

AESTHETICS OF DAYDREAMING IN RECONSTRUCTION OF COLONIAL HISTORY IN THREE AFRICAN PLAYS

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ABSTRACT: *The nexus between history and drama accounts for the attraction shown by some playwrights in adopting history as a material for playwriting throughout the ages. Existing studies on historical plays have focused on the implacable explication of historical characters and predicaments in their societies, sometimes, ignoring the artistic techniques of the writers. This study, examines the technique of daydreaming as a pattern of dream to showcase the playwright's dramaturgy with colonial history in order to investigate the link between the conflict of the characters and the predicament of their societies. The theoretical framework is on Psychoanalysis that allows for the investigation of characters' emotions which manifest in recurring fantasies. Three of Ahmed Yerima's plays are purposively selected and critically analyzed: The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen, Ameh Oboni the Great and Mojaagbe. Daydreaming, therefore, has become a quintessential strategy for the development of the plot structure, characters and reconstruction of history.*

KEYWORDS: *Daydreaming, Historical plays, Psychic context, Fantasies, Ahmed Yerima*

Introduction

Dreams are successions of images, ideas, emotions and sensations that occur involuntarily in the mind during stages of sleep. (Grunebaum, 2000:146). Adeboye (2010:8) defines dream as a series of mental images and emotions occurring during sleep that are likely to dictate the dreamer's life. From Grunebaum and Adeboye's views, dreams appear to be caused by external powers of the supernatural since they occur when man is asleep and unconscious.

It will be pertinent to examine the functions of dreams based on the above views and others. This will be done with a view to underscoring the relationship between the functions of dreams and the dramatic characters who dream in literary texts. Vedfelt (1999:78) says that dream allows the repressed parts of the mind to be satisfied through fantasy while keeping the conscious mind from thoughts that would suddenly cause one to awaken from shock. Freud suggests, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1994) that bad dreams let the brain learn to gain control over emotions resulting from distressing experiences. Jung (1964:42) suggests that dream may compensate for one-sided attitudes held in waking consciousness. Hartmann (1995:215) says dreams may function like psychotherapy, by making connections in a safe place and allowing the dreamer to integrate thoughts that may be dissociated during waking life. Weldhorn (1988:408) opines that dreams are thought to influence the actions of the living (the dreamer) or to foreshadow events. All of these views or parts of them shall be the bedrock of the analysis of daydreaming in this paper. There are different patterns of

dream such as nightmare, hallucination, daydreaming, lucid dream, etc. But our focus shall be on daydreaming.

According to Barret (2010:140), daydreaming is a visionary fantasy, especially one of happy, pleasant thoughts, hopes or ambitions imagined as coming to pass and experience while awake. From Barret's definition, it shows that daydreaming can be constructive in some contexts. Daydreamers develop new ideas, invention and great feats through daydreaming. Creative artists, research scientist, mathematicians, physicists and others have developed new ideas by dreaming about their subject area, which eventually becomes real.

Previous scholarly engagements on dream and historical plays have focused on the supernatural and phenomenal natures of sleep and dream, sometimes, ignoring the employment of dream as technique to redefine history as this will be the main thrust of this paper. The analysis of daydreaming as a pattern of dream and its usage in Yerima's historical plays as artistic technique will be influenced by Psychoanalysis. The essence of psychoanalysis is to allow for the investigation of characters' unconscious motives and collective archetypes. Three of Ahmed Yerima's historical plays were purposively selected: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Ameh Oboni the Great* and *Mojagbe*. The plays were subjected to critical textual analysis in both content and form.

In the preface of *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, we learn that the culture of the Benin people forbids the Oba from receiving strangers during the Ague festivals. It was during this period that Consul Philips and his men proceeded to Benin to discuss business with the king. The Oba's emissaries met them and advised them to come another time since it was glaring that the Oba would not see them because it is a taboo for the king to do so. They, however, ignored the advice and advanced to the city. That led to their misfortune. Benin warriors attacked them and, in the process, Consul Phillips and six other Europeans in the delegation lost their lives. In reprisal, the British government invaded Benin Empire, looted and burned it down. Oba Ovonramwen was dethroned and exiled.

Towards the end of the play, Oba Ovonramwen daydreams where he envisions the restoration of his esteemed throne and of peace to his Kingdom. The daydreaming provides succours for him and the entire Benin Kingdom. In spite of the gloomy picture of the colonial world presented in the play, there is hope for change. In *The Trials*, Oba Ovonramwen is captured, tried and sentenced to exile. While he is aboard the British yacht about to be deported to Calabar, he dreams and the message of the dream is the springing of hopes to the lost Kingdom, people and culture of Benin kingdom from the claws of the British colonial lords.

I had another dream last night this time I saw my father, Adolo with a sweet and gentle smile, he hugged me with a reassuring grip. He beckoned me to follow.

Then as I turned to follow him, I saw my mother, Ihaya seated in her Eguae at Uselu, surrounded by little children all with little crowns. Obas all. She too smiled and then I knew that all was not lost, my beloved Bini shall never die!... And yet like a trapped fly in the palms of little children, we, you and

I, must find that little uncovered space to breathe the air of freedom one more time (*The Trials*, 79).

This daydreaming is employed here to herald a message that change is achievable and is also suggestive of reassurance of change. The symbolic creations of his father smiling at him, the smiling of his mother and the little children playing with crowns become succour and solace to the troubled mind of the Oba. The psychological trauma of the Oba through his earlier nightmares and the physical trauma orchestrated by the acrimony and intrigues of the chiefs and the merciless killing, looting and ravaging of the Benin Kingdom by the whites are summarily allayed in this daydreaming. In reality, though Oba Ovonramwen died in exile and there was a strong tussle for power between his kinsmen and Agho Obaseki on who to ascend the throne, at the end, Ovonramwen's biological son was enthroned as the Oba of Benin after his father. The vision he sees eventually becomes a reality. Yerima, from this last dream of Oba Ovonramwen, presents dream as carrier and search light for fulfilment in life. He artistically brings out a golden fleece from a protracted psychological upheaval. The stylistic use of daydreaming by the playwright is to present dream as part of the colonial history and experience of African in order to show the exploitative nature of colonialism to the world. Most especially, daydreaming is used to counter the Eurocentrism of the British report or version of Benin invasion. The colonialists have the perceptions that African kings and prominent chiefs are fetish and murderous. These perceptions are untrue accounts about African leaders. Daydreaming, as observed above, negates these foreign biases and prejudices for it shows symbolically the grandeurs (cultural and personal) that the presence of the colonial masters and colonialism have swept away in African communities.

Another remarkable inference from this daydreaming which, transcends the textual Benin Kingdom, is the optimistic view of a brighter future for African countries if we can learn from our past and brace up for both present and future challenges. From this daydream, Yerima is artistically preaching that all is not yet lost for the confused and disturbed Africans. There is, indeed, hope of a better tomorrow if they can strike a crystal balance between their past, present and future, between their unconscious and conscious minds and between their dreams and available resources.

Daydreaming is another remarkable pattern of dream Yerima employs as a device to penetrate the psychic mindset of the protagonist in order to blur historical line, mitigate the pain and trauma of colonialism and to create a link between a conscious and unconscious mind in *Ameh Oboni the Great*. Though the story re-enacts the emancipative significance of the entire gamut of the Igala colonial struggles, yet, it provides an avenue to present the prevailing socio-political realities that continue to attract critical attention in the post colonial cultural and political spaces to elucidate heroic deeds that are essential for the growth and development of contemporary African society.

The play shows the beauty, love and harmonious society of Igala people before the advent of colonialism and the spread of Islam under the leadership of Attah Ameh Oboni. The play begins at the palace of Ameh Oboni, a leader that was loved, respected and worshipped by his people until there was a religious and political contact with the

Sultan of Sokoto and the British imperialist, J. D. Muffet, who brought a major challenge and setback to the ruling class and the entire people of Igala. The socio-political contact with the outside world like the Sultan and J. D. Muffet eventually sowed a seed of disunity, betrayal and disintegration to a once united people and nation. Attah Ameh Aboni, at this period of turbulence, resisted the political inclusion and domination of the Islamist Northerners and the British imperialists but he could not withstand the military might of the British colonialists and the disloyalty some prominent members of his community meted out on him. Consequently, he committed suicide in 1956 to avert being tried by the colonial government.

In *Ameh Oboni*, Attah Ameh Oboni has a daydream in which he has a vision of a pleasant thought and dialogue with Ajamalede, a spirit character and a voice of the ancestors. He appears to Attah Ameh Oboni at the climax of both his psychological and physical struggle. The appearance of Ajamalede reveals the psychological frame of mind of the protagonist at the peak of his struggles against the encroachment of the British imperialist, J.D. Muffet. Yerima comments on the manner of Attah Oboni's death and Ajamalede's appearance as he notes:

He (Attah Ameh Oboni) puts the noose on his neck. He jerks and remains still for a while. The lights go off, and slowly come back again. Just then the drums of the Ajamalede masquerade is heard. The Ajamalede dances until it gets to the Attah whose neck is in the noose (56)

The appearance of Ajamalede is like a trance and it is to justify the link between the natural world and the world beyond. This daydreaming symbolizes two things in the characterisation in the play. Firstly, it presents Ameh Oboni as a true leader, who is loved by his subjects and even by his ancestors who are represented by Ajamalede. Secondly, it acknowledges the African belief that the dead (ancestors) are always in contact with the living to guide and shape their lives. From the daydreaming, the protagonist, Attah Ameh Oboni, envisions Ajamalede, a non-living character, at the most critical period of his life when he is dying as a victim of suicide. His suicide is enthused and admired for Ajamalede comes to initiate and inaugurate him enthusiastically to the world of the ancestors. The conversation between Attah and Ajamalede in the daydreaming attests to the rites of passage to the world of bliss that awaits the Attah after his suicide:

ATTAH:	(Slowly he walks to each one opening his face, so that only him sees it. He lets out a little yell on each one) Haa.... My fathers all. All Attahs before. Gaabaidu!
AJAMALEDE:	They have come for you. An Attah is a spirit god, he does not go alone. Follow them.... Your work here is done... you have fulfilled your destiny. Follow them... and call all your names.... So that we may mark your presence in the land of the ancestors
ATTAH:	My presence in the land of the ancestors? Then you are the figure of death.
AJAMALEDE:	Call me what you will. I am the soul of the king that helps him into the Ofe of life and the one beyond after he has lived his destiny. I am the voice, the eyes of life that

helps one to soothe the pain of transition. Must I say more?
ATTAH: No. I understand even more than when I started. Speak no more for I am ready. (pause) My destiny? So I was not forced? So the enemies did not succeed? (sense of realisation) I was just playing out my book of life? Oh what a thing of joy! I forgive them... I forgive them all... (57-58)

Though, this daydreaming is mythical because of the presence of a supernatural character, but it presents the deep psychological cosmos of the protagonist. All the collective and fragmentary images, conversation and emotions are stored in the brain mechanism of the hero (Attah Ameh Oboni). The mythical nature of this daydreaming also props up the view of Jung on mythic characters in his archetypal theory that they are divine shapers and modellers of destiny (216). These shaping and modelling roles are characterised in Ajamalede in the excerpt.

Yerima has used daydreaming as psychotherapy that brings solace and satisfaction to the inner mind of the protagonist. Artistically, it becomes a catharsis that provides relief from both psychological and physical suffering from the ignominious British imperialism and fear of internal intrigues and betrayal. The essence of the importation of this daydreaming is to show that history-drama nexus is engaged to re-present, redefine and rejuvenate African traditional beliefs and to expose the pangs of colonialism. When Attah Ameh Oboni is in dilemma over whether to surrender to British imperialism or to uphold his dignity of firm refusal of foreign domination, his daydreaming as analysed above regulates his mood and this makes his suicide to be culturally accepted, praised and adored. Little wonder, he sees the suicide as part of his glorious destiny as he follows his ancestors on the guidance of Ajamalede. He (Ameh Oboni) confirms thus.

I am the fearful python who, out of kindness, slips away into the big bush instead of crushing the children of the house he lives. I am he who commands the rains to fall in the east, and the sun to set in the west. I am like the ancestors before me, the Attah of Igala land (*Ameh Oboni*, 59)

The daydreaming, which is a mythical encounter with Ajamalede in the play, symbolises mood regulator. This is clearly evident in his happy mood and feeling of fulfilment at the end of the play. The mood, which it regulates, is not only that of Ameh Oboni but also of the entire Igala kingdom. Amana-Attah, the head of the palace chiefs, tells J.D. Muffet of the triumph that follows the suicide of Attah Ameh Oboni “..... go home, white man, the enemy you seek has won the battle. (*Ameh Oboni*, 61)

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 unknott 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. The summary of the play as a historical play presents a monarch who has offended both the living and the dead. From the beginning of the play, Oba Mojagbe is presented as a rude king who has shamefully soiled the fingers that facilitated his ascension to the throne. The "Yeyes", weird women of the conclave that represent the supernatural world and who are endowed with mystical powers to enthrone, dethrone, destroy, kill and to control the destinies of mortals, as depicted in the play and Oyo tradition, are severally disgraced and dared at the order of Oba Mojagbe. He unleashes a sacrilegious treatment on them, even in the presence of his chiefs. He is involved in the ritual killings of his own mother and wife to get fortified against death or to elongate his days. He becomes highhanded and autocratic in order to weaken people's protest and possible dethronement. He fails to understand that all human being are mortals and that there is no amount of ritual killing that can elongate life that God has decided to take. The play depicts the philosophical saying that everybody will die one day or the other and that the good or evil one does while living will live after one.

In the play, Yerima dwells artistically on the psychological obsession of human beings, especially leaders, and their inordinate ambition and link 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*, 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 (2007:335) 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 imbibe and those to lampoon and reject. Iji (2001:45) collaborates 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, liveable 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 day dreaming 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 daydreaming to develop the plot structure and the characters.

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.

Unlike Ajamalede in *Ameh Oboni*, who voluntarily or uninvitedly appears to cheer and initiate Ameh Oboni to the underworld, it is 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 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) 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 wants 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 Mojaḡbe 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 the society.

CONCLUSION

This paper submits that Ahmed Yerima handles daydreams psychologically in his historical plays to produce a form of psycho-historical drama in African dramatic literature as a new sub-genre. It can be seen that a psychic context is identified in the plays at the expense of social and historical contexts. The psycho-historical plays show the hybrid or marriage between psychology, history and drama. Similarly, in *Ameh Oboni* and *Mojagbe* where the playwright, through daydreaming, employs metaphysical characters like Ajamalede and Layewu, the playwright has succeeded in creating a new form of drama that can be called mytho-historical drama because in all the plays in this paper, the individual personal and psychological conflict is given more attention than that of the community.

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