

FEMINISTIC
PERSPECTIVES
IN THE
DRAMATURGY
OF
AHMED YERIMA

EDITED BY:
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'Feministic Perspectives in the Dramaturgy of Ahmed Yerima'

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL AESTHETICS OF THE FEMININE POWER IN AHMED YERIMA'S *ÒSUN*

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IYANDA, Sunday Elijah &
ATTEH, Femi Yinka

Introduction

The African society represents a socioreligious landscape characterised by diverse cultures and traditional practices that aesthetically, influence gender relationship. In Nigeria, both Islam and Christianity coexist alongside indigenous ancient beliefs, which emphasise purity, spiritual cleansing, and the utilisation of feminine power as instruments for regeneration. Therefore, this study explores the religious and cultural aesthetics of feminine power in Ahmed Yerima's *Òsun*. This study adopts the descriptive research design and content analysis with Arnold Berleant's Cultural Aesthetics Theory (2005) to foreground the study. The descriptive design is to conceptualise issues on the silent struggles of women, especially as contextualised in Yerima's *Òsun*. Findings reveal that women have developed a feminine force capable of intercepting and reprimanding the influences of patriarchal tendencies within society's culture and religions. It is observed that these spiritually driven socio-religious practices have resurfaced through various avenues. Characters like Apena and Iyemoja should be emulated for supporting justice for

tradition, and the mothers of the night's effort at destroying lecherous tendencies like King Ogidan for plaguing women and society. Ahmed Yerima's play, *Òsun* offers a compelling narrative that underscores the religious and cultural aesthetics of feminine power within Yoruba cosmology. To further explore the theme of feminine power in African drama, it is recommended that scholars conduct comparative studies on similar portrayals in other playwrights' works. Theatre practitioners should also engage in productions that celebrate female agency in African spirituality.

African culture and religions have always approached feminine issues and challenges with a lot of sensitivity and fear. This paper addresses the issue of culture within the African Context African culture is being relegated to a lowly position to the extent that it is even despised by the very same people who are supposed to preserve it. To be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious. Little wonder Mbiti (1969, p. 20) says "Africans are notoriously religious". He goes further by identifying religion in five aspects of culture which include beliefs, practices, ceremonies, festivals, and religious objects, and places values and morals on religious officials and leaders. In a nutshell, religion is found in all aspects of African life.

Since the arrival of the Christian missionaries into Africa, most blacks have the belief that everything said and practised by the Christians is the best; this has affected and is still affecting the African culture negatively. In African traditional religions, African women play significant roles in places like ritual ceremonies; and spiritual leadership, therefore, contributing positively in various capacities. Awolalu and Dopamu (2005, p. 6) emphasise the "leading roles of women in traditional religion in areas of worship, mediums, diviners and healers coupled with other special services which show that women are highly recognized and significant in religious services of their communities". Ahmed Yerima corroborated this assertion by

introducing the three elderly and powerful women namely Kori, Aje and Iyemoja into his play; *Òsun*.

Conceptual Clarification

Religion: Like many academic disciplines such as sociology, philosophy and psychology, “religion lacks a universally accepted definition” (Eze, 2016, p. 13). Omoregbe (1993, p. 13) asserts that, religion is conceived and defined differently by different people, highlighting its subjective and varied interpretations”. The absence of consensus reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of religion. It is stated further that “religion derives from two Latin words as its roots: *ligare* (meaning to bind), *relegere* (meaning relationship), thus the etymology of the word “religion” shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons; the human person, and the divine person believed to exist. (Omoregbe, 1993, p. 13).

Also, Momoh (2000, p. 16) opines that defining a discipline or a subject is like controlling the executive position in any viable organisation, say a state or an executive president or an executive prime minister of a country calls the shots. He further views that anyone who controls the definitions and you have a pretty good clue who controls everything else”; and the Chinese proverbs more or less agree with “he who defines the terms, wins the arguments”. Anyanwu (2004, p. 9) asserts that “religion is human interaction with the supernatural to cope with life's crises”. Okereke (1983, p. 75) is of the opinion that “religion is a link between man and God”. He believes that religion is the sum total of man's relation with God and the transcendent.

Furthermore, Oxford dictionaries define religion as the belief in and or worship of a super-human controlling power, especially a personal God or gods. Others such as Ekwunife (1991, p. 20) says religion is a man's awareness and recognition of his dependent

relationship on a transcendent being, the wholly other, nameable or un-nameable, personalised or impersonalized expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethical or moral behaviour". Defining religion has been a controversial and complicated issue in religious studies with scholars failing to agree on any one definition. Religion is an effort by humans to search for meaning, to understand reality and to place themselves in a relationship with reality. Religion came as a result of man's quest to seek answers to the unknown. It can be concluded that religion is man's attempt at understanding reality about phenomena through beliefs and practices.

Culture: Taylor (1920, p. 3); the first anthropologist, defines culture as "the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society". He was the first to specify that culture is learned and acquired, as opposed to being a biological trait. Geertz (1973, p. 18) in his words, defines culture as "the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions". This is another anthropological definition of culture.

Durkheim (1895, p. 6) gives a sociological definition of culture as the totality of social institutions, norms and values that shape the behaviour and attitudes of individuals within a society. Blumer (1969, p. 19) in his sociological definition of culture, opines that "culture refers to the shared, learned and transmitted behaviour, values and norms that characterises human group". Adorno (1951, p. 4) defines culture philosophically that culture is the sum total of the artefacts, values, and norms that are produced and reproduced within a society, and that shape the ways in which individuals perceive, think and behave". The various definitions given above show the multifaceted and complex nature of culture. They also highlight how different disciplines and scholars approach the concept of culture from unique or different perspectives.

Reimagining Cultural Aesthetics

Aesthetics is a broad field with different categorisations in positive, negative and neutral conceptions of art. For instance, Graham (2005, p. 3) states, that the “most familiar question in philosophical aesthetics is this: what is art? Why is this question worth asking? The answer has to be that art matters”. Interestingly, Berleant (2012, p. 5) expresses that “despite perceptual sensitivity, a lively imagination, wide experience with aesthetic matters that extend beyond one's native culture, and the educational background to focus and direct that experience, the influence of cognitive prejudice may be more pervasive and powerful still”. The perception of an artwork is linked to its aesthetic value, which can be understood through the artistic styles and cultures that shaped it.

Africa's cultural belief systems when examined alongside the influences of diverse foreign religions, manifest as culturally rich environments distinguished by a vast array of artistic expressions and an extraordinary degree of creativity. This interplay of indigenous and external influences contributes to the dynamic cultural landscape which showcases Africa's intricate synthesis of tradition and innovation. From Berleant's (2005, p. 170) point of expression, “different cultural traditions in the arts have become increasingly familiar, ethnic tradition has emerged as a powerful force in cultural identity”. *Òsun* encompasses a diverse range of cultural identities recognised by the Nigerian people. Osun State, the *Òsun Osogbo Festival*, and Ahmed Yerima's play, *Òsun*, are just a few elements that contribute to Nigeria's diverse identity. In *Òsun*, Yerima portrays *Òsun* as both a character and a cultural experience, reflecting the nuances of the society in which it is set.

In addition, Yerima's conception of cultural aesthetics encompasses three distinct analytical strands: the environment, the cultural ethos, and artistic expression. This framework is characterized by a clarity of form and detail that reflects the intricate

interplay of gender dynamics and the application of cultural aesthetics within the context of Nigerian theatre and drama. These elements collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural landscape and its representation in the performing arts. Johnson (2004, p. 35) submits that:

Clarity of form and detail..." will ease the chance for appreciation of the performance by the audience; as well as add to what is theatrical about the art. "Complexity of composition" can be linked to conflicts in the drama, without which, the drama would lack suspense, tension and interest; while "balance and symmetry", are indispensable in determining the aesthetic positions on the stage directorially; and in the placements of figures and props from a rather *mise-en-scene* and *tableau* perspectives.

Johnson's perspective emphasises that the essence of the people's culture and the art within it reflects the playwright's "complexity of composition." *Yerima* incorporates both the material and immaterial aspects of Yoruba culture, setting *Òsun* background apart from other cultural environments. The aesthetic framework of *Yerima's* vision is symmetrically balanced to align gender dynamics with cultural representation.

Consequently, Ahmed *Yerima's* cultural aesthetic of the feminine power in *Òsun* essentially distorts the art of patriarchal tendencies within society. Berleant (2005, p. 170) opines that "the influence of culture on art, indeed the formative power of culture, is even more true of the environment". However,

We cannot evade the realization that, despite the intent and efforts of phenomenology and the psychology of perception, there is no pure experience. And in the present context, we can infer that there is no pure aesthetic experience. We look at the world metaphorically, so to speak, through a multitude of superimposed filters: the filters of language and, even more

comprehensively, the ontology and metaphysics of our culture. (Berleant, 2012, p. 5).

Art, in general, relies on the phenomenological and psychology of perceptions which are rooted in its structural composition—both form and content—allowing it to achieve a certain level of acceptability within the context of its originality to society. This suggests Ahmed Yerima's aesthetic value of art derives its uniqueness from the people's cultural belief system. Each society generates art that is unique to its cultural beliefs, serving as a means to convey its worldview and familiarise others with its belief system.

The Relationship between Religion and Culture

Sociologists and Theologians agree that religion operates within the context of culture and that religion is a primary influence on culture. Religion is influenced by culture and also triggers cultural change. Though culture can be defined in various ways as discussed above, most simply, it is the behaviors and beliefs of a group of people. Religion is also a set of behaviours and beliefs though it typically focuses on the spiritual aspects of life.

Religion serves as a cornerstone of identity, shaping individuals, beliefs, behaviours, and communal interactions. Conversely, culture provides the context within which religion develops and is expressed, reflecting the values, norms and traditions of a particular society.

Synopsis of *Òsun*

The play opens with King Ogidan Arogunmasa, the King of Ijekun Odo, undergoing a ritual that will prolong his life and reign by three decades (He has spent just three years on the throne). Unknown to King Ogidan, he is under a curse placed on him because of his father, former King who rapes a maiden and also enslaves the

members of the maiden's family. The curse is that no descendant of the king will reign for more than two years. This is the reason why King Ogidan decides to ward off the curse through supernatural forces that sanctioned the curse. Unfortunately, contrary to the assurance given to the king by priest Ikusanri, the officiating priest that the ritual was a success, it was indeed a failure. The affairs of the town became awry, the reason why the annual festival of Orisa ode i.e. Òsun festival became a failure that year. For the town to become peaceful again, the help and intervention of the deities are sought, but then another royal secret is revealed, King Ogidan is suspected to have raped a maiden named Òsuntayo (the daughter of one of the chiefs named Otun) to death or might have used the maiden for ritual for tenure elongation. This provokes the anger of the already tense environment. So, the cleansing ritual items given to Òsun are rejected by the goddess and this signifies danger. This is a sign that danger is ahead in the town.

Feminine Power Aesthetics in Ahmed Yerima's *Òsun*

After three years on the Throne, King Ogidan Arogunmasa, the King of Ijekun Odo, uses ritualistic practices to prolong his life and reign for three decades. Unknown to King Ogidan, he is under a curse placed on him because of his father, the former king, who violated a maiden while on the throne and enslaved members of the maiden's family. The curse is that no descendant of the king will reign for more than two years. This is the reason why King Ogidan decided to ward off the curse through supernatural forces believed to be capable of sanctioning the curse. Apena breaks the foreshadowing of impending danger.

APENA: ... The air is stale... Three mothers of the night sit by a cooking pot with rich sanyan and the crown as ingredients in their boiling pot. (Yerima, 2020, p. 201).

The introduction of the influential mothers of the night is a

gradual incorporation of feminine power that reeks of imminent doom. The three elderly and powerful women in the play namely; Kori, Iyemoja and Aje show their spiritual power here.

During the festival of Oriṣha odo Òsun or Odun Yeye, the people celebrate the Yeye Odo of the Ijekun River, and they do this by having an Arugba Òsun Carry calabash to the river. Interestingly, Saura, Eṣu priest also showed the importance of the power of both mother of night, goddess and a woman's restless spirit.

SAURA: Did you give the mothers of the night their gifts?
Even your daughter's spirit is restless.... Òsun heaves, her
anger festers... (Yerima 2020, p. 208).

Through Apena's reactions, it is expressed that with the machinations of the gods, things begin to fall apart and Ijekun Odo is plunged into darkness because "Orisa Odo Òsun and Iyemoja were turning around turning around until the once peaceful river became a turning whirlwind" (Yerima 2020, p. 218). These feminine powers of the gods caused the water to rise, and "with arms outstretched from the river. It picked Samu and dragged him down the river" (Yerima 2020, p. 219). Lastly, "Igba Òsun which the Arugba had taken to the river the day before. The calabash... was returned (Yerima 2020, p. 220).

Furthermore, the cultural and religious aesthetics of the people's tradition diminishes as the Arugba is expected to be pure so that the sacrifice is acceptable before the gods. After carrying the calabash, she is supposed to be happy but this is not so and this raised questions about her powers as Arugba.

ÌYÁ ODÒ: Kabiesi, the Arugba has fainted. She bleeds from
everywhere as if she has been defiled. (Yerima, 2020, p.
221).

Ifadeyi also confirms that great consultations must be before the Arugba is chosen because Ifa's choice is "a girl that would bring peace and progress to the land, a virgin as pure as a dove" (Òsun, 2020, p. 222). In preparing her for the spiritual process,

ÌYÁ ODÒ: ...We took her first to Iyemoja asking for protection. We begged her to convince her sister Òsun to accept and bless our offerings, then we went before Ìyá olóde, whom we fondly refer you as Kori, the mother of abundant blessings, and finally Aje, the orisa of wealth and plenty... (Yerima 2020, p. 224).

The feminine power is pronounced during the rites the Arugba has to undergo before the procession must start. The ordeal of the defiled Arugba was shared and her reluctance to carry the calabash also validated her defilement.

ÌYÁ ODÒ: "She was never possessed... I knew that the purity of the Arugba has been compromised" (Yerima 2020, p. 225)

At long last, the Arugba dies due to the power she lost, the power linked to her virginity that could make her connect with the goddess Òsun gone.

Aesthetics of feminine power is further expressed by the mothers of the night. The trio thwart the fortification that King Ogidan embarked on at the opening of the play. The trio unmask the king as "a crooked man with the crown... an epitome of evil" (Òsun, 2020, p. 245). For exposing the "Arugba" to defilement instead of protecting her, he was eventually executed shamefully courtesy of the three elderly and powerful women in Yerima's play; Òsun. Also, more intriguing is the fact that Esu also transformed into a woman shape to solve the request brought by Ọtun. According to Saura, "my master is shapely shapeless. He takes the shape and turn the sides that concerns a matter to it" (Òsun, 2020, p. 229). To loosen the entanglement of which Ọtun daughter's death could be revealed, more sacrifices have to be made to the mothers.

SAURA: Too many women have their fingers in your matter.
Send more gifts to the mothers of the night one more

time. There is a cloak they must pull from the face of the killer of your daughter, and then all will be revealed. (Yerima 2020, p. 230).

Ahmed Yerima's conception of feminine power is that tool used to intercept the lecherous tendencies of patriarchy in society while consoling and restoring the importance of a woman's purity in ensuring national growth. Iyemoja reacts regardless of the Arugba's unprecedented experiences.

Iyemoja: Òsun weeps angry. Iyemoja consoles her. Why did you send a broken spirit to carry the sacred calabash to the riverside for Òsun? (Yerima 2020, p. 231)

The three elderly women decide to use their feminine powers to mete out punishment to balance the scope of reality and restore order in society. This is the reason why King Ogidan is rejected because of his approach to warding off the curse from his father's generation.

Conclusion

By portraying Osun as a divine and influential figure, the play reaffirms the significance of women in both spiritual and societal leadership roles. Yerima's dramatisation utilised the characters of the mothers of the night, Esu and the goddesses to challenge patriarchal viewpoints by illuminating the resilience, wisdom, and authority inherent in African traditions' feminine aspects. We recommend that future studies probe into the intersection of gender, spirituality, and performance in African drama to enhance the understanding of indigenous feminist narratives. Furthermore, theatre practitioners should persist in staging productions that honour feminine power within cultural and religious contexts. Fostering continuous academic discourse on African feminist aesthetics in drama will contribute to preserving and promoting these narratives in contemporary society.

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