

The Power of Women in War and Adversity: A Dramatic Discourse of Duro Ladipo's *MOREMI*

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Abstract: The legend of Moremi Ajasoro, one of the most celebrated figures in Yoruba history and mythology, exemplifies female agency, sacrifice, and transformative leadership. This paper examines the dramatic representation of Moremi, particularly in Duro Ladipo's play *Moremi*, analyzing how her character embodies the power of women in times of war and adversity. Through the lenses of feminist theory, Yoruba cosmology, and performance studies, the analysis demonstrates how Moremi challenges conventional patriarchal narratives by asserting intellectual, spiritual, and political authority in a male-dominated society. The study situates Moremi within her historical and cultural context, compares her with other iconic female figures in drama and history, and reflects on the enduring relevance of her story in contemporary discourse on gender, leadership, and cultural identity. The findings reveal that Moremi's strategic thinking, emotional resilience, and unwavering commitment to communal welfare offer a multifaceted portrait of feminine power that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, positioning her as both a historical heroine and a dramatic archetype of transformative female leadership.

Keywords: Moremi Ajasoro, Yoruba drama, Yoruba mythology, feminist theory, female leadership, sacrifice, African performance aesthetics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, narratives of war and adversity have predominantly been told through the lens of male heroism, with women relegated to the sidelines as victims, nurturers, or symbolic representations of nationhood. However, in many African traditions, women have played pivotal roles in shaping the course of events, especially in times of crisis. The legend of Moremi Ajasoro, one of the most revered figures in Yoruba history and mythology, stands out as a powerful example of female agency, sacrifice, and leadership. Moremi's tale is not merely a relic of oral tradition but a dynamic cultural narrative that continues to evolve and resonate with contemporary audiences. From her infiltration of the Igbo invaders to her ultimate sacrifice, Moremi embodies the complexities of leadership, the pain of duty, and the transformative power of feminine strength (Awe, 1992).

This paper explores the dramatic representation of Moremi in Lekan Ladipo's play *Moremi* analyzing how the character exemplifies the power of women in times of war and adversity. The analysis situates Moremi within her historical and cultural context, examining her actions through the lenses of feminist theory, Yoruba cosmology, and performance studies. In doing so, it argues that Moremi challenges conventional patriarchal narratives by asserting intellectual, spiritual, and political authority in a society dominated by male leadership. By comparing her with other iconic female figures in drama and history, this study also reflects on the enduring relevance of her story in a world where the contributions of women to peace, resistance, and transformation are gaining increasing recognition as opined by Mohanty (2003).

The research questions guiding this paper are:

- How does the dramatic representation of Moremi in Ladipo's play articulate female agency within patriarchal structures?
- What theatrical and symbolic elements are employed to convey Moremi's leadership and sacrifice?
- How does Moremi's narrative compare with other iconic female heroines across cultures and historical periods?

- What is the contemporary relevance of Moremi's story in discourse on gender equality and leadership?

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

The legend of Moremi Ajasoro is deeply embedded in the cultural, spiritual, and political history of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. Ile-Ife, regarded as the spiritual homeland of the Yoruba, serves as the setting of Moremi's story. Historically, as recorded by Bascom (1969) the Yoruba civilization has been rich in oral traditions, where myths, legends, and folklore serve as means of preserving history, transmitting values, and fostering collective identity. In this context, Moremi emerges not only as a mythological figure but also as a historical archetype whose story has been preserved and retold across generations.

According to oral accounts, Ile-Ife was once plagued by mysterious invaders believed to be spirits or supernatural beings. These raiders, later identified as the Igbo people, would attack the city and retreat into the forests, leaving the populace fearful and helpless. The warriors of Ife, despite their might, were unable to combat these invaders effectively. It was during this period of uncertainty that Moremi, a queen and wife to Oranmiyan, by the advice of the oracles offered herself to be captured by the Igbo in order to learn their secrets. Her bravery, intelligence, and foresight enabled her to uncover that the so-called spirits were, in fact, ordinary men disguised in raffia. Armed with this knowledge, she returned to Ile-Ife, helped strategize a successful counterattack, and liberated her people (Johnson, 1921).

The cultural significance of Moremi's story lies not only in her espionage and victory but also in the ultimate price she paid. Before embarking on her mission, Moremi had made a vow to the river deity *Esimirin*, promising to offer the most valuable thing in her life; her only son should she succeed. Upon her triumphant return, she fulfilled her vow by sacrificing her only son, a gesture which Olupona, (2011) describes as “the depth of her commitment to the collective good over personal desires”

This act of sacrifice is deeply rooted in Yoruba cosmology, where the spiritual and material worlds are intricately connected. Promises to deities are binding and must be honored, often through offerings or sacrifices. Moremi's willingness to uphold her promise exemplifies the high moral and spiritual standards expected of leaders. Furthermore, her actions challenge the notion of passive femininity by presenting a woman who takes initiative, demonstrates strategic thinking, and upholds communal values through spiritual devotion (Drewal & Drewal, 1983).

According to Pembarton (2000), Moremi's story has been institutionalized in Yoruba culture. She is worshipped in Ile-Ife as a deity, and annual festivals are held in her honor. Statues and monuments commemorate her bravery, and her story is taught to young people as a symbol of patriotism and sacrifice. In recent times, the legend has also been reinterpreted through drama, music, and literature, allowing contemporary audiences to engage with her legacy in new and dynamic ways.

The historical and cultural context of Moremi's story, therefore, sets the stage for a deeper understanding of her dramatic representation. It reveals the complexities of leadership, the intertwining of gender and power, and the profound spiritual undercurrents that influence personal and political decisions in traditional Yoruba society.

3. DRAMATIC REPRESENTATION OF MOREMI

The dramatic representation of Moremi Ajasoro, particularly in Duro Ladipo's play *Moremi: A Drama*, provides a compelling stage for interpreting her legendary actions through a theatrical lens. Ladipo's version is not merely a retelling of an ancient legend; it is a reimagining that engages with modern dramaturgy, African performance aesthetics, and feminist discourse as opined by Adelugba (1998). Through carefully crafted dialogue, symbolic imagery, and performative rituals, Ladipo elevates Moremi from the realms of history and folklore onto the dynamic space of theatre, where her bravery, emotional complexity, and leadership can be thoroughly examined and crafted for audiences.

In *Moremi*, the playwright structures the narrative around key events in her life, emphasizing not just the heroic climax of her espionage but also the inner turmoil she experiences as a woman torn between maternal instincts and civic responsibility. The dramatic structure follows a trajectory of rising conflict, intense climax, and tragic resolution. It is during these dramatic moments that the emotional and ideological weight of Moremi's decisions are most palpable. For instance, her decision to offer herself as a sacrifice to the Igbo is not portrayed as spontaneous heroism but as a calculated, painful, and deeply spiritual act born out of social awareness and communal loyalty (Ladipo, 1971).

Ladipo's use of traditional Yoruba oral performance techniques such as chants, incantations, call-and-response, drumming, and ritualistic dances grounds the play in African aesthetics and total theatre (Adelugba, 1988). These elements do more than decorate the narrative; they serve as channels through which cultural memory and communal values are transmitted. The audience becomes not just passive observers but participants in a ritual of remembrance and reflection. The character of Moremi often invokes the gods through songs and chants, invoking ancestral spirits and deities that highlight her spiritual depth and connection to Yoruba indigenous tradition.

By portraying Moremi's life on stage, these dramatizations serve to bridge historical memory and contemporary relevance. They turn myth into movement, history into spectacle, and folklore into inspiration, thus transforming ancient narratives into living performances that speak to modern audiences (Asante & Edu, 2018). Through the medium of theatre, Moremi's narrative becomes a performative act of empowerment, allowing her to speak to generations beyond her time and to assert the legitimacy of women's leadership in times of crisis.

4. MOREMI AS EMBODIMENT OF FEMALE AGENCY AND LEADERSHIP

At the heart of Moremi's story is her embodiment of strategic leadership, feminine agency, and moral courage. Her actions challenge traditional gender roles and redefine what it means to be a leader in times of war and crisis. Unlike many of the male figures around her who rely on physical strength and militaristic approaches, Moremi exemplifies a different kind of heroism; one that is rooted in intellect, emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, and the ability to make difficult moral choices for the greater good of society as opined by Amadiume (1987).

One of the most compelling aspects of Moremi's character is her strategic decision to allow herself to be captured by the enemy. This was not a reckless or impulsive move, but a calculated risk aimed at gathering intelligence that could lead to the freedom and salvation of her people. The playwright captures this through Moremi's introspective monologue, in which she weighs the dangers of her plan against the suffering of her people. Her reasoning is clear: *"If the men cannot win this war with strength, then I shall win it with knowledge."* This statement encapsulates the essence of her selfless leadership and a commitment to results for the greater good of her society.

This strategic mindset is further emphasized by her ability to adapt and navigate different environments. In the Igbo palace, she does not resist or attempt to escape; rather, she assimilates, observes, and waits for the right moment to act. She uses intelligence, adaptability, and humility to learn the truth about the enemy's disguise. This phase of her mission highlights the power of observation, cultural understanding, cultural adaptability, and psychological warfare; tools that are often overlooked in conventional narratives of warfare (Steady, 1981)

In most traditional patriarchal societies especially Africa, women were often expected to remain within the domestic sphere, defined by their roles as wives and mothers. Moremi, however, steps beyond these boundaries to assert herself in the public and political arenas. Her leadership is not granted by lineage or title alone, but earned through action. Even though she is a queen, her choices reflect autonomy and assertiveness. She neither seeks permission nor defers to male authority when deciding to act. There were instances where men doubted her capabilities of facing the adversaries. Her identity as a mother does not hinder her resolve; if anything, it deepens her sense of responsibility.

From a feminist perspective, Moremi exemplifies what Mohanty (2003) describes as "embodied agency" the idea that women's power is enacted through lived experiences and choices, often in opposition to structural constraints. Her action is not theoretical but lived, emerging from the realities of her context. In contrast to the often-static portrayal of African women in colonial discourse, Moremi is dynamic, assertive, and morally strong.

Furthermore, Moremi's character aligns with the concept of "motherism" as advanced by Nigerian feminist theorist Acholonu (1995) who argues that African women express power through motherhood, sacrifice, and communal responsibility. In this light, Moremi's sacrifice is not a negation of her motherhood but a powerful extension of it, thus redefining what it means to be a mother not just of one child, but of an entire people, as witnessed in her action of sacrificing her son *Oluorogbo*.

In dramatizing her life, Ladipo gives voice to a form of leadership that is often unrecognized in male-dominated historical accounts. Moremi's strength lies not in physical conquest, but in her clarity of

purpose, emotional resilience, and unwavering sense of duty as Amandiame (1987). These qualities, dramatized through soliloquies, dialogues, and ritual scenes, create a rich tapestry of feminine power that challenges conventional heroic archetypes. Moremi thus stands not only as a historical heroine but as a dramatic archetype of strategic female leadership; one who negotiates power within and beyond patriarchal boundaries. Her story invites audiences and readers alike to reimagine the role of women in history, theatre, and society at large.

5. MOREMI VERSUS PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

Moremi's story unfolds within a deeply patriarchal society where traditional gender roles are strictly defined and enforced. Yoruba society, like many other African communities, was historically organized around patriarchal norms that prioritized male leadership in politics, religion, and warfare. Women, though often powerful in their own right, were typically expected to function within the private or domestic sphere. In this context, Moremi's emergence as a central figure in a military and political crisis is both radical and revealing according to Mann, (1985).

The gender dynamics in *Moremi* highlight the tension between societal expectations and individual action. The male characters in the play, especially those in Ife including the king and chiefs, are depicted as either paralyzed by fear or overly reliant on tradition and ritual. They are unable to respond effectively to the Igbo threat, which creates a leadership vacuum that Moremi steps in to fill. This shift is significant; it reveals the limitations of patriarchal leadership in moments of crisis and opens the space for female intervention where necessary. The playwright does not portray this transition as seamless. Moremi's decision to act is met with skepticism and disapproval from some male leaders, who view her actions as transgressive. Her autonomy and boldness challenge not only military protocols but also gendered expectations of obedience and passivity. A male elder warns, "*A woman who walks into the fire may return with ashes, not victory.*" This line encapsulates the patriarchal anxiety about women who step outside their prescribed roles. Yet, Moremi defies this warning and redefines what success and leadership can actually look like.

Importantly, Moremi does not seek validation from male authority figures. She acts independently, driven by a moral conviction rooted in communal responsibility. Her promise to *Esimirin*, the river deity, is a personal spiritual commitment, not one sanctioned or guided by the male-dominated council. This spiritual autonomy is crucial (Idowu, 1962) as it demonstrates that her power is not derivative but original, grounded in her own relationship with the divine and her people. Through Moremi, Ladipo presents a critique of patriarchal structures that limit women's potential. Her story demonstrates that when given the opportunity, women are equally capable of extraordinary feats of leadership, strategy, and moral courage. The play thus serves as both a historical record and a call for the recognition and empowerment of women in all spheres of life.

6. MOREMI VIS A-VIS OTHER HEROINES

To fully appreciate the dramatic and symbolic significance of Moremi, it is useful to compare her with other iconic female figures from history and drama. These comparisons illuminate shared themes of sacrifice, resistance, and moral leadership, while also highlighting the unique cultural contexts that shape each heroine's narrative. Among the most compelling parallels are Antigone from Greek tragedy, Yaa Asantewaa of the Ashanti Kingdom, and Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba, present day Angola. Each of these women defied normative gender roles to assert political or moral agency in a male-dominated societies (Sophocles Antigone, Boahen, 1966, Heywood, 2007)

Sophocles' *Antigone* presents a heroine who defies the king's decree to uphold divine law. Like Moremi, Antigone is guided by a higher moral code that places duty to the gods and family above civic law. Her resistance is rooted in personal conviction and spiritual obligation. Both women; Antigone and Moremi face dire consequences. Antigone with death, Moremi with the loss of her son, yet their actions reframe what it means to be heroic. While Antigone's defiance is individualistic and ultimately leads to her martyrdom, Moremi's choices result in the collective liberation of her people, offering a more communal vision of heroism.

Yaa Asantewaa, a real historical figure, was the Queen Mother of Ejisu in the Ashanti Empire and led the 1900 War of the Golden Stool against British colonial forces (Boahen 1986). Like Moremi, Yaa Asantewaa stepped into a leadership role when male leaders were hesitant or unwilling to act. Her fiery rhetoric and unwavering courage galvanized her people to resist colonial domination. Both women; Yaa

Asantewaa and Moremi, embody resistance as a moral imperative and show how leadership can emerge from unexpected quarters when the survival of a community is at stake. Their stories challenge the narrative that women are passive victims of conflict and instead position them as active agents of resistance and change. Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba, who ruled in present-day Angola during the 17th century, also provides a compelling comparison. Queen Nzinga was known for her political acumen, military prowess, and diplomatic skill in dealing with Portuguese colonizers. She navigated a complex political landscape through both war and negotiation, much like Moremi infiltrated the Igbo to outwit the enemy as recorded by Heywood (2007). Nzinga's use of performance such as public ceremonies and symbolic gestures echoes Moremi's dramatic self-sacrifice and ritual commitments. Both leaders, Queen Nzinga and Moremi used cultural and spiritual tools to assert power and legitimacy.

These above comparisons reveal a pattern which shows that when women are faced with systemic injustices, they often resort to non-traditional forms of leadership that challenge existing power structures. They mobilize courage, sacrifice, and strategic thinking to achieve outcomes that benefit the collective society.

Moreover, these heroines have all been subjects of dramatic reinterpretation. Antigone has been reimagined in modern plays as a symbol of resistance against tyranny. Yaa Asantewaa's story is celebrated in Ghanaian theatre and oral poetry while Queen Nzinga has been portrayed in films and operas as a symbol of African sovereignty. Moremi's inclusion in this pantheon of female icons therefore affirms the significance her narrative and the universality of the themes it explores.

7. MODERN DAY RELEVANCE AND LEGACY

The story of *Moremi Ajasoro* remains profoundly relevant in contemporary society, particularly as conversations around gender equality, leadership, and national identity continue to evolve. Her legend, once transmitted through oral tradition, now lives on in literature, theatre, music, and public commemoration. This enduring legacy speaks to the timeless themes embedded in her narrative; sacrifice, resilience, justice, and the transformative power of women's leadership (Ogunleye, 2004).

In Nigeria, Moremi has been elevated from mythic heroine to a symbol of cultural pride and feminine empowerment. The annual *Edi Festival* in Ile-Ife commemorates her courage and sacrifice, drawing thousands of attendees who reenact elements of her story through dance, chant, and rituals as corroborated by Adepegba (1995). These cultural celebrations not only honor Moremi's memory but also reaffirm her place in the Yoruba spiritual and civic imagination. Moreover, according to Ogundiran (2020) a Statue of Liberty has been erected in honour Moremi in Nigeria which reflects the extent to which her legacy has become monumental in both literal and symbolic terms.

Moremi has been the subject of numerous theatrical productions, musicals, and literary works. An example is Austen-Peters' musical *Queen Moremi: The Musical* which brought her story to a contemporary audience with vibrant choreography, music, and visual storytelling, demonstrating the adaptability and relevance of her narrative across generations. Such productions not only entertain but also educate, fostering a sense of cultural identity and historical consciousness among younger audiences.

Moreover, Moremi's legacy has implications for leadership and governance in Africa today. In an era marked by political instability, corruption, and social inequality, her selflessness and sense of duty offer a moral example. She represents a model of leadership that prioritizes the welfare of the community over personal gain; an ethic sorely needed in many contemporary societies (Mazuri, 1986). Her example challenges both male and female leaders to embrace a more ethical, inclusive, and visionary approach to governance.

As African societies grapple with the dual demands of tradition and modernity, Moremi stands as a bridge between the past and the future. Her story embodies the values of courage, intellect, and responsibility that are crucial for nation-building. She is not merely a relic of the past but a living symbol of the transformative potential of women in all spheres of life.

8. CONCLUSION

The legend of Moremi Ajasoro is more than a tale or myth of heroism but rather a profound narrative of vision, sacrifice, and the enduring strength of women. Through dramatic representation, particularly in Ladipo's *Moremi* and other adaptations, Moremi is reimagined not merely as a figure from Yoruba mythology but as a timeless symbol of transformative leadership. Her strategic thinking, emotional

resilience, and spiritual conviction offer a multifaceted portrait of a woman who transcends the limitations of her time to protect and uplift her people.

In exploring her story, this paper has illuminated how Moremi navigates and resists patriarchal structures, exercising authority and agency in a society that typically reserves such power for men. Her journey from queen to spy, from mother to sacrificial figure, reflects a deep moral complexity and unwavering dedication to communal welfare. The dramatic elements of her portrayal further enhance these themes, employing ritual, symbolism, and African performance aesthetics to deepen audience engagement with her character. The comparative lens situates Moremi among global heroines like Antigone, Yaa Asantewaa, and Queen Nzinga, revealing shared themes of courage and moral defiance, while also highlighting what sets her apart as uniquely representative of African values and leadership traditions. These comparisons demonstrate that the struggle for justice, the assertion of female agency, and the willingness to sacrifice for the collective good are universal themes that transcend geographical and temporal boundaries.

Ultimately, Moremi's story is a call to action; a reminder that heroism is not the preserve of warriors alone, and that true leadership often requires the courage to sacrifice for a cause greater than oneself. Her legacy challenges us to recognize and elevate the contributions of women, not just in the past, but as co-architects of the present and future. As we continue to interpret her story on stage, in classrooms, and in cultural narratives, we ensure that her legacy remains alive; not just as a myth, but as a movement for women's empowerment and social transformation.

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