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## THE INTERFACE BETWEEN PSYCHIC CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL CONTENT IN AHMED YERIMA'S *MOJAGBE*

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### Abstract

*Dream is stylistically used to unveil history and connect reality with illusion in Ahmed Yerima's Mojagbe. Existing studies on dream and historical plays have focused on the supernatural and phenomenal nature of dream and sleep, sometimes ignoring the employment of dream as a technique in historical play. This paper therefore, examines dream as a technique for interrogating human psyches in order to unfold history with a view to establishing the conflict of the characters and the predicament of their families and societies. The study adopts psychoanalysis and historicism as the theoretical frameworks. Significantly, it is discovered that dream provides therapy to the character, it serves as the signifier of the character's trauma which is precipitated by the hero's autocratic, wicked and naïve behaviours. From the artistic use of dream, boundaries created by historical space and time are blurred and patterns of symbols recur as oppressed/oppressor and man/woman. The paper concludes that dream has been used as a quintessential strategy in Yerima's reconstruction of history.*

**Keywords:** Dream, Therapy, Construction of History, Ahmed Yerima.

### Introduction

#### The significance of history to drama

Drama is a product of social life like other genres of literature. This is equally true of history. It is truthful that some dramatists select materials for their creative output from happenings in real life, which in essence is history. In this sense, the dramatist, according to Jegede (1998:p.5) "becomes a prophet-seer who foresees and foretells the future. However, the structure of fiction differs from that of history in that, fiction relates a causal relation between events while history relates the temporal relation of events. The historian relates what has happened, the dramatist reveals why events might happen.

Adeniyi (2007) opines that "history which is written in the form of drama is on a higher plane, more intense, more universal and more philosophical than history which is written in a chronological manner" (p.97). Thus, it can be said that historical drama deals with a particular point in the history of the society. It gives insight into what life was like at the particular period chosen by the playwrights as focus. History, just as politics, becomes the potter's wheel that shapes and develops dramatists' talents and ideologies. History in contemporary African drama serves as an ongoing re-assessment of what happened in the past and the implication for the present as well as the future (Adeniyi, 2007). Greg Denins (1993) buttresses Adeniyi that history is not the past; it is a consciousness of the past for present purposes (p.170).

Underscoring the import of history into Drama, Soyinka opined, the purpose of existence, we insist,

is enquiry and enquiry encompasses past, present and future (2006:p.6). It has also been observed that though man may forget the past as documented in history, history hardly forgets man and that accounts for the tendency for repetitiveness of human history (Adeoti, 2007). Yerima (2003) justifies the interface between history and drama as:

*One in which the playwright attempts through his play to offer explanation to a historical event even while forcing on the historical event, his thematic preoccupation... history is an integral part of the soul of the community. And like myths and folk stories, they form that rich aspect of the cultural heritage which serves as material source for the playwright (p.61)*

From the quote above, it can be inferred that playwrights not only seek to dramatise history, but also to redefine it, interrogate it, intensify it and draw a connection overtly or covertly between the past and the present with a view to shaping the course of future actions.

Adesina (2012) highlights the usefulness of history-drama nexus as an embodiment of the soul of the community (p.4). Thus, drama, like history, is a medium for creating or recreating the struggles. Hamilton (1996) asserts that the practice of using historical subject matters in play writing stems from the common factor of experience at the basis of both drama and history (14). Both are disciplines that deal with human actions and social relations.



### **The Historical Inclination in *Mojagbe***

This is a play on king and Nigerian historical character based on the history of Oyo Empire in the pre-colonial era. But, looking at it from the postcolonial point of view, it reveals sordid human intrigues, fears, autocracy and all sorts of dehumanising atrocities that, characterize the reigns of unscrupulous and proud rulers that are prevalent in many contemporary African nations. The play records the historical deeds and, notably, the curse Alaafin Aole placed on Oyo kingdom because of the disloyalty the Oyo people demonstrated during his reign. The curse is a heavy burden on the people and the manifestation began to surface immediately after the demise of Alaafin Aole.

Consequently, the once united and revered Oyo Empire began to disintegrate in the wake of Alaafin Maku's ascension to the throne of Alaafin. Maku succeeded Aole. The disintegration begins to manifest when Afonja, the Aare Ona Kankanfo, decides to have his own autonomy and refuses allegiance to Oyo kingdom. It is a turbulent and critical time. It is at this time that Oba Aderemi Mojagbe of a neighbouring town to Oyo also decides to secede from the stranglehold of Oyo kingdom. Many inter and intra communal wars take place between Oba Mojagbe and Alaafin Maku and Oba Mojagbe wins all these wars to maintain and stand as a formidable kingdom. But his personal excessive - desire to be immortal, pride, egocentrism, highhandedness and terrorism prevent his kingdom from standing the test of time.

Prior to the collapse of his kingdom, he becomes obstinate and defiant to the voices of his people and ancestors. He is deaf to the pleas and counsels of the chiefs and priests on how peace and harmony will reign for the growth and economic stability of the kingdom. His strength and personal flaws blur his sense of reasoning and, in the end, his reign is terminated tragically.

### **The interface of Psychic Context and Historical Content**

In the play, Yerima dwells artistically on the psychological obsession of human beings, especially leaders, and their inordinate ambition and links them with illusion and societal stasis. The playwright touches the act of governance and the lapses of the ruling class. In the author's note on the play, he appeals to leaders or the political class to remember that one day they will die. Therefore, they should rule with conscience and reason for their attributes and deeds will indelibly immortalise their reign. He further explains in the note, what

informed the writing of the play was the need to present the type of leaders that forget to learn from history and how man confronts himself while searching for inner peace, which he himself often destroys in the first place (*Mojagbe*, p. 6).

It is clear from the author's note that the psychological mindsets of rulers are the focus of the play. Though the play is a reflection of actual happening in the Oyo kingdom of pre-colonial days, examples of the type of leadership portrayed in the text abound among the ruling class of contemporary Africa. It is the artistic or dramatic style the author advances in the play, which shall be the focus of our analysis and discussion. However, before textual engagement, it is pertinent to ask, why does Yerima often use plays on past kings or leaders to address the cosmic phenomenon of leadership? Bakare (2007:p.335) proffers a probable answer viz: "this postcolonial literary creation, of the exploration of existing history, is to be on the side of the downtrodden without being prejudicial to the status quo". Thus, the exploration and exposition of some integral parts of Oyo history - the tyrannical reign of Oba Mojagbe in the years before colonialism - are presented for the contemporary world so as to know the characters to emulate and those to lampoon and reject. Iji (2001) corroborates Bakare when he notes that the exploration of existing history in drama is "an attempt to reflect the agonies of the time, the hopes of the time, to show a way out of all the problems and to condemn negative forces". All these are processes to make life bearable, livable and ideal for all and sundry through historical drama.

The accuracy and pedagogy of the historical leaning of the play are immaterial to this study but the exegesis of the psychic context as the author's dramaturgy in the nexus between history and drama. In the play, Yerima penetrates the mind of the protagonist, Oba Mojagbe, through dreams to develop the plot structure and the characters. The playwright presents two dreamers simultaneously - Oba Mojagbe and Olori (the king's wife). In Oba Mojagbe's nightmare, there is an exposition of an outright rejection of his tyrannical reign by his forefathers and unborn children. The forefathers represent his ancestors - who appear as Yeye in the play while the unborn children symbolise the future generation. From his nightmare, it can be drawn that Oba Mojagbe is compelled to see the futility of his inordinate ambition and autocratic reign. His nightmare epitomises anxiety related neurosis fuelled by guilt. And he seeks to overcome his worries and guilt-laden mind. The symbolic



creations or images he encounters in the nightmare are cumbersome and worrisome. As such, he becomes fearful and jittery in his conscious mind after the dream. As part of actions to unravel the mysteries behind the nightmare, he consults his personal priest whom, he believes, is capable of placating the angry gods, ancestors and the unborn generation. He narrates the nightmare to Isepe:

*Two nights ago, I had a dream. A fearsome one I held a big party in this palace. Everybody was there. Both the living and the dead. They were eating and drinking. They all ignored my presence. As if I was not there at all. All the kings before me sat on one long bench made of ivory and gold. Each time I tried to sit with them, no one would move or give me a place to sit. I woke up worried. What does this portend my friend? (24).*

A nightmare is defined to be an unpleasant dream that can cause a strong negative emotional response in the mind, which may typically be fear and horror but also despair, anxiety and great sadness (Barret, 2007). This very nightmare has caused serious fear and psychological unrest to Oba Mojagbe because he feels nothing can shake and trouble him because of his confidence in the fetish and ritual killings he has been involved in. He has never seen any reason or occasion to doubt the efficacy and potency of his charms and fetish belief. At this crucial period, the reply or likely interpretation to the dream by his personal priest, Isepe, worsens his psychological trauma. The reply, through Ifa divination, portends death. Isepe, the priest, consults the oracle:

*Sleep is the only thing that comes close to death. But shall we sleep no more out of fear? Life they say is sweeter than death. Is this true? Where does the river go? Where does the mountain go? Ifa, the one that turns worrisome thoughts to joy, speak with me. It is I Isepe who calls you. (He throws the string shells.) Haa, Kabiyesi. It is bad. Your enemies work so that the land would reject you. Ewo! (Mojagbe, p. 24)*

As Kramer (1993: p.17) posits that nightmare regulates mood and controls the sad emotions resulting from distressing experiences of the unconscious mind. Oba Mojagbe makes frantic efforts to avoid the manifestation of the dream. But, he is proud, highhanded and obstinate. He

becomes more stiff-necked and tyrannical than before. To him, he believes that is the way he can reduce people's antagonism, hatred and opposition but he has forgotten that it is not only the living that reject him but also the dead. The more he does this in the play, the closer he gets to the webs of death. Yerima x-rays the various psychological reflections of Mojagbe's mind through the artistic presentation of nightmare to provide a similitude of the actual happenings in his reign. From the dream, his hope and aspiration look somewhat shattered. In the plot structure of the play, every other character, event and action similarly become shattered. The neighbouring villages are waging wars against Mojagbe's kingdom; the market women are protesting against the evil, disaster and economic hardship in the land. In the midst of all these uproars, the king becomes extremely disturbed physically and psychologically and he makes an inquiry to know what the future holds for him. It is from this final inquiry that he suffers the most intensive psychological or mental torture. Isepe tells him, "Eledumare... The almighty God who consents to the death of any man, before lku (death) can kill him, has consented to your death (Mojagbe, 43)

To really portray his mindset on hearing the message from Isepe, his priest, it will be note worthy to examine the previous confidence, assurance and hopes Isepe has been giving to Oba Mojagbe, which further increase and heighten his autocratic and destructive nature.

ISEPE: Go to sleep, kabiyesi. With your mother's head, I blocked the passage which death takes to come to the world. With your first wife's blood. I wet the throat of death, got him drunk. Whenever your name comes up..... in a stupor like a child with his first keg of palm wine, he shall forget your name, thus confused, he shall take the neighbour's children, not your own, kabiyesi two!

MOJAGBE: (Chuckles. Relaxed) so, Layewu can open his face a thousand times, it will do nothing to me only a child's play?

ISEPE: He can even go naked..... stark naked, kabiyesi, and not a strand of hair from your head shall feel a stretch. (22)

From the analysis so far, the confidence and hope suggested above that are dashed, have been implicitly and impliedly portrayed in the nightmare. The living and the dead have rejected Oba Mojagbe.



The resolution of the plot structure has been made in the nightmare.

Oba Mojagbe's nightmare is stylistically used by the playwright as a technique that establishes the autocratic nature of the Oba and projects the causes of the conflicts in the play. It is therefore suffice to say that nightmare is used to develop the plot and characters in the play, especially the protagonist. Another beauty of this nightmare as a structural device in the play is that it projects the characterisation of the Oba and the subsequent reprisal he is to face from the living and the dead. So, Oba Mojagbe's nightmare is a symbolic creation of reality that supports the popular maxim that the wicked cannot go unpunished. This effectively shows that the nightmare also establishes the thematic preoccupation of the author in the play.

Having examined Oba Mojagbe's nightmare, we shall proceed to analyse Olori's nightmare as part of the stylistic technique of Yerima's handling of history in drama. Olori's nightmare provides the necessary avenue to comment on the character traits of the Oba. However, these character traits are only known to the audience but not to the queen. The playwright uses Olori's nightmare to create irony, suspense and to heighten the emotional desires and aspirations of the Olori. Her dream:

*Six headless children chased me with horsewhips. And as I ran, I fell, then you (Mojagbe) came to my rescue. That was when the children turned on you. Kabiyesi. They flogged you until you bled. All my pleas fell on deaf ear. And when you became unconscious, they tore you up limb to limb. When they were done with you, the children simply looked at me and walked away (Mojagbe, 53).*

This nightmare aesthetically unravels the plot structure as the audience comes to the knowledge of the reason why the Oba is unperturbed and adamant in his autocratic tendencies. He thinks that his rituals and human sacrifices have made him immortal. This nightmare reveals vividly the reason why even future generations (unborn children) reject his kingship. Again, it reveals the depth of his callous and acrimonious behaviours. Yerima also uses the queen's nightmare to enhance dramatic irony in the play because the audience knows the reason why the Oba suffers brutal treatment from the six headless children but Olori does not know this. Dream (nightmare), therefore,

has become a motif; not only of unfolding the plot, but also of creating dramatic irony and revealing the character of the Oba as heartless, wicked, inhuman, and sadistic. Another remarkable thing in Olori's nightmare is its symbolism. The six headless children represent or symbolise two distinct sets of people. Firstly, they symbolise the victims of Oba Mojagbe's ritual killings that are ever ready to avenge Oba Mojagbe's gruesome killings. Secondly, they represent the female human reproductive organs that are responsible for fertility in women, which the Oba and his fetish priest, Isepe, have diabolically used for ritual to elongate Oba's life or to fortify him against death. All these are unknown to Olori but, through dramatic irony, the audience knows.

As a way of getting acquainted with the diabolic activities of the Oba and his priest, it will be imperative to examine the dialogue between them in connection with the symbolic creation of those six headless children in Olori's nightmare:

MOJAGBE: And that one, too. She now wants children...! I see her drinking concoction and whispering incantations in my room before coming to bed, often she cries out in her sleep. Poor child.

ISEPE: Nothing Kabiyesi, let her toil and drink. All the six children in her womb have been used to elongate your life.

MOJAGBE: Haa, Isepe. May Ogun bless you! (23)

From this dialogue, the playwright has artistically linked the symbolic creation in the nightmare with the devilish character of the Oba and his wicked priest. It reveals greatly that the king is highly self-centred and merciless concerning the plight of even his dear ones, like the second wife who is referred to as "that one" in the quote above. The Oba turns a deaf ear to her inner struggles and pleas for a child. Little wonder, the six headless children in her nightmare simply looked at her and walked away. It is glaring here, that the children understand her innocence and her inability to procreate; she is just a victim of a circumstance that is beyond her control.

Thus, it becomes humorous to the audience when they see Olori worried, restive and nagging in order to have a child that will be heir to the throne. Yerima also uses dream to portray the theme of human intrigues, wickedness and unfaithfulness



through Olori's nightmare. The art of creating and developing character through dream and dramatic irony proves Yerima to be a dramatist of peculiar ingenuity. He uses dream, especially nightmare, in this play to interrogate the reality in history. He creates the manifestations in society through the unconscious minds of prominent members of society in order to expose the fault lines and to guarantee the survival of society.

The aesthetic use of dream motif in *Mojagbe* has afforded the playwright the opportunity to expose the psychic context and mind set of the fictional characters and the human psyche over the historical, cultural and socio-political conflicts. The two nightmares from the Oba and his Olori in the text and their effects on the dreamers (characters) have proven right the psychoanalytical theories of nightmare of Freud, Jung and other psychologists. It also heightens both the psychological and physiological development of the hero, Oba Mojagbe.

### **The Aesthetic of Daydreaming in *Mojagbe***

Yerima, in his usual manner of foretelling the future or destiny of his historical characters and hero, often employs daydreaming as an aesthetic device to acquaint the audience with the outcome of the characters' actions and inactions. To most of Yerima's historical characters, like Oba Ovonramwen and Ameh Oboni after the use of nightmare and its effects, daydreaming will be employed artistically to resolve or unknit the complications that arise from the symbolic creation in the nightmare. Similarly, in *Mojagbe*, the playwright employs daydreaming to expose the consequences of Mojagbe's brutal and diabolic reign. Oba Mojagbe has a daydream, like a trance, where he encounters Layewu, the king of the Masquerade of life, and the big fearsome masquerade. The appearance of Layewu reveals the psyche of Oba Mojagbe and his affinity to autocratic and callous behaviours. It also reveals the depth of the playwright's artistic creation of demon-like characters that take delight in intrigues and wickedness.

The spirit of Layewu that is invoked by the Yeye who are superhuman in divination and in the control of the activities of all mortals plays a significant role in the text. The Yeye appeal to and beg Layewu to rescue them and the entire community from Oba Mojagbe's excesses. The appearance of Layewu on the invocation is brisk and apt to the present scenario. The playwright comments:

*Layewu, the big fearsome masquerade, comes in with fast footsteps. He dances rapidly until the Oba in a trance-like*

*dance flows with him in gestures, and movement. The dance rolls the Oba on the floor, gesticulating in fear and despair. The dance is fast and in one swift movement. Layewu reveals his face to Oba Mojagbe, who falls groping for help. Layewu disappears as rapidly as he appeared. (Mojagbe, 11)*

This is the exposition of the reflections in Oba Mojagbe's mind. Mojagbe knows the tradition of his land, that any Oba that rules not in alliance with the conventional ideal ways will face the wrath of the gods and ancestors symbolised by the appearance of Layewu. He knows he cannot escape being punished but his confidence or solace lies in his brutal ritual killings and the sweet and assuring words of Isepe, the priest. As he often feels guiltless and free from reprimand, he falls into a trance with Layewu who appears to him in order to inform him that his (Mojagbe's) end and shameful death is imminent. By the time the Oba becomes conscious from this nightmarish daydreaming, he is somewhat sceptical about guiltlessness but he later takes relief in his fetish charms. He says:

*(Panting. Still on the floor). Was this a dream? What does Layewu want with me? The king's head? Ewoo my head? Can they dare? (Slowly, he goes to the shrines in the four corners of the room). One by one, to you my fathers, I come for help. Mothers, who guard and keep watch on my soul, protect me. A king is not raw meat for the hunter's wife to throw at the dogs. They shall search and not find me. For I am the blessed black strand of hair lost in the head of spirit god (11)*

Through daydreaming, Yerima reveals the mind of Oba Mojagbe as somebody who has the premonition of the tragedy that will befall him. Moreover, he can prevent the tragedy if he wishes because the appearance of Layewu is to warn him or inform him about the fall he will experience. But he chooses to be a wicked king as a result of overconfidence in his fetish deeds and beliefs. From this scenario, daydreaming as a device in Yerima's *Mojagbe* is artistically employed to turn parts of societal history into dream. The Oyo Kingdom is culturally known to control their rulers through the process of "opening of calabash". Layewu appears in the daydreaming to herald and re-enact this cultural injunction to Oba Mojagbe to check his excesses. As culture is an indispensable ingredient



of history, Yerima uses dreams as a recurring device to redefine and piercingly re-energise the socio-political realities of the past to make them circumspectly fit into the modern world. The daydreaming, therefore, has ebulliently made history a necessary condiment for the survival of society.

### Conclusion

From the aesthetics of dream in this text, the psyche and desires of the protagonist is crystally

portrayed: the past is presented as the 'present'. The border between the physical and spiritual is blurred. Thus, time and space are collapsed and the psychoanalytical analysis and critique of the text is made possible. Similarly, a survey of dreaming as reflected in this study not only displays the stylistic device of Yerima as a historical dramatist but also; describes him as a playwright that strives to produce new things literarily from the past and known history and dramatic genre.

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