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## Classical Temper and Creative Ingenuity in Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone*

Omolara Kikelomo Owoeye

### Abstract

This essay closely reads Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone* in the light of its classical antecedent and critically examines the playwright's deconstruction of Sophocles's *Antigone* as manifested in the thematic preoccupation, style, linguistic mediums and mythical contents of *Tegonni*. Through an exploration of the play, the feminist, Marxist and postcolonial agenda of the author is discussed together with his emphasis on local history and oral tradition. In spite of the author's recourse to colonial history and other local literary and non-literary materials, this essay argues that the play is still analogous to the classical play as both plays are affiliated in terms of plot, characterisation and ending. The essay ends with the proposition that Osofisan questions existing political and aesthetic structures and traditions, by demystifying supernatural claims on human existence and promoting a radical ideology based on the Marxist convictions of equity and egalitarianism while standing on the Hellenist platform.

### Introduction

At the nascent stage of the development of drama on the African continent, internal and foreign influences on the writers and their works have been noticeable. Although any discussion of the source of inspiration for African creative authors would naturally raise the subject of oral tradition as a major source of material in African writing, the effect of the exposure of African writers to Western education and Western literary tradition soon became decipherable in their plays. Efua Sutherland's *Edufa*, which largely draws on Euripides's *Alcestis*, and Athol Fugard's *The Island* that reverberates the myth of Antigone, best exemplify the

development of external influences on African drama. Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* soon became canonised as African adaptations of ancient Greek tragedies and the Aristotelian tradition that determined the reception of this classical genre in the present. J. P. Clark was to follow with his *Song of a Goat* and *Ozidi*, sourced respectively from the classical tradition and Elizabethan revenge tragedy and the oral tradition. Though Clark does not adapt a particular Greek play, his style clearly draws on the Aristotelian definition of tragedy and the ancient Greek plays. These dramatic texts from the first generation of African playwrights seem to form the groundbreaking African drama adaptations that influences the younger generations of writers.

Classicism appears to be an enabling tool for African playwrights because of the discovery of a parallel between the Grecian ways of life and worship and those of the indigenous people of Africa. Soyinka once gave a reason for his fascination with Greek plays, noting that there is a line of similarity between a Greek god and a Yoruba deity. In his introduction to *The Bacchae of Euripides*, he claims that Dionysus's thyrsus "is physically and functionally paralleled by the Opa Ogun borne by the male devotees of Ogun. But the thyrsus of Dionysus is brighter, it is all light and running wine, Ogun's staff is more symbolic of the labours of Ogun through the night of transition"(iv). In comparing Ogun with Dionysus, he suggests that the religious life of the Greeks and that of the Yoruba are comparable. Rotimi also remarks that the multiplicity of the gods of the Yoruba pantheon is comparable to that of ancient Greek culture. This analogy seems to be one of the basic reasons this generation of writers adapt Greek plays. Soyinka pursues the point more vigorously as he discovers that "the Delphic Oracle and the Ifa Corpus of the Yoruba are a fascinating instance of one such structural parallel" (14). His point is that there are "virtues of complementarity" common to both cultures and on which adapting authors base their idea (*Myth, Literature, and the African Word* xvii).

The first generation of African writers is quickly followed by a younger generation that approaches creative writing with a more radical and ferocious wit than their predecessors. In Nigeria, Femi Osofisan is a leading voice among the younger writers and has carved a niche for himself through a personal persuasion on such matters as myth, gender, history, race and class which form the bedrock of his thematic engagement and ideological terrain. Simon Gikandi suggests that "in

engaging with these themes, Osofisan was undoubtedly responding to the crisis that the postcolonial ruling class had imposed on his generation” (421). His works are deliberately patterned to depart from the conformity of the older generation to ageless tradition and culture and the established aesthetic patterns. Osofisan’s plays are usually designed to be a subversion of myth, a revisiting of history, and a radical transformation of existing plays. Rewriting older plays really seems to be the stock in trade of Osofisan who has variously adapted Greek, European, and Nigerian texts in a bid to relay his radical view on the matters of tradition, leadership and the supernatural in these dramas.

Osofisan has adapted and appropriated plays like Nikolai Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* and Clark’s *The Raft*. His most recent adaptation, *Women of Owu*, is a reworking of another classical Greek tragedy, Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*. His adaptation serves as another podium from which Osofisan projects his call for a better treatment of women, who as partners together with men will realize an egalitarian society. In all these adaptations, his purpose often extends beyond the aesthetic; he always revisits and reviews the ideological base of the older plays. Saint Gbilekaa declares that “through a dialectical twist, he [Osofisan] squeezes myth, legend and history to extract only the tangible aspects as can sauce his own vision of society” (77). In this regard, Sophocles’s *Antigone* has been most adroitly recast to bring out domestic issues of colonial history, military dictatorship, and racial prejudice on the African continent. The aim of this essay, therefore, is to delve into Osofisan’s revisionism of *Tegonni* and critically examine how his play makes *Antigone* relevant in a different place and time.

Writers have had to depend on existing materials either from literature or myth/history in the composition of their works. The story of Oedipus which Sophocles employed in his writing of the trilogy has subsisted in Greek mythology though it was still worth watching by virtue of the artistry that goes into the making of the play by the playwright. In the English tradition, authors such as Chaucer, Dryden, Milton and Pope have drawn largely from Classical myths in their imaginative works. Writers have been influenced by older literature to such a large extent that, as Richard Gill says, “quite often the context of literature is other

literature” (312). The reading of a work of literature often ends up becoming an encounter with older literary and also non-literary materials.

Intertextuality as a literary theory “evolved,” in the words of S. O. Afolayan, “as one of the poststructuralist responses to the weakness of the structuralist semiotics which often individualises a text as a discreet and ‘closed off’ entity hence, focusing exclusively on its internal structures” (70). This argument implies that a text is meaningful mainly when placed in the light of other texts which are believed to have influenced the writer, either consciously or unconsciously. As Daniel R. Schwarz argues in “The Novel and Modern Criticism”:

Each text takes its meaning from other texts, not merely prior texts, but other concomitant texts and expressions of culture and language. The blank marble pages, the squiggly lines, the scrambled chapters, the skipped pages of *Tristram Shandy* are external events because they respond not only to extant literary texts, but to contemporary and medieval ideas of logic, or order of rationality. (in Coyle 613)

Thus a text is best interpreted when read in light of other texts to which it is linked, either unconsciously or by authorial design. More writers and critics have come to develop the theory of intertextuality as it continues to be relevant in critical evaluation. T. S. Eliot’s position is that the best interpretation of a literary piece can be achieved by relating the work to older ones. In his words, “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (2440). This is even true for works where the authors are not directly reworking older material. The intertextual theory is a wide one which not only claims that literary texts are always interrelated, but also attempts to cater for all sorts of relationships that can exist between works of literature ranging from adaptation to allusion, translation, intention and influence.

The intertextual theory is suitable in the evaluation of adapted plays such as the one under study here because, more often than not, areas of linkage beyond what the author intends are discovered in the process of critical analysis. In the case of *Tegonni*, adaptation serves to attest that classical ideas are not obsolescent but are still much relevant even in the postmodern world. Hellenism thus becomes a platform on which postcolonial ideas in the African world can be voiced. The possibility of generating such contemporary issues from an extant Greek play signifies that Hellenism, though originating from the ancient past, may never

degenerate into archaism or absolute irrelevance. The major aspiration of this work is thus an investigation of the viability of the canon of intertextuality in the critical analysis of a Classical-based African play like *Tegonni: An African Antigone*.

### **Tegonni, Not Antigone**

An adaptation of Sophocles's *Antigone*, *Tegonni: An African Antigone* is the story of the Princess of Oke-Osun who defies custom and goes into bronze casting, thereby incurring the wrath of her people. This professional leap leads to the loss of her fiancée and she is unable to get a suitor from her people; yet later she falls in love with Allan, the British District Officer who rescues her from what would have been the consequences of committing a taboo by venturing into a career that is the exclusive preserve of men. Her impending marriage to a white man draws opposition from both blacks and whites but especially the Governor Carter Ross whose arrival with the corpses of the royal brothers on the wedding morning results to a truncation of the wedding ceremony. The extreme measures taken by Carter Ross to halt the wedding, coupled with the intractable temperament of Tegonni lead to the tragic end of the major characters in the play. *Antigone* is a play that also fascinates many African writers because of the significance of the autocratic regime of Creon and its similarity to the style of rulership of Africa's despots. The introduction of soldiers as relics of a military governance attests to this fact.

*Tegonni* opens at the dawn of the wedding day of the Princess of Oke-Osun whose friends have gone to convince her uncle to attend her wedding ceremony in spite of the seeming imbalance in the racial difference between the couple. Upon his acceptance of their plea, the morning turns out to be a happy one for Tegonni and her friends as they gleefully dance along the street, as a preparation to the wedding. The wedding proceedings are however halted by the arrival of the corpse of Prince Oyekunle, killed in battle against his brother over the throne. The artistic design of having a marriage in the wake of a bloody war that involves the two royal brothers has been variously questioned by critics who think Osofisan's desire to depart from his Greek predecessor is the reason for this modification. Indeed, the death of King Abiodun has just occurred and the war over who inherits the throne is still raging high at the borders. The elaborate wedding ceremony slated for this period might be either a deliberate act to show Tegonni's insensitivity or the

playwright's conscious design to make Tegonni's wedding coincide with her burial. Although Antigone's judgment leads to her death, she laments that "No wedding-day; no marriage-music; Death will be all my bridal dower" (148). In a sharp contrast to Antigone, Tegonni and her friends are enmeshed in mirth and high celebration accompanied by music and dancing which vivify the day. The festive atmosphere is opposed to Antigone's pensive mood throughout the Greek play. This vivacity as the play opens on the dawn of Tegonni's wedding day is the first point of departure from *Antigone*.

The original intention of the playwright in composing a play like *Tegonni* is to alert his audience to issues of contemporary relevance. Thus the thematic and ideological preoccupation transcends Sophocles's engagement with the subject of the State versus the individual which forms the bulk of critical opinions on the Greek play. G. J. Watson clearly states that the tragic conflict in the play is premised upon the difference "between individual conscience and State policy" and this is sustained till the end because "equally valid claims collide" (31). The validity of each claim may also have been proven by the disastrous end of both parties as neither is exonerated and spared by what should have been the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

Drawing on the plot and setting of *Antigone*, Osofisan shifts his gaze from the subject matter of the classical play to the attitude of the peoples of Africa at the time of colonisation. Very few creative works that represent the colonial history have paid attention to and raised questions on the compliance of African leaders and citizens in submitting gullibly to the colonial masters. In his artistic presentation of the same colonial history in his *Two Thousand Seasons*, Ayi Kwei Armah reverses the response of the denizens of the Gold Coast when white invaders landed on their soil. In Armah's narration, a considerable section of the people still lived by the tenets of The Way—and this includes the communal essence—when the predators arrived on their soil. This same subject of response to colonial invaders has recurred in Osofisan's drama and Muyiwa Awodiya notes that Osofisan's plays "respond to the exploitation of the colonial master before independence" (171). Osofisan has also raised the same issue albeit differently in an earlier play, *No More the Wasted Breed*, in which the various deities and cults worshipped by the people are at the receiving end of his critical butt. His angst in this play is directed

at the gods and goddesses who take pleasure in afflicting their worshipers through a constantly cannibalistic request for human blood through sacrifice. The character chosen as scapegoat to carry annual sacrifices for Elusu the water goddess, Biokun, queries the established pattern of worshipping the gods in the play and questions Elusu thus:

You complain of being abandoned, but who brought the predators who impoverished our people and turned them into groveling slaves? Did our conquerors not come across your seas, Olokun? Did they not berth in your waters, goddess?... We fed you with the best of our seasons, praying for peace and abundance. But instead, you brought us the white slavers, who carried off our best men to the far plantations. To anguish and humiliation. You did not shake your head, and overturn their ships on the way. You did not ask your tides to lead them astray before they reached us. They rode on your shoulders and brought the terror of guns, the corruption of cowries, they brought their venereal diseases. (108)

In this quote the playwright hints at the question of African reaction to colonial invasion. Although the playwright here focuses his satiric lens on the gods by demystifying them and suggesting some socio-politically beneficial ways by which the supernatural beings should have expended their acclaimed powers, we can see that he has subtly started reviewing the response of a people and their gods to the presence of strangers on their land. This point is heightened in *Tegonni* where the people (women) revolt and cause an insurgency instead of allowing themselves to be subdued. It is highly significant that it is members of the relegated gender who rise against oppression in society when men of valour simply comply with all the repressive decrees of the colonialists. Knowing that women practically had no voice in Africa at this point in her history, it becomes obvious that the author's revision borders on his 'gender ideology' of hinging societal success on partnering women with men in the battle for freedom. The point is also raised that there must have been audacious women on the continent during the colonial days who could have, jointly with the men, stirred a revolution.

In *Tegonni*, the focus is not on the deities but on the different categories of the African populace and their manner of responding to colonialism. As already established above, the strong patriarchal base of African culture might be its highest undoing during this critical period in the history of the people. *Tegonni* is already created as a fearless character who challenges any individual who stands in her way perhaps because she is used to having her way since her childhood. Thus



when Governor Carter Ross arrives and stands between her and her marriage to Allan, she faces him squarely and fearlessly while the leaders of Oke Osun are already crouching in subjugation. This situation affords the playwright another opportunity of airing his thoughts on the subject of African reaction to colonialism. The girls have to face Baba Isokun and other leaders and give them a piece of their mind on the issue:

Isokun: Listen my dear girls, do as he says, for now. It's all for the better, or we won't be here. Trust us.

Kunbi: No more, with all due respects, baba! That's how we've been trusting you men all along, and see what you have made of our land!

Yemisi: Turned all of us to slaves!

Faderera: While the white bastards plunder our land! (75)

This forms the pivot of Osofisan's revision of colonial history and represents his ideological position on the issue. It becomes obvious that the author's point here is that had the Africans raised some intelligent resistance instead of a couple of unplanned upheavals that were easily quenched by the colonialists, the story might have been a little different, at least in some quarters.

The alteration of colonial history observed afore is an innovation of Osofisan which has no antecedent whatsoever in the older play. The only issue occurring silently between Creon and Antigone is that of gender. Although Creon is truly angry with Antigone for flouting his decree, one of the reasons why he is unwilling to forgive her and back down on the stringent decree is because she is a woman and the Greek society of the time expected utmost submission from the womenfolk. To some extent, we find the State represented by Carter Ross versus the Individual represented by Tegonni in *Tegonni* but later in the play the issues change and both Tegonni and Carter are unable to hide the real sources of the ire in them.

The heroism of Antigone is also shifted to collective heroism in Tegonni as occasioned by the other age mates and friends of Tegonni in the struggle against colonial domination. This is also typical of Osofisan's revolutionary plays and is based on his belief that every member of society need be involved in a revolution; before it can be successful though there would always be a leader in the group. In pulling the ancient Greek play from the European tradition, Osofisan vigorously transforms its meaning and unsettles its subject matter to fit into the African society in which it is relocated. All the points raised in the play are essentially

African with no single thematic pointer to its European tradition except for the presence of the mythical Antigone among the characters and the authorial acknowledgment that the play is an adaptation.

### **African Oral Tradition in *Tegonni***

Perhaps one aspect of this adapted play which has remained unexplored by critics is that which has to do with the oral nature of the African traditional heritage (Raji). Critical essays have dwelt on the political and postcolonial essence of the play to the detriment of the oral traditional elements contained therein (Goff and Simpson). Osofisan infuses *Tegonni* with a great deal of the orality that generally characterises a typical African literary text. Although the innovations of Osofisan in recreating *Tegonni* are many and varied, the features of the African oral tradition in the new play are more pronounced. This is one area where the play has no link whatsoever with its Greek antecedent but is directly rooted in the author's artistic bequest. Orality in the play is manifested in songs, dance, language, narration and chants which connect the play more to other plays of Osofisan rather than to the Greek source play.

Storytelling in the play best exemplifies Osofisan's use of the oral tradition of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, which is a long-standing tradition of most tribes of Africa, as attested by Ruth Finnegan who says "the existence of stories in Africa is well known" (315). This explains why, even in an adapted play, storytelling is still featured. When the tension is high in *Tegonni*, Tegonni tells a story at the request of her friends, to cool their nerves. This makes the artistic implication of the storytelling analogous to that of the effect of comic relief in Shakespeare's historical tragedies. In Greek drama, any form of comedy is anathema to tragedy. Dryden explains that "tragedies and comedies were not writ then as they are now, promiscuously, by the same person" (443). However the stories introduced in *Tegonni* and other plays by Osofisan are not imported for mere comic reasons. They are usually stories within the story, which parody, illuminate and highlight the major themes of the main story of the play. Here the story of the Tiger and the Toad is intended to highlight the main message of the play that tyrants will always fall. That is why at the end of the narration, Tegonni stresses the following moral lesson: "So my friends, remember the lesson well: the one who was swallowed

gained a throne, while the one who usurped power fell to disgrace – oh yes, that is always the end of those who come to rule by force, when the light of freedom shines again and the people regain their rights!” (73). This is to predict that the tyrant among them will fall while the oppressed will triumph one day in the ultimate and artistic triumph of good over evil.

The language of the play is absolutely different from the older play though it is written in English as well. Osofisan’s use of different Englishes and Yoruba idioms further enhance the Nigerian character of his adaptation that marks its clear difference and direction from the classical play. Apart from the Governor and the major characters who use Standard English, other characters speak Pidgin English typical of their class in the Nigerian society and, in some instances, we find the characters speaking the Ijebu dialect of the Yoruba language which the author translates into English. The soldiers talk like average semi-illiterate Nigerians whose only grasp of the English language is seen in the usage of pidgin in their speeches, constantly punctuated with non-English words apparently coined from their native language. Even though Tegonni speaks Standard English that demonstrates her status and education, analogous to that of her mythical sister Antigone, her native language still intrudes into her speech as in the instance of shock below, orchestrated by the sudden discovery that a corpse is placed on her way to her wedding:

Tegonni: (Reeling). Yéèpà ! I’m ruined! My mother’s Òrìshà has abandoned me! Our enemies have put a curse in the way of my wedding! (33)

The words ‘*yeepe*’ and ‘*orisha*’ could probably not be translated without at least a part of the meaning being lost, hence the author’s decision to leave them in the native language. Later when the women are to curse the Governor, they do so in the Ijebu dialect of the Yoruba language. The use of the dialect cannot be seen as inappropriate since it clearly depicts the playwright’s intention to ‘Africanise’ *Antigone*. The inclusion of these native words in the play almost renders it a complete African play but for the presence of Antigone and the author’s admission that he is reworking a Greek play. The meanings of the Ijebu words reveal that the Governor has committed an abomination and is therefore cursed. This forms the crest of the several twists brought to the story in the course of reworking it for the African audience. It is a twist in the sense that a curse does not have to be verbally

pronounced as in the case of Creon. Teiresias warns that the singular act of burying the living in the earth and leaving the dead on the earth's surface translates into Creon cursing himself by pitching himself against the gods in the process. Tegonni's restiveness and cunning do not allow the Governor get to a point of burying her in a cave, either dead or alive. From wearing a mask to attack the Governor at gunpoint to simulating remorse and demonstrating her intention to apologise, Tegonni is evidently too restless for the Governor to make a timely progress in his intention to punish her for burying her brother against clearly stated orders. It is thus the curse of the women that together with Tegonni's other awry deeds culminate in the tragic fall of the Governor at the end of the play.

The effect of the curse is felt mainly in the chanting and that is the reason the playwright leaves the curse in the indigenous language. In the first edition of the play, he states in the footnotes that he has "preferred the Ijebu dialect here, just to enhance the oral power of the curse" (139). Thus the translation alone will not be sufficient to produce the type of effect desired by the author.

### **Postcolonialism in Tegonni**

The literatures springing up in nations of the world which were previously colonies of England, France, Portugal and others have been loosely tagged postcolonial literature. Postcolonial studies have focused more on literatures from the Third World countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. One characteristic feature of this type of literature is "an abiding concern with...the colonial and postcolonial 'subject,' as well as of categories by means of which subject conceives itself" (Abrams 245). Thus postcolonial literatures are not only those written in the postcolonial era but those dealing with issue of postcolonial concern including military dictatorship, economic distress and the colonial experience generally.

Although *Tegonni* is set in the colonial period when the whites dominate and rule black African nations, the play has raised postcolonial issues of military dictatorship, tyranny and oppression of the black populace by fellow blacks. These have no root whatsoever in the source play but are the fictive creation of the playwright intended to raise a voice against such practices by African rulers while at the same time subtly blaming the inhuman colonial experiences of the black

world for the poor qualities of African leaders. Gikandi equally observes that Osofisan's response to the crisis of postcolonialism in Nigeria was driven by the feeling that "the first generation of African writers had not adequately developed new forms of writing to respond to the crisis" (421).

*Tegonni: An African Antigone*, for one, is a critique of the inhuman and aberrant activities of the soldiers who ruled Nigeria and some parts of Africa while the play was being written. Hence the soldiers in the retinue of Antigone complain bitterly of the horrors of being soldiers in such a country as this. They complain of the undesirability of their profession in this particular African country:

2<sup>nd</sup> SOL: You've got to find us another role. This one is not fun at all!  
ANTIGONE: You are tired of being soldiers?  
4<sup>th</sup> SOL: Demoralised. All we do is carry corpses  
2<sup>nd</sup> SOL: Or build execution platforms –  
1<sup>st</sup> SOL: Or terrorise people –  
2<sup>nd</sup> SOL: Burn and plunder houses  
4<sup>th</sup> SOL: Collect bribes  
3<sup>rd</sup> SOL: We are so ashamed! Is this all that soldiers do in this Country?  
2<sup>nd</sup> SOL: Not even one act you could call humane? (74)

While the playwright makes the soldiers converse, he lays bare all the brutalities and inhuman acts characteristic of soldiers as they control power in twentieth-century Africa. This particular feature appears superimposed on the play because apart from the fact that the soldiers are not inculcated into the mainstream of the action in *Antigone* (a sentry reports the treacherous act though), these supposed soldiers of the colonial era complain like soldiers in postcolonial Africa.

### **Race and gender in *Tegonni***

*Tegonni* affords Osofisan another pristine opportunity to voice his mind on the salient issue of gender which he has raised variously in some other older and newer plays in his work. From the earliest plays such as *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Morountodun*, Osofisan has taken an incontrovertible stand on the matter of gender discrimination against women both in life and literature. He states without prevarication that "I have always tried to expose and denounce the wrongs which our society inflicts upon women, just on account of their gender" (6). Hence the first battle fought by Tegonni in this adaptation is against male dominance in the bronze casting profession into which she fearlessly ventures. Other women would

not dare this feat because the persecution that attends it could almost overshadow the success expected therein but Tegonni is not one to be daunted by opposition, challenges or tradition. She is presented to the audience as a queer child who is unable to fit into established but impractical attitudes and cultures. Baba Isokan explains to Governor Carter Ross:

Right from childhood, she's always been like that, a problem child. She's a gift from our Mother, Yemoja, and such children are never bound by the normal rules the rest of us live by. It's the goddess inside them, they can't be controlled. It's what drove her for instance to choose a white man, of all available suitors, for a husband. (62)

This proclaimed innate attitude is reflected most in her choice of profession. Tradition has bound women to such professional choices as weaving, knitting and other endeavours presumably compatible with the feminine nature and domestic roles and Tegonni's venture into the male dominated world of professionalism is perceived as aberrant.

While this professional angle to the story is indubitably Osofisan's introduction to the myth of Antigone, one must be quick to note that Tegonni's refusal to submit to the confines of her gender as imposed by society is drawn from Antigone who equally refuses to be bound by the shackles of gender limitation in burying her brother. Ismene's instant reply to Antigone's proposition is that "we are women; it is not for us /To fight against men" (Sophocles 128). Antigone seems to take no cognisance of the fact that she is a woman in a world ruled by men and simply replies that she would bury her brother and moves on to business. To her, gender is not strong enough a barrier to hinder her from performing her duty to her deceased brother and to the gods.

Tegonni's determination to forge ahead in bronze casting against popular opinion costs her her fiancée and lands her on the doorstep of Allan, the British District Officer in Oke-Osun with whom she eventually falls in love. The love affair changes the course of the story because of the racial difference of the two lovers which generates consternation from the people. At this juncture in the play, Tegonni begins to battle racial prejudice while still facing gender bias. The racial agenda of Tegonni's struggle with the Governor is revealed when she responds to Baba Isokun's pleas to save her life that, "I want to live! Of course I want to go on living! But if the cost of that will mean the death of our people, then I am willing to

die” (78). Tegonni’s statements and actions in the play reveal that she is more preoccupied with fighting the racial complex of the white colonisers than tackling the chauvinistic disposition of the opposite sex. Obafemi already indicates that “*Tegonni: An African Antigone* imports *Antigone* from the classical past to combine with Tegonni in her revolt against British imperialism in the Nigerian colony” (166).

The Governor too seems to have nothing against Allan’s choice of Tegonni as wife except for her skin pigmentation. He inadvertently reveals this in the following conversation with Allan:

Jones: And then I began to see the products of her work. General, you’ve got to see them! I’m not exaggerating, when I say it’s the work of a genius! If she was white, she’d be a major discovery...  
Gov: Exactly! If she was white! Don’t you see the difference? (99)

Tegonni’s dexterity in bronze casting cannot erase the darkness of her skin, as far as the Governor is concerned. Thus while Creon vigorously pursues his intention to punish Antigone because she is a woman, Carter Ross is apoplectic about the situation because Tegonni is a black girl. The combination of femininity and blackness in Tegonni makes her more detestable to Carter who is incorrigibly racist in attitude and eventually orders Allan’s return to England in order to end the marriage.

One issue of interest here is the discovery that the feeling of racial superiority is not exclusively resident in any country or continent; all peoples of the world possess the tendencies to believe that they are better than those of another colour/race and that inherent differences in peoples’ capabilities are due solely to their racial background. This is represented in Isokun’s annoyance that of all black suitors, Tegonni chooses to marry “one of the white ghosts from across the sea” (13), which is an undue denigration of the skin pigmentation of the white colonisers. There is however a tilt towards the side of the whites who have captured and colonised part of the black world and hold the conceited belief that the African continent cannot match them in development or education or any other aspect of civilised life. Though Isokun matches the Governor in the racist perception of issues and language, this tilt is detected in Isokun’s ability to recant while the

Governor remains recalcitrant till the end of the play and is ever quick to say that the only thing wrong with Tegonni is that she is black.

The authorial message proper on the matter of race relations is relayed by Jones through whom the author intrudes in his confrontational explanation to the Governor that, “You only think in terms of war and conflict, General. Of order and command. But that’s not the only relationship possible between the races!” (91). Jones here conveys the all important point on tolerance and understanding between peoples of different colour and creed. This forms the thrust of the message on racism and not a bigoted stance in favour of a particular race. Obviously, the playwright is advocating for peaceful mutual coexistence among nations of the world rather than merely seeing things from the perspective of just one race.

### **Conclusion**

*Tegonni: An African Antigone* is indeed one play with a multiplicity of meaning and vastness of intention. Established on an ideological base that is nearly inexhaustible in its continual treatment of issues of politics, society, egalitarianism, gender, class and race relations, the play keeps expanding upon each critical assessment of its thematic and aesthetic contents. This may derive from the source play, *Antigone*, which has continued to intrigue critics, scholars and students alike down the ages in spite of its seemingly simple Aristotelian storyline devoid of digressions and subplot. This adaptation of the Greek play derives its own ‘contemporaneity’ from the presence of oral materials, the domesticated use of English language and its postcolonial essence all brought in as the author adapts the older play and transforms it into a typical modern African play. *Tegonni* differs in outlook from a play like *The Women of Owu* which is equally adapted from classical tragedy in that it seems to ambitiously encompass most of the problems confronting the ailing continent of Africa.

We discover that what the author does with the ancient material available to him is what Gbilekaa refers to as squeezing; that is, he sort of sieves the older material, drops some and retains some of the structure and contents and this conforms with Eliot’s claim that “novelty is better than repetition” (2440). The tendency is there for readers and critics of the play to hastily agree that Osofisan drops the supernatural content of the Greek play for self will and determination



especially since this is what he claims his works stand for. In this play, the absence of a direct equivalent of Teresias, the de-emphasising of the curse on the house of Labdacus, and Tegonni's insistence on personal will tend to lead the reader to believe that Osofisan has dumped the matter of control by the gods for that of self will but the manner of the Governor's ineluctable fall as the women nakedly curse him makes the author's position on the supernatural rather ambiguous.

All the ideological labels that have been placed on the playwright (though he has rejected them time and again) are noticeable in the making of this sensitive adaptation. Raising postcolonial and gender issues, *Tegonni* critically adapts the Greek play that provides an interesting platform. The creative ingenuity that goes into the making of this play proves clearly that adaptations are not slavish imitations of older works nor are they an indication of a dearth of ideas on the part of adapting authors.

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