*Tere jìnnà!*

What a disaster, my wife!

-*Tere jìnnà!*

Run away, my child!

-*Tere jìnnà!*

The war fire is everywhere!

-*Tere jìnnà!*

Furthermore, in this scene, *Erelú* (the queen) wonders if anybody seeing her at this moment will ever remember she was once the powerful Queen of the now-fallen city of *Òwu*. She laments over her daughter, whom she reminds the Chorus, was "...engaged already to be married to kings!" (p. 11). The Chorus agrees and that they vividly remember the songs and dances which were composed by them. When *Erelú* cannot control her sorrow, she collapses and joins in the singing of the dirge, *Lèsí ma gbà wá ò* (Who will save us?), which rises to crescendo portraying the level of frustration and hopelessness of the Queen, *Erelú* (p. 11). *Erelú* vents her anger on the invaders, metaphorically describing them as beasts and animals for being heartless. This anguishing mood of *Erelú* in her curses of the invaders leads the Chorus to resume their dirge, which abruptly stops because *Erelú* bursts into wailing again (p. 13).

In the ensuing frustration and confusion, *Erelú* requests more dirges, and the Chorus obliges with the singing of *Le si gbo gbìgbì l'ereko o?* (Who heard the frightening sound on the farm?) The women engage in gossiping about their future fates in the hands of the generals when the dirge is suspended and resumes on the advice of the Chorus leader that while they wait for their fates, they should dance the dance of the days of woe (p. 17).

**(3) *Le si gbo gbìgbì l'ereko-gbìgbì!* (Who heard the frightening sound on the farm?)**

*Le si gbo gbìgbì l'ereko-gbìgbì!*

*Bo o gbo gbìgbì ko wa so o-gbìgbì!*

*Won wipe igi nla wo – ehn??...*

*Emi o gbo gbìgbì l'ereko o – gbìgbì!*

*Mi o gbo gbìgbì l'ereko o – gbìgbì!*

Who heard the frightening sound on the farm?

If you did, come and say so

They say a big tree has fallen – ehn!??...

I didn't hear the sound at all

I certainly did not hear the sound!



*Lesi gbo gbigbi lagbala o? – gbigbi!  
Bo o gbo gbigbi ko wa so o! – gbigbi!  
Won wipe eni nla subu – ehn!??*

Who heard the scream in-the yard?  
If you did, come and say so!  
They say a giant has fallen – ehn!??

*Emi o gbo gbigbi l'agbala o – gbigbi  
Mi o gbo gbigbi l'agbala o – gbigbi!  
Bo o gbo gbigbi ko wa so o – gbigbi!  
Won wipe eyin nla fo – ehn!??*

I heard no scream in the yard!  
I heard no scream in the yard!  
If you did, come and say so!  
They say a big egg has cracked – ehn!??

*Emi o gbo gbigbi l'odede o – !  
Lesi gbo gbigbi l'odede o – gbigbi!  
Bo o gbo gbigbi ko wa so o – gbigbi!  
Won wipe baale subu – ehn!??*

I heard no cry on the balcony!  
Who heard the scream on the balcony?  
If you did, come and say so!  
They say the family head fainted-ehn!???

*Emi o gbo gbigbi l'ojude o – gbigbi!  
Mi o gbo gbigbi l'ojude o-gbigbi!*

I heard no cry on the doorstep!  
I heard no scream at all! -gbigbi!

This implies that the women know they cannot avoid being slaves or concubines to the conquering generals when they eventually leave Owu with their loot. Singing the dirge slowly (p. 17) signifies the belief that their lives will soon change for the worse – from being distinguished wives to being slaves to the so-called 'beasts' and 'animals', according to Erelú (p. 12).

This next song, *Iji aye po* (The storms of life are many), is taken by the Chorus of Women in Scene 3 (three) just before the dialogue between the god Anlugbua and his mother, goddess L'awunmi concerning the misfortune that has befallen Owu. From their discussion, one can understand that goddess Lawunmi brought this carnage to the city because she claims the inhabitants were arrogant towards her and Ile-Ife, which is the cradle of the Yorubá. The song goes thus:

**(4) Iji aye po**

*Iji aye po  
Ogun gb'ode o  
A ti se titi  
Ti o ja si nkankan:  
Aye a su ni,  
K'alare gbe nkan je!*

**(The storms of life are many)**

The storms of life are many  
War has broken out  
If we've tried all we could  
And yet to no avail  
We'll be frustrated  
To the point of suicide! (by poisoning)

*lya s'agidi,  
lya ma ku o  
Baba s'agbara,  
Ti o ja si nkankan:  
Gbogbo ile ti tu  
K'alare m'okun so!*

Mother braved it all  
But Mother died  
Father tried his best  
All to no avail  
The family is scattered  
To drive one to suicide (by hanging)

*Nibo la wa nlo?  
Ile eru ni:  
A sunkun titi  
Ti o ja si nkankan:  
Aye ti su ni,  
K'alare gbe nkan mu!*

Where are we going  
But to the house of slavery?  
We've cried our eyes dry  
All to no avail  
We're tired of life  
To the point of suicide (by poisoning)



Suffice to state that the texts of the song indicate the psychological state of the mind of the singers, which in this case is at the depression level. This is one of the signs of *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). At this point, the victim/patient may likely lose interest in living and might be contemplating suicide or any such extremely dangerous activity.

Orisaye's dramatic display towards Gesinde in scene four (pp. 23-38) is very significant in this study as she displays signs of being mentally challenged (psychological trauma) while prophesying what will be the fate of Balogun Kusa. The general has requested her, although she is dedicated to the gods. She single-handedly sings and dances to *E sure funmi* (Shower me with blessings) (p. 27) and *Olobe lo l'okọ* (Husbands are for those who can cook) (p. 28). After that Orisaye threatens, to the surprise of Erelu and the Chorus, thus:

And I'll watch his blood flow, gurgling like fresh wine  
From the palm tree! I will be singing, Mother!  
Then, of course, they will seize me and hack me to death!  
Ah, what happiness is waiting for me! (p. 29).

The simile "...like fresh wine from the palm tree" reveals that the blood is normally more viscous and thicker than the wine mixed with water. It also signifies that there shall be a bloodbath whenever she meets with Balogun Kusa. Furthermore, the last line is a big paradox since *happiness* in this context means that she will be happy even in death because she would have been able to put to death her enemy and forced 'lover', Balogun Kusa. Orisaye is so defiant of her fate that she bluntly tells Gesinde to send words to Balogun Derin, who has requested Erelu to be his booty, that the gods have decided his fate, and that his journey back home would be disastrous, characterised by wandering, suffering and fighting without respite (p. 32).

**(5) E sure funmi**

*E sure funmi*  
*Mo nre 'le oko*  
*E si ba mi yo*  
*Mo nre 'le oko*  
*Okunkun parada*  
*Imole tele mi lo*  
*E ba mi yo sese*  
*Sese la nyo m'oko*

**(Shower me with blessings)**

Shower me with blessings  
I am going to my husband's house  
And rejoice with me  
As I head for my matrimonial home  
Darkness, melt away  
And light, accompany me  
Come, celebrate with me  
A groom is met with rejoicing

**(6) Olobe lo l'okọ o**

*Olobe lo l'oko o!*  
*Emi ti r'oko fe o-e!*  
*Oko ma won lode o:*  
*Emi ti ri temi o e!*  
*Okunrin won l'ode o:*  
*Emi ti ri temi o e!*  
*Ogun ti gbe won tan o*  
*Emi ti ri temi o e!*  
*Baba o digba na o!*  
*Emi nlo 'le oko o e!*  
*Iya e ma sunkun o*  
*Emi nlo 'le oko o e!!*

**(Husbands are won by those who can cook)**

Husbands are for those who can cook  
*See, I've gotten my husband!*  
Husbands are hard to find:  
*But I've gotten my husband!*  
Good men are rare to find  
*But I caught my own!*  
Wars have made them rare to find:  
*But I've found my own!*  
Father, goodbye to you:  
*As I leave for my husband's home!*  
Mother, wipe your tears:  
*I'm going to my husband's house!*



**(7) Wele-wele l'eri nse**

Wele-wele l'eri nse o  
Wele-wele leri o  
Sewele sewele l'ojo aléle o  
Sewele sewele l'ojo  
Iku o ni gb'owo  
A ba fun l'owo  
Iku o ni gb'ebe?  
A ba f'ebe fun  
A kigbe-kigbe Orò Iku  
Iku o loogun o!

**(Softly, softly falls the dew)**

Softly, softly falls the dew  
Softly, softly the dew  
Gently, gentle rain in the evening  
Gently falls the evening rain  
Death will not accept money  
We would have offered money  
Death will not listen to any plea  
We would have offered our pleas  
Repeatedly, we curse death's sting  
But there's no medicine for Death!

The women, by the advice of the Chorus leader, resolve to curse the men, which they do by singing a song of malediction that *Ọrunmila* will break the legs of the Allied Forces members. At the end of this song, they all bare their breasts collectively with a shout, 'WE CURSE YOU ALL!!!' thereby infuriating the soldiers who burst on them, beating and assaulting them sexually so that the women groan and scream (p. 38). Above all, the action of the women in exposing their breasts to curse the soldiers speaks a volume of non-verbal communication. The act symbolises condemnation and doom because it is the breasts that the soldiers sucked when they were born, and the women exposing them before their very eyes is more dangerous than the curse of the mouth in addition to the dirge.

**(8) Ọrun dèdèdè bí orin arò**

**(The hereafter, like a dirge)**

Eni ba p'ejo l'ejo o pa  
– Akalamagbo kii ku l'ewe!  
Ọrúnmilà a se won nitan  
Se won nitan  
Se won nitan  
Se won nitan

Who summons Snake will die by him  
The vulture never dies young  
Diviner god will break their legs!  
Break their legs  
Crush their legs  
Smash their legs!

**(9) Bùjé-bùjé pa mi o**

Buje-buje pa mi o: Tere buje!  
Buje-buje pa mi o: Tere buje!  
Oyin nla ta mi o: Tere buje!  
Iku gbe mi lomo lo: Tere buje!  
Iku da mi l'Orò: Tere buje!  
Buje-buje pa mi o: Tere buje!

**(I've been stung to death)**

I've been stung to death  
I've been stung to death:  
Stung by a mighty bee:  
Death has stolen my child:  
Death has stung me badly!  
I've been fatally stung!

Gesinde comes in with instructions from his superiors concerning the infant. The infant is to be killed, as they do not want to leave a single heir behind. The soldiers agree to kill the innocent Aderogun. As though the news that Aderogun is going to be killed is not enough for Erelú, Gesinde, being a faithful messenger and gossip, releases heavy news to Erelú; he informs her that her husband, the king, has been captured and has suffered to death in the hands of the generals.

As Gesinde takes the infant boy, the raising of the dirge, *Se mba mo, mi o ni wa'le aye* (If I'd known, I'd not have come to the world) takes place by the women, a dirge that may have led to Erelú's collapse (p. 45). The dirge rises and fills the atmosphere with sorrow and hopelessness until Maye himself, General Okunadé in the company of armed soldiers, arrives, and all the dirge singing stops abruptly (p. 46).



**(10) *Şe mbá m̀, mi ò ní wáale aye***

*Şe mbá m̀, mi ò ní wáale aye*  
*Mba sinmi o, s'ajule òrun*

– **Refrain:**

*Rogbodiyan aye yi ti po ju*  
*Iponju ojo, iponju òru,*  
*Iponju oorò, Iponju òsán,*  
*Se mba mo, mba sinmi ni temi*

*Obinrin bimo tan, o mi sunkun*  
*Abiyamo njo, ogun gb'ode*  
*Ejire isokun lo ma tun s'ofò*

– **Refrain:** ...

*Okunrin ogboogbojo, o d'ebo Ogun*  
*Akin rogun, ko ma d'ehin bo*  
*Ki la mbimo fun bi o ni d'agba?*

– **Refrain:** ...

**(If I'd known, I'd not have come to the world)**

If I'd known, I'd not have come to the world  
I'd have stayed peacefully in heaven instead

Too many tribulations fill the world  
Hardship all day long, hardship at night,  
Hardship in the morning and afternoon,  
If I'd known, I'd have stayed back in heaven

A woman gives birth and begins to cry  
As nursing mothers rejoice, war breaks out  
The (mother of) twins will soon be mourning

The handsome turn sacrifice to the god of war  
The brave go to battle and never return  
Why have children then if they won't last?

### Scene Five: pp. 39-67

The concluding scene, which begins with the dirge *Wele wele l'eri nse o* (Softly, softly falls the dew, p. 39), is packed with intrigue. Firstly, the Chorus sings this dirge when Erelú is resuscitated by the old woman, and the Chorus after she is told of the level of her daughter's psychological trauma, who is expressing signs of insanity (pp. 33-38).

***Wele wele l'eri nse***

*Wele-wele leri nse o*  
*Wele-wele leri o*  
*Sewele sewele l'ojo alele o*  
*Sewele sewele l'ojo*  
*Iku o ni gb'owo*  
*A ba fun l'owo*  
*Iku o ni gbebe?*  
*A ba febe fun*  
*A kigbe-kigbe Orò Iku*  
*Iku o loogun o!*

**(Softly, softly falls the dew)**

Softly, softly falls the dew  
Softly, softly the dew  
Gently, gentle rain in the evening  
Gently falls the evening rain  
Death will not accept money  
We would have offered money  
Death will not listen to any plea  
We would have offered our pleas  
Repeatedly we curse death's sting  
But there's no medicine for Death!

It is in this concluding scene that Adúmaádán, after a hot quarrel with Erelú, whom she accuses of never loving her husband, Lisabi tells Erelú that Adeoti is dead: *'I found her body lying at the entrance to the shrine of the goddess Láwùnmí. Her throat had been cut* (p. 40). There is a general lamentation followed by a dirge, *Buje-buje pa mi o* (I have been stung to death, p. 40). Erelú now remembers what Gesinde had earlier told her:

**Erelú:** Oh! Oh! Is that what that goat Gesinde  
Was trying to tell me yesterday and I chose to misunderstand?  
**Adúmaádán:** I closed her eyes and poured some sand on her.  
In the situation, it was all I could do (p. 41).



This simple deed of Adúmaadán pleases Erelú so much that she blesses her and gives her motherly advice to forget her husband, Lisabi, and try to fall in love with whomever she is allocated to: “Surrender your pride and learn to give to your new man the care you once gave my son” (p. 43). This touches Adúmaadán:

**Adúmaadán:** Are those words from you! You! Old woman  
Did I not say you never loved my husband!

**Erelú:** That boy's his only son, I repeat. If he lives, we do not die.  
And one day, therefore, he will grow up and remember,  
And we will be fully avenged. (p. 43).

The last dirge in the play *Wele wele l'eri nse o...* (Softly, softly falls the dew, p. 67) is taken when the women realise with dismay that Erelú is dead after her valedictory statement. The dirge, after being interrupted by Ánlùgbuà's promise that 'Òwu will rise again but not here but 'Within other cities of Yorùba land' (p. 67), the dirge *Wele wele l'eri nse o...* (Softly, softly falls the dew), rises to the end of the play, implying that whatever has a beginning does have an end. The numerous dirges, songs, and *Oriki* make the play, *Women of Owu*, more meaningful and interesting as the songs help bring cultural importance to the people's lives.

**(11) Ara mi e w'oro t'iku fi se wa**

*Ara mi e w'oro t'iku fi se wa,  
Paga, e wo 'ya ta waye wa ba!  
Eyin le pe ka l'oko lo to  
Eyin le pe k'oloko l'oyun  
Eyin le pe k'oloyun ko so?*

**(Come see the pain they put on us)**

Come, see the pain they planned for us  
That we came to meet on earth  
You taught us it is right to wed,  
Right too to become pregnant  
And afterward, give birth

*K'oloyun so, ka bimo s'aye  
S'eyin le tun lo s'ile lku  
S'eyin le pe'ku ko da wa l'oro  
Eyin le da'na ogun saye  
E f'omo s'ofu, so won di eeru*

And have children on earth  
You also went to the domain of Death  
And brought him here to strike us?  
Was it you also lit the fire of war  
And burnt our young to ashes?

The centre point of this moving scene is Erelú, the mourning Queen. She receives a series of more devastating news from Gesinde about her fate and those of her daughters and only living grandson. Gesinde though respectful, sometimes caring and emotional, confesses being a 'borrowed mouth' (a synecdoche meaning a messenger who must say what he has been told to say) (p. 23). The first news to Erelú is that Orisaye has been allocated to Balogun Kusa upon request, even though Orisaye has been dedicated to the gods from birth (p. 23). That she is dedicated to the god and a virgin, according to Gesinde, is what interests Balogun Kusa the most (p. 24). On the fate of her second daughter, Gesinde speaks in riddles that Erelú does not seem to comprehend by saying that Adeoti 'has gone where pain can no longer reach her', meiosis that implies that Adeoti is already dead and, therefore, spared of mental torture of which of the generals to whom she would be allocated (p. 25). On her other daughter, Kesobo, Gesinde tells Erelú that the killer of her son, Sakula, whose name is Otunba Lekki, is the general to whom Kesobo is allocated (p. 25).

The main news comes to Erelú when she is told that Balogun Derin has requested that she, Erelú be allocated to him (p. 26), a man Erelú metaphorically refers to as 'that dog' either for his promiscuity or passion for war. Erelú, in anguish, asks the Chorus to weep for her, 'Weep for me then, you women of Owu! Now I know what suffering defeat means (p. 26). That is to say that she now realises that



defeat does not respect or recognise status or pedigree. Orisaye is speaking the minds of the gods without anybody realising it as she is seen merely as one going mad by Erelu and the Chorus, and to Gesinde, Orisaye is merely bragging.

Erelú is suddenly becoming nice to Adúmaádán, whom she thinks will take the infant baby along to whoever takes her among the soldiers, but she is wrong. Maye has come to call on his erstwhile wife and the cause of the war, Iyúnloyè, and award her appropriate punishment. Erelú's son, Princess Adejumo, adopted Iyúnloyè as a wife, causing a ripple between him and Okúnadé, who had been a renowned artist before joining the military to the extent of becoming the General Commander of the Allied Forces. Erelú is happy for the first time in days because Maye has decided to punish Iyúnloyè: *'So with all your mischief, you can still mete out punishment to whom it is due! I salute you, Maye, for being the hand of justice!'* (p. 47). Erelú advises Maye to avoid looking at the face of Iyúnloyè because she is too pretty, cunning, deceitful, and capable of seducing him to remember the former love: *"One look at her again, believe me, all your anger will melt away"* (p. 48). Erelú is right, for the tantalizing beauty and sweet tongue of Iyúnloyè melt the powerful anger of Maye in no time. Despite the women singing their song of abuse (unfaithful wife, p. 48 and p. 51), Iyúnloyè is undeterred as she argues her innocence before Maye and the women. In one of her persuasive words, Iyúnloyè cheerfully tells Maye in his eyes:

*I have made your adire cloth famous all over the world.  
The most popular pattern of them all bears your name.  
What more proof do you require to know  
I've never stopped loving you? Listen,  
This is how we advertise it... (p. 53).*

Being a very deceitful woman and knowing the power of music and dancing, Iyúnloyè dances seductively in demonstrating how her alleged advertisement was done, but Maye cuts her off. He asks if she did not hear that he had been present with the troop at the walls for seven years. Iyúnloyè replies to him:

*Of course, I heard. And how many times I tried to run away  
To join you! On a number of nights, I climbed up the walls,  
Tied ropes together and tried to escape. But the guards found me out  
Each time and stopped me. It's the truth! I had to bribe them  
To keep it to themselves. Ask them, they are my witnesses!  
I really tried, my husband! Look in my eyes!  
See if I am lying to you!  
**Chorus Leader:** Don't look in her eyes, General! All you will find there  
Are danger and deceit! And really, Iyúnloyè has been lying;*

Iyúnloyè refutes all the women's accusations, climaxing with her chanting of Maye's Oriki (p. 57), which softens Maye and brings down his anger so that he orders that Iyúnloyè be taken to his caravan. Erelú protests against this move, knowing fully well that Iyúnloyè will complete her seduction of Maye in the caravan (p. 57). Maye speaks back to Erelú like the strong soldier; he affirms that the wound inflicted on him is so deep, thereby killing the love he once had for Iyúnloyè. He adds that Iyúnloyè will be put on a separate caravan and made to *"pay the full price for her life of infidelity and waywardness and serve as an example to others"* (p. 58).

Believing Maye, Erelú gives herself happiness and initiates a song of celebration, Ojo ayo kan si mi l'ara (Showers of joy fell on me). The joyous song does not last long when the arrival of Gesinde, with



the dead body of Aderogun, arrives, and the Chorus sees him and announces his presence with the little corpse (p. 58). Gesinde delivers some important messages to the wailing Erelú before handing to her, her grandson to bury. One of the messages is that Adumáadán has been taken away in a hurry because "...news came that someone has seized Otunba Lekki's father's throne and started a war back home" (p. 58).

As Erelú ponders on Orisaye's prophesies, Gesinde delivers yet another message from Adunmaadan that Erelú takes the corpse as she sings the dirge '*Ará mi ẹ w'oró t'íkú fi ẹ wá'*

(Come see the pain they put on us, p. 59). Part of Gesinde's touchy message is as follows:

*...she implored me to ask you to bury her son  
For her, this boy whose head we dashed against the araba tree.  
In place of a shroud to wrap him in, she sends this war-dress  
That his father used to wear... (p. 59).*

In deep emotion, Erelú holds the corpse of her grandson and sings his *Oriki* (praises), which ends with the beginning of yet another dirge, *Se mbá m̀, mi ò ní wáale aye* (If I'd known, I'd have not come to the world (p. 60). The death of Erelú after she and her fellow old women had gone into a spiritual exercise, leading them to fall into a trance, is a panacea to her being reduced to nothingness in the house of Balógun Derin.

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, Ọ̀sófisan employed the medium of music to guide the audience's understanding and interpretation of the emotional crisis which the characters of the play, go through, having witnessed the elimination of their male and male children, as well as the ransacking of their homeland by the allied force of both Ife and Ijebu. The use of words alone would not have been enough to communicate the emotional crisis in which the characters found themselves due to the devastating and destructive event. The use of music to express this emotion, therefore, helps the audience to conclude the emotional state of the female characters who are victims of war as they undergo the atrocious experience of the destruction of lives of their loved ones, as well as properties they have worked tirelessly to put together. The use of music in this regard by Ọ̀sófisan is due to the ability of music to convey emotion and function as a therapeutic instrument of consolation during periods of grief, war, and anxiety. Apart from the use of music to express the emotion of the female characters in the play, it is of significance to mention that Ọ̀sófisan also used the play as a medium to satirise war in itself, as being unnecessary in conflict resolution, especially since both warring sides count losses in the end.

Having discussed the usage of the songs, there is a need to touch briefly on the musical features of the songs used in the play. The songs make predominant use of the "*konkolo*" rhythm (situated in the compound quadruple time signature), which is a pervasive standard rhythmic pattern across indigenous West African music (Agawu, 2006), especially Yorubá music, as well as parts of the African diaspora. *Lesi gbo gbìgbì l'ereko*, *Lesi ma gbà wá ò* and *atupa gb'epo nle f'elepo* are all in this *konkolo* rhythmic framework. However, a few of the songs, such as *E sure fun mi*, *Ojo ayo kan si mi Lara*, and *Olobe lo l'oko*, are situated in the simple quadruple highlife rhythm. While the songs in compound quadruple express the theme of mourning, lamentation and sorrow, the songs in simple quadruple highlife rhythm express momentary joy and hope. The songs also demonstrate solo singing (could also be referred to as chorused refrain, given that a chorus sings them), solo and chorus refrain, and call and response, both characteristic of African vocal music. *Lesi gbo gbìgbì l'ereko*, *Lèsi ma gbà wá ò* and *atupa gb'epo nle f'elepo* are call and response songs, while *E sure fun mi* and *Iji aye po* are solo songs which could also be referred to as 'chorused refrain' within the context of the play. *Se mbá m̀, mi ò ní wáale aye*



is an example of songs in solo and chorused refrain pattern. The preceding shows that the songs, in their various pattern, enable participatory singing by the women chorus, thereby expressing their shared traumatic experience.

### Conclusion

The female gender in Osofisan's *Women of Owu* are victims of circumstance in their war-torn city, which makes them prisoners of conscience. This was a common phenomenon in the historical past among the Yorubá, as depicted by Osofisan in this dramatic work. To situate his audience in the emotions of the women characters in the play, Osofisan employed the medium of music to express their anger, vulnerability, sorrow, pain, hopelessness, reflection and *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). In the latter part of the play, the playwright insinuates that the war may have started as a result of the fight over the possession of Iyunloyè, a beautiful woman, between Maye, a general in the allied force and Prince Adejumo of Owu. The play features dirges, which are used to mourn the dead; victory songs, which Erelu uses to celebrate the perceived justice for the promiscuity of Iyunloyè, bridal serenade, which is sung to express hope for a good marital experience in the hands of whosoever among their oppressor that would be husband to the vulnerable women, songs with which they reflect and express their *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD).

Finally, it features songs of lamentation and *oriki* (praise poetry), all employed at various points in the acts to express the pains and shock of brutal destruction not envisaged. This shows how the playwright has made ample use of music to represent trauma in Femi Osofisan's "*Women of Owu*" as experienced by the women folks in a war situation.

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APPENDIX

Musical score of illustrative songs

1. Atupa gbe'po n'le f'elepo

Composed by FEMI OSOFISAN  
Scored by ADEOLU O. OGUNSANYA

The musical score is presented in five systems, each with a Solo part and a Chorus part. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 6/8. The lyrics are written below the notes.

**System 1:**  
Solo: A - tu - pa gbe 'po n' le f'e - le - po:  
Chorus: I - ra - wo wo, o - run o ran. O -

**System 2:**  
Solo: A - le - jo lo de l'o - gan - jo o - ru.  
Chorus: su - pa o tan mo o, a - le - le le. I - ra - wo wo, o -

**System 3:**  
Solo: A - la - gan - gan lo k'o - ja re de o.  
Chorus: run o ran. O - su - pa o tan mo o, a - le - le le. I -

**System 4:**  
Solo: O - ja o - ro re lo  
Chorus: ra - wo wo, o - run o ran. O - su - pa o tan mo o, a - le - le le.

**System 5:**  
Solo: ma ko de o: O -  
Chorus: I - ra - wo wo, o - run o ran. O - su - pa o tan mo o, a - le - le le.



25

Solo  
ro i - ku de ni t'a-la-gan-gan!

Chorus  
I - ra-wo wo, o - run o ran. O - su-pa - o tan mo o,

30

Solo  
Ko ma s'e - ni to le ye\_\_ bo o!

Chorus  
a - le - le le. I - ra-wo wo, o - run o ran. O -

35

Solo  
A - tu - pa gbe 'po n' le f'e - le - po:

Chorus  
su - pa o tan mo o, a - le - le le. I -

39

Solo

Chorus  
ra-wo wo, o - run o ran. O - su-pa o tan mo o, a-le-le le.



## 2. Lesi gbo gbigbi l'ereko

**FEMI OSOFISAN**  
Scored by Adeolu O. Ogunsonya

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of six systems, each with a Solo part and a Chorus part. The lyrics are in Yoruba. The Solo parts are written in a treble clef, and the Chorus parts are written in a bass clef. The lyrics are as follows:

**System 1:**  
Solo: Le si gbo gbi gbi l'e re-ko o? Le si gbo gbi gbi l'e re-ko o? Bo gbo gbi gbi ko  
Chorus: Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!

**System 2:**  
Solo: wa so o! Bo\_\_gbo gbi gbi ko wa so o! Won wi-pe i-gi n' la wo.  
Chorus: Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi! ehn!??\_

**System 3:**  
Solo: E-mi gbo gbi gbi l'e re-ko o. E-mi gbo gbi gbi l'e re-ko o.  
Chorus: Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!

**System 4:**  
Solo: Le si gbo gbi gbi l'a gba-la o? Le si gbo gbi gbi l'a gba-la o?  
Chorus: Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!

**System 5:**  
Solo: Bo\_\_gbo gbi gbi ko wa so o! Bo\_\_gbo gbi gbi ko wa so o! Won wi pe e-ni nla  
Chorus: Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!



**LE SI GBO GBIGBI L'EREKO**

2  
3/6

Solo  
su-bu. E-mi gbo gbi gbi l'a gba-la o. E-mi gbo gbi gbi l'a-

Chorus  
ehn!?? — Gbi gbi!

31

Solo  
gba-la o. Le si gbo gbi gbi l'o de-de o?

Chorus  
Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!

36

Solo  
Le si gbo gbi gbi l'o de-de o? Bo\_\_gbo gbi gbi ko wa so o! Bo\_\_gbo gbi gbi ko

Chorus  
Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!

41

Solo  
wa so o! Won wi-pe e - yin nla fo!

Chorus  
Gbi gbi! ehn!?? —

46

Solo  
Mee gbo gbi gbi l'o de-de o. Mee\_\_gbo gbi gbi l'o de-de o.

Chorus  
Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!

51

Solo  
Le si gbo gbi gbi l'o ju de o? Le si gbo gbi gbi l'o ju de o?

Chorus  
Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!



LE SI GBO GBIGBI L'EREKO

3

The musical score is divided into three systems, each with a Solo part and a Chorus part. The lyrics are in Yoruba.

**System 1 (Measures 57-61):**  
Solo: Bo\_\_gbo gbi gbi ko wa so o! Bo\_\_gbo gbi gbi ko wa so o! Won wi-pe baa - le  
Chorus: Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!

**System 2 (Measures 62-66):**  
Solo: su-bu! Mee gbo gbi gbi l'o - ju-de o. Mee\_\_gbo gbi gbi l'o-  
Chorus: ehn!??\_ Gbi gbi!

**System 3 (Measures 67-71):**  
Solo: ju-de o. Mee\_\_gbo gbi gbi l'o - ju-de o. Mee\_\_gbo gbi gbi l'o - ju-de o.  
Chorus: Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi! Gbi gbi!



#### 4. E su're fun mi

FEMI OSOFISAN  
Scored by Adeolu O. Ogunsanya

E su-re fun mi, mo n' re 'le o-ko. E si ba mi yo mo n' re 'le o-ko. O-  
5  
kun-kun pa-ra-da, i-mo - le - te - le mi lo, E ba mi yo se-se. Se-se la n' yo m'o-ko.

#### 5. Olobe lo l'oko

FEMI OSOFISAN  
Scored by Adeolu O. Ogunsanya

Solo O - lo - be lo l' o - ko o, O - ko ma won l' o - de o!  
Chorus E - mi ti r' o - ko fe o e!  
4  
Solo O - kun - rin won l' o - de o!  
Chorus E - mi ti ri t' e - mi o e! E - mi ti ri t' e - mi o e!  
7  
Solo O - gun ti gbe won tan o! Ba - ba o d' i - gba na o!  
Chorus E - mi ti ri t' e - mi o e!  
10  
Solo I - ya e ma sun 'kun o!  
Chorus E - mi nlo 'le o - ko o e! E - mi nlo 'le o - ko o e!