FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVES IN THE DRAMATURGY OF AHMED YERIMA

EDITED BY:
OLUDOLAPO OJEDIRAN

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'Feministic Perspectives in the Dramaturgy of Ahmed Yerima'

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PREFACE

Women have always played active roles in any society they find themselves, especially in the area of passing down cultural values, tradition and narratives to younger generations. Ironically, while women are the upholders of culture, they are restricted in so many areas that the society sees as taboo, abomination and forbidden. Feministic Perspectives in the Dramaturgy of Ahmed Yerima is a compilation of sixteen (16) articles by different authors who examined, analysed and explored female characters and their characterisations, female aesthetics and female dynamism as portrayed and presented in selected play-texts. This collection deals with different play-texts from Ahmed Yerima's vast creative ability ranging from religion, social, historical, financial, psychological amongst many other forms that limit and subjugate the female gender within the society. These intellectually crafted articles delved into how the female gender is treated, presented and viewed within the African context especially in Nigeria. While it is agreed from the reviewed articles that the African woman needs to change her narratives, more writers are also encouraged to present women who are navigating the gendered society and putting an end to the ill-treatment meted out against women. However, the book is a compilation of over twenty different play-texts from the collection of Ahmed Yerima with the purpose of allowing readers to gaze and view from the mindset of re-writing the female story, changing the existing narratives from history to (Her)story. Indeed, this collection is just the starting point in exploration of the socio-cultural, socio-economic, political and religious challenges as portrayed by the dynamic playwright, Ahmed Yerima. However, these highlighted contributions are representatives

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of women's issues in the African society. How the bad issues under the guise of culture can be stopped and how women can be encouraged to reaching their desired goals.

About the Playwright and his Works

Ahmed Parker Yerima was born May 8, 1957 to the family of Alhaji Musa Yerima and Hajiya Saidatu Yerima. He attended St. Bernadette School for his primary education and went to Lagos Baptist Academy for his Secondary School Education. In 1981, he obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in Drama and Literature from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, osun State, Nigeria. In 1982, he proceeded to the United Kingdom and obtained a Postgraduate Diploma in Playwriting and Acting in the same year. He later furthered his education in Royal Holloway College, University of London, for his Doctoral Study. Yerima's play-texts compilation include the following:

1996

1. The Silent Gods

1998

2. The Bishop and The Soul
3. Thank You Lord
4. The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen
5. Kaffir's Last Game

1999

6. Attahiru

2000

7. The Sick People

2001

8. Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees
9. The Sisters
10. Tafida

2002

11. Yemoja
12. The Lottery Ticket

2003

13. Otaelo

2004

14. The Limam
15. Ade Ire
16. The Angel

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2006

17. Ameh Oboni the Great
18. Idemili
19. Erelu-Kuti
20. Hard Ground

2007

21. The Wives
22. Aetu

2008

23. Akwabata
24. Tuti
25. Mojagbe

2009

26. The Asylum
27. The Flood
28. The Movement
29. An Inspector Calls
30. Dami's Cross
31. Atika's Well
32. Little Drops

2010

33. Ajagunmale

2011

34. Mu'adhin's Call
35. No Pennies for Mama
36. Ipomu
37. Three Plays

2012

38. Igatibi

2013

39. Heart of Stone
40. The Sacred Mutter
41. Requiem

2014

42. Orisa Ibeji

2015

43. Abobaku
44. Aguda
45. Owiwi

2016

46. Iyase
47. The Wooden Pot
48. The Last Grain of Wheat
49. Pari

2017

50. Jakadiya
51. Odenigbo

2018

52. Drugga

2019

53. Lanpapa
54. Hendu
55. Queen Amina

2020

56. Ikutelu
57. Osun
58. Pegunrun
59. Kudeti

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60. Haze
61. Ala

2021

62. Kandege
63. Kadenge

2022

64. Three African Plays
65. Ajidewe
66. Akudaaya

2023

67. Agbala

2024

68. Ketiku
69. Layefa
70. King Liadi

2025

71. Kaakulaye
72. Ayelala

Date Unknown

73. Uncle Venyil
74. The Twist
75. The Portraits
76. Mirror Cracks
77. The Asylum

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Notes on Contributors

Oludolapo Ojediran is a lecturer in the Department of the Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Olayinka Magbagbeola is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Ekiti State University, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Femi Atteh is a lecturer in the Department of the Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Abolade Fakayode is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Theatre Arts, Atiba University, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Adenike Arinomo is affiliated with the Department of the Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Kehinde Ajibade is a lecturer at Elizade University, Ondo State, Nigeria. He also works as a media consultant.

Oluwakemi Mercy Emmanuel-Olowonubi is a lecturer in Federal University, Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria.

Wuraola Ikimot Oriyomi is a postgraduate student of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Tomiwa Adenola is a graduate of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State.

Olamide Atayese is a postgraduate student of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Omobola Oyedepo is a postgraduate student of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Ayobami Aponmade is a postgraduate student of Theatre and Film Arts Department, University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

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Lucky Fadam is a lecturer in the Theatre and Film Arts Department, University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

Suliat Tanwa Owolabi is affiliated with Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Emmanuel Bassey Eteyenaka is affiliated with the Department of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Hawau Bashiru is affiliated with the Department of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

John. Oludare is affiliated with the Department of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Mary Taiye Daniel Ph.D. is a lecturer in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Sunday Elijah Iyanda Ph.D. is a lecturer in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Basiru Adebisi is a lecturer in the Department of Performing Arts and Film Studies, Kwara State University, Malete, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Kayode, Ayodeji Kunle is a is a lecturer in Federal University, Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria.



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CHAPTER TEN

RELIGION DYNAMICS AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY IN AHMED YERIMA'S *OWIWI*

IYANDA, Sunday Elijah &
DANIEL, Mary Taiye

Introduction

Religious tensions in Nigeria have severally escalated into conflicts, resulting in socio-political instability. The challenge lies in understanding how religious differences can be managed to promote harmony rather than discord. The dynamics of religions in Ahmed Yerima's play-text, *Owiwi* therefore, explores how religious beliefs, conflicts, and interactions shape the socio-political landscape of Nigerian society. The uniqueness of African religious practices and the influences of Christianity deduced from the play-text showcase the tensions and harmonies that emerged from their co-existence. This paper adopts historical and content analysis methods. Historical method is adopted to find out unravel the age-long activities of Owiwi and contextualise, the play within Nigeria's religious landscape. Through a textual analysis of *Owiwi*, the paper explores how traditional deities and cultural rites face resistance from a growing Christian influence thus creating an arena for religious negotiation as a template for Nigerian multi-religious society. The dramatic conflicts within *Owiwi* not only reveals the impact of colonialism on indigenous faith but highlights the resilience and adaptability of

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traditional beliefs in a rapid changing world. Among other findings, Ahmed Yerima's *Owiwi* provides a critical exploration of religious interplay; revealing the challenges and possibilities of co-existing among different faiths in a diverse religious-culture as Nigeria.

Ahmed Yerima, a prominent Nigerian playwright and former Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria, is renowned for his works that delve into the delicate socio-political, religious cum cultural issues in the Nigerian society.exploring themes such as politics, culture, history, and religion. His play, *Owiwi* is a metaphoric engagement with the dynamics of religions and its implications for the contemporary Nigerian society.

Owiwi, is a play that weaves traditional beliefs with contemporary issues, reflecting the complexities of religious dynamics in Nigeria. The owl, often perceived as an ominous symbol in Yoruba cosmology, serves as a metaphorical backdrop to the narrative, highlighting themes of superstition, fear, and the clash between old and new belief systems. In the play-text, Yerima portrays characters mostly women to be entrenched in traditional religious practices, confronting the challenges posed by modernity and the encroachment of other religious ideologies. This interplay offers a microcosmic view of the broader Nigerian society, where multiple religions coexist, sometimes harmoniously and at other times contentiously.

Religion plays a central role in the socio-political and cultural development of Nigeria, influencing governance, community relations, and individual identity, (Adeoti, 2010). Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic society with the major three dominant belief systems: indigenous African religions, Islam, and Christianity. While religion has historically provided moral guidance and social cohesion, it has also been a source of conflict, with frequent clashes arising from doctrinal differences, intolerance, and political manipulation of religious sentiments, (Falola, 1998).

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Ahmed Yerima, is known for using drama to reflect social realities, particularly in the areas of history, politics, and culture. His play *Owiwi* explores the interactions and tensions among religious groups in a traditional African society, particularly Yoruba religion. The play highlights the struggle between indigenous religious practices and the influence of Christianity and Islam, reflecting the broader religious dynamics in Nigeria. Yerima employs pragmatic features such as implicature, presupposition, mutual contextual beliefs, and intentions to convey complex messages. These linguistic tools rely on shared cultural and religious knowledge, facilitating deeper understanding among characters. This approach underscores the importance of common ground in effective communication within Nigerian communities.

Despite Nigeria's constitutional provision for religious freedom, tensions between religious groups persist, often leading to violence, social unrest, and political instability, (Kukah, 2011). Scholars and policymakers have sought ways to manage religious diversity, but literature and the arts remain underutilised as tools for fostering interfaith dialogue. Yerima's *Owiwi* provides a rich narrative through which these issues can be examined in the attainment of national unity.

Synopsis of *Owiwi*

The play centres on a community grappling with the encroachment of modern values on its longstanding traditions. The play explores the tension between preserving traditional values and adapting to contemporary societal pressures, reflecting broader postcolonial challenges in African societies. This dichotomy leads to conflicts that question the essence of cultural preservation versus adaptation. Through metaphoric and proverbial language use, and symbolic elements, Yerima portrays the tensions and potential harmonies between old and new ways of life as a template for Nigeria. The

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playwright also employs cultural aesthetics such as language, rituals, and symbols not merely as artistic elements but as integral components that celebrate Yoruba heritage and underscore its resilience and adaptability. The play also emphasises the role of women in negotiating and preserving cultural identity. Female characters navigate the expectations of their community while asserting personal identities, illustrating how gender shapes the processes of identity formation in various African contexts.

Thematic Engagement of *Owiwi* with Religious Co-existence, Conflict Resolution and Cultural Identity

Owiwi, a proverbial and wisdom-laden discourse style in Yoruba tradition, serves as a key mechanism for reflecting on and addressing issues of religious co-existence, conflict resolution, and cultural identity, (Falola Toyin, 1999). As an essential part of Yoruba oral literature, *Owiwi* functions as a didactic and philosophical tool for imparting moral lessons, mediating disputes, and reinforcing communal harmony, (Abimbola Wande, 1975). This analysis explores how *Owiwi* engages with these themes within the broader framework of Yoruba wisdom tradition. Religious co-existence in *Owiwi* could be identified with how Yoruba people are known for their religious pluralism. With traditional beliefs, Islam, and Christianity co-existing within the same communities and even families. *Owiwi* reflects this interfaith tolerance through proverbs and wise sayings that emphasise harmony and mutual respect.

The thematic engagement showcase itself in the religious pluralism in Yoruba proverbs. Many Yoruba proverbs highlight the importance of unity despite religious differences. A common proverb states: *Ibi tí a ń gbé sìn Ọlọrun kan naa la ń gbé sìn Ọlọ́run méjì* (Where we worship one God is also where we worship two gods), (Bamgbose Ayo, 2006). This is a testament that religious pluralism is not a new thing and that multiple faith traditions ultimately recognise a singular

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divine reality, reflecting Yoruba accommodative spirituality. *Owiwi,* through proverbial expressions, reinforces the need for peaceful religious co-existence by discouraging exclusivist ideologies. In *Owiwi* play as expressed by Yerima, the pluralism of religion could be identified with the presence of Christianity and African religion. Adunni was a Christian despite her involvement in *eleye* kingdom. Adunni cried unto God when there was a bad dream and said: Lord Jesus, what a dream; Father Lord, God of challenges... (Yerima, 2015). Saura, Ifaoseke, and Paga to mention a few belong to African religion (Yerima, 2015).

> **ADUNNI:** Lord Jesus, what a dream! Thank you, Father it was. What kind of dream is this? A white dove fights and kills an owl. (She kneels.) Father Lord, God of challenges, the fighter for the just, the savior of the downthrodden... (Yerima, 2015, p. 69).
>
> **IFAOSEKE:** Have you not heard?After the death of Oba Idele, the whole village turned against Orunmila. No one comes here anymore. I sit alone brooding over what happened five years ago... (Yerima, 2015, p. 82).

The above shows that Adunni was Christian and Ifaoseke was an adherent of African Religion, which also established the pluralism of religion in play.

Yoruba society exhibits a high level of syncretism, with individuals seamlessly participating in both indigenous religious rites and Christian or Islamic ceremonies. The level of syncretism in Adunni could be so glaring when Ifaoseke told Adunni that she was the *iya ijo* in her church heading the women, a strange new world, but now as *iya Agba* of the owls... a world she knew better (Yerima, 2015). *Owiwi* reflects this dynamic by encouraging flexibility and understanding: No wonder a Yoruba proverb says, *Ẹni tí ó mọ òrìṣà tí ó mọ Imámù, gbogbo wọn la ń gbé lo si òrun* (He who acknowledges the *Orisa* and the *Imam,* all journey toward the same heaven) (Olatunji

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Oyin, 1984). This suggests that despite different religious practices, people share a common spiritual goal. By promoting messages of inclusivity, *Owiwi* contributes to the maintenance of religious harmony in Yoruba society.

The level of syncretism was also established from Adunni's way of life. She was a Christian and also well rooted in African religion. This could be seen the following conversations:

ADUNNI: ... Father Lord, God of challenges, the fighter for the just, the savior of the downtrodden... grant me protection, grant me pure wisdom (Yerima, 2015, p.69).

ADUNNI: Good evening, wise one Old man, Ifaoseke, servant of God of truth, the God of wisdom, the pure one, the great God Orunmila, I greet you (Yerima, 2015, p. 81).

IFAOSEKE: With either bird, you are head. As Iya Ijo in your Church, you head the women, a strange new world, but now as Iya Agba of the owls, a world you know so well. (Chuckles.) You are head of everything... (Yerima, 2015, p. 125).

Adunni could be seen to be here and there. In the Church and in the world of owls. This shoes the level of syncreytism. The place of Christianity rivaling with African religion in Owiwi may not as all that be glaring, but the struggle of Adunni to break the yoke that binds her to a doom of endless fight could be related to it. Saura who is the devil was struggling with her that she could not go to anywhere, no wonder the way the discussion went:

ADUNNI: (In a whisper.) Save me, Lord. Save me. Arinu rode Olu moran okan, save me. I feel the dove swell in me. But the owl raises too. Let me soar, Baba, I beg you. My spirit is about to explode in a hurricane of doom. (In a whisper.) I am afraid. But in your name, I say, depart oh strange one. Depart!

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SAURA: To where? Woman, I say to where? You talk of fear. Of whom? What can possibly frighten the queen of the clan? Is it blood or its smell that frightens you? Or is it the chimes and tumtum of your church bells that tingle your veins already. Woman take your title and go rule both worlds! Either way, I shall be there with you (Yerima, 2015, p. 125).

The above shows when Adunni was no longer interested in the way of the owls and wanted to go with the Lord God, but Adunni was despirate and she was not goin back

Harmonious co-existence among the adherents of the faiths in *Owiwi* could be deduced from Ifaoseke, Adunni, and Saura's dialogue.

IFAOSEKE: (Esu goes to Orunmila and whispered into his ear.) Come closer, woman. (ADUNNI moves closer to IFAOSEKE.) Stand before us, woman, and we shall tell you. (SAURA unties the osugbo from PAGA who still lies dead on the floor. With both of them tying it back on ADUNNI. Steps back.) Behold the daughter of Iya Agba

ADUNNI: Me?

IFAOSEKE: Yes, you.

SAURA: The very one that you seek.

ADUNNI: But my father was Adefila, the timber tree cutter. The Christians fondly called him Baba Aladura.

SAURA: Yes Ogini-Agbegi l'odo, son of Adefila. He was the same person.

This shows that they have all been living harmoniously and they could still peacefully co-exist. This could be seen from their interaction with Adefila who happens to be the father of Adunni.

Owiwi serves as a crucial rhetorical tool in Yoruba conflict resolution, functioning in both informal and formal mediation

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processes. Elders, traditional rulers, and religious leaders often employ *Owiwi* to guide disputants toward peaceful settlements. A Yoruba proverb that encapsulates this principle states that: *Ọ̀rọ̀ kì í tán níbè, a kì í gbọ́ fìtílà ròhùn* (Disputes are never truly exhausted, just as the lamp does not make noise). This implies that conflict is an ongoing part of human interaction, but it should be approached with wisdom and patience. *Owiwi* often employs narratives and metaphors that emphasize compromise, patience, and the long-term benefits of peace over discord. Traditional Yoruba dispute resolution mechanisms prioritize reconciliation over punitive measures. *Owiwi* plays a vital role by offering proverbial wisdom that encourages offenders and victims to reach amicable settlements. One example is: *A kì í bá èèyàn jà kó má bọ́ sí ilé* (One does not fight with another and refuse to return home). This emphasises the impermanence of conflict and the necessity of restoring broken relationships. Through such proverbs, *Owiwi* fosters a communal approach to justice rather than an adversarial one.

It should be understood that *Owiwi* is integral to the preservation of Yoruba cultural identity. It encodes moral values, communal ethics, and historical consciousness, thereby sustaining Yoruba worldview and philosophy. The Yoruba worldview is deeply embedded in proverbs that emphasize respect, diligence, and communal solidarity. The Yoruba proverb went further to say: *Ìlú tí kò sí Ògbóni, a kì í pe èyàn sínú* (A town without elders lacks direction), (Lawuyi, 2000). This illustrates the importance of elders as custodians of wisdom. Through *Owiwi,* younger generations inherit a sense of identity rooted in respect for tradition and communal governance.

In the area of oral traditions, *Owiwi*, serve as repositories of Yoruba history and indigenous knowledge. Proverbs and wise sayings encapsulate past experiences and ensure their continuity. The proverb: *Òwe l'ẹ̀ṣin òrò, bí òrò bá sọnù, òwe la fi ń wáa* (Proverbs are the horse of speech; when speech is lost, we retrieve it with proverbs),

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highlights the centrality of *Owiwi* in knowledge preservation. By sustaining indigenous epistemologies, *Owiwi* strengthens Yoruba cultural identity in the face of globalization and cultural erosion.

In view of the above, *Owiwi* remains a vital aspect of Yoruba wisdom tradition, deeply engaged with themes of religious co-existence, conflict resolution, and cultural identity. Through its rich proverbial expressions, *Owiwi* fosters interfaith tolerance, facilitates peaceful dispute resolution, and reinforces the Yoruba cultural ethos. As modernization and urbanization continue to challenge traditional modes of knowledge transmission, the role of *Owiwi* in promoting Yoruba values remains crucial.

Dynamics of religions as portrayed in Ahmed Yerima's play *Owiwi*

The dynamics of religions in the play *Owiwi* could be well understood as it was displayed by a character named Adunni. The blending of different religious beliefs and practices such as African religion and Christianity were demonstrated. Adunni, is a character that demonstrated this when in a whisper said "Save me, Lord. Save me. *A rinu rode, Olu moran okan*, save me. I feel the dove swell in me. But the owl rises too. Let me soar, *Baba*, I beg you. My spirit is about to explode in a hurricane of doom. I am afraid. But in your name, I say, depart oh strange one. Depart!" (Yerima, 2015, p. 125) Adunni blends well in the two religions.

Adunni, a member of the owls could be seen calling on the Lord Jesus when she had a fearful dream that involved a white dove and an owl. It was there a white dove killed an owl which was regarded as a fearsome bird (Yerima, 2015). Adunni kneels down and prayed to the Lord God for protection and wisdom because it portends bad omen. She was a Christian and at the same time a member of witches. Religious syncretism practiced in the play shows the diverse religious landscape where indigenous religion co-exists with Christianity. The

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dynamics of religions could be seen in the co-existence where the two lives harmoniously.

The co-existence of religions could be recognized when Adunni was initiated into the world of Owls at the age of ten years. She practiced the two religions until when she retraced her step back to the God of Christianity.

> **ADUNNI:** In my sleep one night when I was ten years old, an elderly woman covered her face with the dish of my favourite meal, pounded yam and efo riro. I ate to my fill. And after, she told me to follow her, and without a thought I flew. When we got there, there was a feast with everybody doting on me (Yerima, 2015, p. 124).

The co-existence was well cemented without much problems among the adherents

She was also the women leader in the Church, when she forsook her traditional way at the point of becoming the leader of the owls (Yerima, 2015, p. 125). In religions, indigenous spirituality is also known to be an essential part of governance and social order (Ukah, 2010). The indigenous larders in *Owiwi,* turned to spiritual consultation, rituals, and ancestral guidance in making decisions. Justice is not based on human logic but deeply tied to the will of the gods and ancestors. This shows that spiritual forces influence human affairs, and not recognizing them could lead to societal disorder (Mbiti, 1969).

The dynamic of religion in *Owiwi* shows that Christianity symbolises modernity and change. Although, the change is not easily integrated into the existing beliefs system. Christianity brings about new concept of justice, morality, and leadership that is sometimes challenging the traditions upheld by indigenous beliefs (Falola, 2005). Christianity is seen to be representing the broader transformation of African societies where religious conversion leads to cultural shifts. The dynamics of religions mirror the real-life experience of many

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Africans who live in a dual-religious society, practicing both Christianity and indigenous beliefs in different contexts.

In the light of the above, Yerima's *Owiwi* presents religion as a fundamental force that shapes identity, leadership, and justice. It also portrays the complexities of religious co-existence in an evolving society. *Owiwi* therefore, provides a critical reflection on the role of religions in African tradition and Modernity.

Ahmed Yerima offers several poignant and valuable lessons for Nigerians, particularly in the realms of communication, cultural preservation, and societal cohesion. In the realm of effective Communication through Shared Knowledge, the play underscores the importance of "Common Ground"-shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions in facilitating effective communication, (Salawu, 2024). Characters in *Owiwi* utilise features such as implicature, presupposition, and mutual contextual beliefs to convey messages that resonate within their cultural and religious contexts, (Salawu, 2024). This highlights the need for Nigerians to recognise and leverage shared experiences and knowledge to enhance understanding and cooperation. In the area of cultural preservation, the play emphasises the importance of preserving indigenous cultures and religions amidst globalization and the dominance of foreign religions. It calls for a balanced appreciation of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. Understanding and showcasing the conflicts arising from religious intolerance, Yerima advocated for mutual respect and understanding among Nigeria's diverse religious groups.

thinking. The narrative in the play encourages individuals to question blind faith and resist manipulation by those in positions of religious authority, promoting a more informed and rational approach to spirituality. Socio-political awareness and critique cannot be undermined in the areas of lessons that could be learnt from the play. Yerima's works, particularly *Owiwi,* often reflect on societal issues, offering critical viewpoints on governance and societal

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dynamics, (Said and Funk, 2001). This encourages Nigerians to engage in introspection and dialogue concerning socio-political challenges, fostering a more informed and proactive citizenry.

Owiwi imparts lessons on the necessity of shared understanding for effective communication, the importance of cultural preservation, and the value of socio-political engagement, all of which are pertinent to fostering unity and progress in Nigerian society. Through *Owiwi,* Yerima imparts several lessons such as: the importance of acknowledging and respecting traditional beliefs, the necessity of fostering inter-religious dialogue to prevent conflicts, and the value of embracing cultural syncretism to promote unity. These lessons are crucial for Nigeria's ongoing efforts to build a cohesive society amidst its rich diversity.

In the light of the above, Ahmed Yerima's *Owiwi* serves as a reflective piece on the dynamics of religion in Nigeria, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities that arise from the country's religious diversity. The play encourages a deeper understanding of cultural identity and promotes the idea that harmonious coexistence is achievable through mutual respect and acceptance.

Conclusion

Ahmed Yerima uses *Owiwi* to explore the religious dynamics in Nigerian society, reflecting on the tensions, interdependencies, and conflicts that arise within a multi-religious nation. The play serves as a microcosm of Nigeria's broader religious landscape, illustrating the ways in which traditional African spirituality, Islam, and Christianity interact, often in competition but sometimes in harmony. Through its thematic concerns, characterisation and dramatic structure, *Owiwi* presents an intricate narrative that highlights the importance of religious tolerance, mutual respect, and the dangers of religious extremism. *Owiwi* is not merely a dramatisation of religious conflicts but a call for introspection and dialogue. It compels Nigerian society

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to rethink its approach to religious diversity, urging a shift from antagonism to acceptance. Yerima's play teaches that while religion can be a source of division, it can also be a unifying force if approached with openness and understanding. The lessons embedded in *Owiwi* remain relevant in contemporary Nigeria, where religious intolerance continues to pose challenges to national cohesion. By embracing the values of respect, dialogue, and coexistence, Nigerian society can transform its religious dynamics into a source of strength rather than strife.

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About the Book

Feministic Perspectives in the Dramaturgy of Ahmed Yerima is a compilation of articles by different authors who examined, analysed and explored female characters and their characterisations, femininity, female aesthetics and female dynamism as portrayed in the selected play-texts of Ahmed Yerima. The intellectually crafted articles delved into how Yerima views women culturally, historically, socially, religiously, economically amongst others and how these women are presented to and navigated within the society at large. While women narratives come from different perspectives, the need to change the subjugation and ill-treatment of the women within the society is emphasised in most of the articles. However, the text with a compilation of over twenty analysed play-texts of Ahmed Yerima portrays the gendered culture of the African women who are mostly in search of identity and societal value for the women folk.

About the Author

Oludolapo Ojediran is a Graduate of the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, where she holds her B.A (Bachelor of Arts) and M.A (Master of Arts) Degrees. She obtained her Doctorate Degree from Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom. She is currently a lecturer at the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Department of the Performing and Film Arts
University of Ilorin

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