

## OYA: THE WOMANIST IN LEKAN BALOGUN'S OYA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a womanist analysis of the character, Oya in Lekan Balogun's play of the same title. In the play, Lekan Balogun is being consistent with his penchant for the exploration of Yoruba myths, legends and mythical figures in his works. Oya, the legendary heroine of the Yoruba people is mythically referenced to be full of woman passion, vanity, emotions, weaknesses and strengths. This, also, is Lekan Balogun's portrayal in this play. By so doing, is Balogun implying that Oya, as a human would have been a womanist? This is the overriding question this paper seeks to answer using Womanism as a theoretical framework.

### INTRODUCTION

Lekan Balogun, Nigerian playwright, has taken a deep and scholarly interest in the culture of his people-the Yoruba. His interest in the oral literature, ancient beliefs and traditions of the Yoruba runs deep. This is strikingly illustrated by his frequent use of traditional elements like oral history, myth and legend in such plays as *Moremi Ajasoro*, *Alaafin Kanran*. It is noted that the Yoruba culture provides the social and cultural context upon which the plays of Lekan Balogun are based. His plays are informed and inspired by the culture and social events from various parts of Nigeria.

The fact remains that the true Yoruba flavour of his plays lie not in the language he uses alone but also the traditional documents which he creatively and inventively adopts. From this cultural universe, he chooses his characters and situations among contemporary human beings as well as from gods, spirits, dead ancestors and mythological heroes. In *Oya*, we have the characters like Oya - who is a deity, Arewa - the pretty one, Omiran - a lanky and huge man, Ogun - another deity, Sondoruku, Olalekan, Sango - a deity again, Sangobiyi - Sango gives birth to this, Obatala - a deity, Odediran- a hunter, Orunmila - yet another deity and warriors, drummers, singers and dancers.

This paper will provide analysis of the character of Oya in Lekan Balogun's play, *Oya* using the theoretical framework of womanism. This approach will be used to interpret Oya's womanist tendencies, inclinations and attitudes especially as it reflects in her speech, point of view and character traits. The objective is to demonstrate that Oya being a Yoruba goddess quite alright is also a womanist who is particularly passionate about the procreation, survival and continuity of humanity. Historically, she has ever been Sango's wife and not Ogun at all. She is seen to be more violent than Sango her husband. She manifests in creation in the forms of sudden and drastic change, strong storms and the flash of the market place. Her representation of natural disasters and death is not as arbitrary as it may seem, those factors often serving as a means of creation for her.

Womanism will be applied in a manner that can be termed 'double-edged' in the sense that it will be merged with its offshoot which is known as Africana womanism. This term, womanism was coined by African-American writer, Alice Walker in her essay which is entitled, "In Search of our Mother's Gardens", while a shade of the same general concept,

known as Africana Womanism was best elaborated on by Breda Verner in her article, “The Power and Glory of Africana Womanism”. The definitions of both concepts are as follows: Womanism:

“A woman who loves other women, sexually and or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter) and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist...loves music, loves dance, loves moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Love the folk. Loves herself. Regardless...”(qtd. in Mojica)

Breda Verner’s view of Africana Womanism is as follows:

Africana Womanism in essence says: We love men. We like being women. We love children. We like being mothers. We value life...We want families and harmonious generations. We are not at war with our men seeking money, power and influence through confrontation...We reject the status of victim. Indeed, we are victors, sisters in charge of our own destiny: We are Africana culture-keepers: Our primary obligation is to the progress of our cultural way of life through the stability of family and the commitment to community.(qtd. in Wikipedia)

Some portions of Verner’s explanation above are omitted because they are not relevant to the analysis.

His play is set in one area or the other of the Yoruba culture. This play is divided into twelve movements so it will be analysed movement by movement. The play opens with two women, Oya, the Yoruba goddess of the whirlwind and her maid, Arewa walking towards the stream. The playwright’s introduction of the goddess, Oya shows that she exudes an air of wealth and general well-being. She is described as being, “well-dressed in rich native attire. She holds a saber in her left hand” (Movement 1:1). Meanwhile, she fusses about her maid’s sluggishness, but not for long for her mood changes to that of excitement about the flower Arewa finds. Oya refers to the flower as “this tender child of nature” but wonders how it “could have emerged from those rocky paths to the stream” (Movement 1:2). Seeing the flower makes Oya feel nostalgic about her wedding night, the night she was married to Ogun Onire. She reminisces about it:

Yes, Arewa, that celebration on our wedding night, the praise chants which swelled my head and moved my spirit while I clung tenderly to my husband as if the day was not going to break anymore. For some moments, I fell asleep. I saw myself in a strange land as the women danced, their leader held a colourful flower which seemed to attract everyone’s attention. I was particularly captivated by its beauty. The feeling was simply irresistible! (Movement 1:4).

In the euphoria of remembering the wedding night, Oya’s mind flashes back to the fateful day. Arewa is enveloped by the festive atmosphere so she joins the maidens to dance but is

soon halted by her mistress who suddenly realises that the flower is a message for her and must be kept as a present from Orisa Oke. Afterwards, they hurry home.

The movement two is in Ogun's house preparing for war; movement three is in Sango's house sitting on a mortar. Movement four is in Obatala's place, dressed in white loin clothes with white calabash from which he pours libation. Oya comes before Obatala in supplication for the blessing of children. Her plea, "please do bless me this time," (Movement 4:17) shows that she has been asking and pleading before now. This yearning for children in Oya's words:

It is not so, Obarisa. When a woman stays too long in the house of a man without children, she equally becomes a man. Yet, I know your backyard is populated with as many children as any woman can desire. Just one will definitely make Oya happy. (Movement 4:17)

The speech above is strong Africana Womanist, as Verner stated, "we like being women, we love children, we like being mothers" (qtd. in Wikipedia). Oya desires children, even only one will make her happy as she does not want to be a man because that is what a woman who has been with a man and does not have children is.

Furthermore, she implores Obatala to save her and not forsake her because she has travelled to Koro, Ejigbomekun, Iserimogbe and Onijumu Naki without success. Now it is only woman who believes she has to play a role in fulfilling her destiny that would go this far. Walker states that a womanist, "appreciates and prefers women's emotional flexibility" (qtd. in Mojica). Based on this notion and a similar vein, Oya goes to Osun, Ewuji *afideremo ootoorofon*, "the good mother who blesses without looking back", (Movement 4: 18-19). Unfortunately, even Osun cannot help out. Rather, she redirects Oya to the father of children, Obatala. Notice that this visit to Osun which even Obatala commends her on shows that she appreciates Osun, the good mother and probably thinks that by visiting Osun, she can draw out her motherly compassion, that is, on the level of woman to woman. See her expression, "I spread my arms and with tears poured out my heart and asked for my own blessing of the womb". (Movement 4:19) Osun must have been moved by Oya's tears for she directs her to the father of children that is Obatala.

Next, she goes to Obatala who asks her to seek further. Oya weeps because from her womanist point of view, she values tears as a tool for supplication. See how she backs her plea with tears and it partly works for her because Obatala is moved and decides to give her a tip on how to go about her predicament. Movement five is in Oya's place. Oya reprimands Sango and his messenger, Omiran for barging into her house. Obviously, she does that because of her love, respect for and loyalty to her husband, "How dare you rant like that in my house? Ogun, my husband is the most powerful, courageous and special of all men!" (Movement 5: 26). This statement is in line with the womanist trait wherein she loves her man to the extent she retorts further, "The tree which produces good flowers, has someone who waters it. My husband is blessed then". (Movement 5: 29). Still in a bid to maintain her loyalty to Ogun, Oya orders Sango to leave but she discovers that his mission is to take her, win her loyalty over to himself. Her language becomes more forceful, "You make a mistake, Sango. No other animal romances the wife of a lion". (Movement 5: 30). From Oya's point of view, her husband is a lion, it does not matter who Sango is or what he thinks of himself, her man (Ogun) is the king of the forest. The womanist loves struggle so she shouts at Sango, orders him to leave and not to ever come back.

Movement six is in Orunmila's place with a young man that he has just finished divination for. Oya would not rest until her quest for a child is successful. This time she visits Orunmila who questions her about her mission and wonders if she has been fighting with Ogun again. Her response displays the womanist mindset wherein the woman loves her man:

Not this time, wise one – Ogun and I don't quarrel anymore.  
Like babies, we both have out-grown the problems of teething.  
Besides, he is away at the battle front now. (Movement 6: 33).

In stating the reason for her mission, her response captures the womanist worldview, "Oya is only full of beauty, nothing more to show that she is a real woman". (Movement 6: 33) This goddess believes in procreation and the continuation of a man's lineage. Equally, she believes in the family, the togetherness and its benefits. She mentions her husband's frequent absence from home due to his obsession with war. This is a pointer to her dislike for separation of any kind which is in line with Walker's view that "the woman (ist) is not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (qtd. in Mojica). However, Orunmila asks her to talk to Ifa and divines for her. Oya talks to Ifa and gets an interpretation from Orunmila. It can be summed up as an instruction for Oya to get ready and be prepared for the change which is about to come but only after she has done her tasks. Oya's trust and faith in the words of the gods is an indication of her love for the spirit. The Yorubas believe in the divinities, spirits, mysteries, rituals, sacrifices as intermediaries through which they can reach and appease the Supreme Being, Olodumare is emphasised here. The Yoruba traditional beliefs underlie the actions and attitudes of the characters in Balogun's *Oya*. We have the historical figures in Yoruba land and principal deities like Orunmila, Obatala, Ogun, Sango and Oya which are freely mentioned in the play.

Concerning the deified ancestors, Orunmila, Obatala, Ogun, Sango and Oya are among the ancient Yoruba heroic men and woman who have made useful contributions to the life and culture of the people and as such were deified. Sango, according to popular legend among the Yorubas, was a human being who reigned as the fourth Alaafin of Oyo. After his death, he was deified as Sango, the god of lightning and thunder who strikes as a manifestation of the wrath of Olodumare descending on the evil people in the community.

According to *Oya*, Sango is the deity that wraps himself up with the shadow of lightning. He emits fire from the mouth and eyes at the same time he goes to town dressed in amazing shreds. He is being praised as *Arabambi Arekujaye*, Sango, son of Oranmiyan by Omiran, his faithful and dutiful servant. Sango desires Oya as Omiran says so much about Oya as the most beautiful woman that he has ever set his eyes on (Movement 6: 27-28). Oya refuses to accept Sango's proposal but Sango does not relent. He insists (Movement 6: 29-30).

Movement seven takes place along the footpath when Oya is walking home and Sango jumps down from a tree by the road side which startles Oya. Oya launches into a tirade against Sango alongside rebuffing his advances until he finally catches her attention when he points out that her husband seems to prefer the battlefield to his wife. In spite of Oya's supposed indifference to his advances, Sango finally catches her attention by stating the obvious fact that her husband seems to be neglecting her of late. He says, "certainly, you are right, Oya. But I know that a tree that does not know how to dance will be taught by the wind. We shall speak further!" (Movement 7: 40). This is too much for Oya to swallow so she stops and demands an explanation. As a result of her womanist inclination to know things in-depth, she decides to acquire knowledge from Sango, rather than run home to unravel the puzzle herself

as a separatist would do. In her words, “Alright, pardon my tongue. But what have you just said now?” (Movement 7: 41).

Nevertheless, at the slightest indication that Sango is probably insinuating that Oya’s husband is involved with other women, she defends him again, “I have not complained to you. Anyway, thank you for poking your nostrils into a business that does not concern you in the least” (Movement 7: 41). The womanist, Oya loves her husband and she is committed to protecting his integrity and his manhood, “I am married to Ogun and to Ogun, I still belong!” (Movement 7: 42). She is unflinchingly determined to remain so and may turn violent if the need arises; she retorts sternly, “Are you deaf? Will you leave my path and let me go?” (Movement 7: 42). This is when he becomes physical in his bid to persuade and convince her to marry him. Sango still refuses to accept and continue to propose marriage to Oya (Movement 7: 42). Oya does not listen to him until when Sango mentions dreams and Oya’s ears were at alert to listen (Movement 7: 43-45).

Finally, she relents a bit when he offers to tell his riddle (his dreams). The dream is somewhat connected to Oya, in the sense that he sees rain, whirlwind, a beautiful woman whose face he did not see and a flower. Also, he sees flowers which take over the place where the woman stands. This prods Oya to want to tell her own dream but Sango departs. Meanwhile, some traits which Oya displays here can be associated with the womanist personality, such as boldness, resilience, curiosity, commitment, strength and fearlessness. Note that Oya sees a flower in her dream on the path to the stream and she is the whirlwind. The flower symbolizes the child she fervently desires. Oya is so fascinated with the dreams that she longs to know the person Sango saw in his dream.

Movement eight is in Oya’s place when Ogun is welcome home from war. Ogun returns from war and is welcomed by Oya, his wife who misses him everyday. She wastes no time in telling him that she wants to live out her dreams of being married to him. She is bold enough to let him know that she desires him sexually. Also, she bares her mind to Ogun, “Oh, it is good to hear that, Ogun Onire. The only farmland here is Oya, so, begin to plant your seeds right now” (Movement 8: 50). A womanist loves individual men as Oya loves her husband and does not want the sexual aspect of their relationship to be relegated to the background. Therefore, she speaks up and her willingness persuades Ogun to agree and give into her.

Movement nine is still in Ogun’s place when Oya rests her head on his laps in a romantic mood. Ogun compliments Oya for her unfading beauty while Oya acknowledges her mother, Yemoja elewiodo’s contribution as well as that of Olokun in bestowing her with such beauty. This is in accordance with womanism: the woman loves other women as well as appreciates them while Ogun is comfortable with taking his time and shying away from the responsibility of having children, Oya is not and she complains. But Ogun would rather be on the battlefield because, ‘A soldier has his duty to perform’ (Movement 9: 53). Here is the conflict or clash of interests: Ogun prefers to be a soldier who is always ready to go to battle at any time but Oya prefers family life and relationships. Consequently, the conflict remains.

While Ogun and Oya are still arguing, drums sound and Ogun gets the message which is that war approaches and he is being summoned to battle. Oya tries to restrain but he chooses to satisfy his urge to fight than satisfy his wife’s yearning for him to make her a proud woman and mother of children. Ogun leaves in spite of her pleas. Oya allows herself to become emotional after being spurned by Ogun, because the womanist values the woman’s emotional flexibility, that is, her ability to let her frustrations flow out in her tears.

A flash of Oya's strength of character is exhibited in her decision to solve her problem in her own way, that is, to give in to Sango Arabambi. Since Ogun would not give her a seed, to grow in her garden, she becomes defiant and decides to give Sango a chance to quench her thirst for that life-giving force which flows from a man. Driven by pain, disappointment and frustration, she seeks Sango because she has an indomitable spirit. Since she has this relentless quest for the fruit of the womb, she takes the initiative to seek for an alternative solution to her problem. She says, "Oya will not have her emotions trampled on by any man. Not even Ogun Onire. I shall take this my own way!" (Movement 9: 58). As if he is within earshot, Sango appears and displays his talent as a good dancer: a performance which thrills and captivates Oya for she loves music and dance and it is in line with her womanist inclinations. Remember that music and dance form part of the soul of a people and Oya loves her people, their music and their dance. This is how Sango is able to realise his dreams along side with Oya Oriri. Ogun is the warrior deity, divinity of iron, war, labour and sacrifice. In *Oya*, Ogun is the owner of Ire, the fierce god that bites himself with vicious anger and contempt. He first marries to Oya in the play. He is a man of war that his heart always gladdens to war at all times. Even when they were both in romantic mood that he hears the drums of war, he is suddenly ready which annoys Oya (Movement 9: 53-58).

Movement ten is at Sango's place when Sango wants Oya to go back to Ogun's house. The playwright dramatises those things which the womanist (Oya) loves such as: dance, music and the spirit. First, Oya urges Sango to teach her his dance steps. He obliges her so they dance. Next, she notices his wand and asks questions about it. Sango explains that he inherited from his father and it symbolises a lot of things for him: his manhood, courage and protection. That notwithstanding, it occurs to Sango that whenever he holds the wand with passion, the sky rumbles with thunder. Oya further connects with Sango on the spiritual level by making him realise that what he sees in his dreams is actually their union, which is symbolised by the act of Sango raising the "Ose" to the sky while Oya summons the rains which fall in response to Oya, the whirlwind. It means therefore, that their union was meant to be, right from the beginning. They celebrate with singing and dancing. She later packs to him and Sango wants her to move back to Ogun to avoid unnecessary war (Movement 10: 61-62) for he later realises that it is Oya that is meant for him relating it to his dreams coming to reality (Movement 10: 63-66).

Movement eleven is in Ogun's place when Ogun is searching everywhere for Oya. Ogun returns from war to learn that Oya has abandoned him to be with Sango. Arewa gives the information. As usual, it is a reason to prepare for yet another battle. Movement twelve is at the centre of the town where three foot paths meet. This is where Orunmila sits and Obatala comes to join him there. It is the point of confusion where by conclusion is made in the play about Oya. This scene is meaningful and has rich metaphors in the Yoruba world view. The three foot paths in Yoruba beliefs is the melting-pot of sacrifice, home of Esu. It is also the abode of the witches, wizards and spirits. The Yorubas believe in the existence of different forms of spirits not visible to human beings but which nevertheless play an important part in their religious lives. The usage of Yoruba cultural documents as far as Balogun is concerned is to depict how he creatively reinterprets his documents by giving them his own artistic significance and meaning.

Ogun and Sango fight over Oya Oriri but Obatala and Orunmila stop them. Obatala represents justice, peace, clarity, wisdom and owner of the world. Oya does not hesitate to tell Ogun to his face that women are not mere possessions to be owned and discarded by men at will, rather, they are individuals who have a right to life, growth, development and

fulfilment just like men. From the perspective of Africana Womanism: Women like being women, we love children. We like being mothers. We value life...We want families and harmonious generations (qtd. in Wikipedia).

Bearing these views in mind, one can decipher that Oya fits in with the women being described because, it is her desire for children, her yearning to be a mother, her desire to carry life in her womb, to have a family that have formed a force. That force has driven her into this seemingly outrageous behaviour. That is, abandonment of the home she shares with Ogun to be with Sango. Orunmila confirms it in his speech, "Oya and Sango's journey started from the house of Ori. The mystery goes on beyond now. If the sower does not sow, what will the reaper reap? (Movement 12: 76-77).

Ogun is forced to give up and leave the land to his home in Ire, where he feels he will live his life in the way he wants it. So, Oya's heart desire is granted as the two gods: Orunmila and Obatala confirm it to her, "...But I hope you will be happy this time, Oya" (Movement 12: 78). In addition, Orunmila reaffirms it by telling her, "when? It has started already, beautiful woman" (Movement 12: 79). As Sango goes off to Koro, Oya vows to be with him all the way and seals her vow with this statement, "Sango, wherever the millipede dies is its burial ground. Even if we start several times war, as long as we do it together, I shall be glad" (Movement 12: 80). Womanist, Oya loves her man and is willing to be with him. Oya is not happy in the play until when she marries Sango and fulfils her dream.

## CONCLUSION

Verner states that:

Indeed we are victors, sisters in charge. We are Africana culture-keepers: Our primary obligation is to the progress of our cultural way of life through the stability of family and the commitment to community.

Oya triumphs in the end. She is victorious because she is a practical woman who takes the initiative to find a solution to her marriage-long quest for children and for family. The desire and quest is womanist in nature because the woman seeks the survival and continuity of an individual and the community at large. The individual and community can only survive by reproducing itself through children. Oya gains because Sango shares in her commitment to procreation so she did not make a mistake in accepting to return the love he has for her.

She is endowed with constructive, reformatory and revolutionary qualities. She is determined to transform her society to a better place. As a result, she leads in the quest for revolutionary change in the society. She believes her name sounds heavy and twisting like the whirlwind. Her name moves any man exactly the way her beauty does. Oya as an active and vibrant woman, she aims high till her mission is accomplished.

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