

Dramatisation of Historical Realities for Ethnocultural Development: A Reading of Ahmed Yerima's *Atthiru*

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Abstract

*The thematic thrust of dramatic narratives among most African playwrights usually highlights ideological and ethnocultural experiences between the coloniser and the colonised. Therefore, the theatre space provides the avenue where such colonial experiences are re-enacted, and challenged. Ahmed Yerima's theatrical endeavor follows in this pursuit, with creative dimensions. His representative play - *Atthiru*, is examined in this paper to provide an ethnocultural perspective to the historical realities of leadership, governance, socio-economic and communal engagements, that depict the African enactment of history, and yet prevalent in contemporary Nigeria. New Historicism theory is utilised to situate the plays in context, with thematic discourse, characterisation and dramatic techniques deployed for elucidation. The study accentuates drama plays, as veritable tools for historical reconstruction and development that depict leadership assertion, conflicts of tradition, religion, identity, power and economic sustenance of the past and present, in contemporary Nigeria.*

Keywords: Coloniser, Colonised, Historical Realities, Ethnocultural, New Historicism

Introduction

Africans did not hear about drama from Europe and America. Drama has existed in various forms in Africa long before Africa's contact with the outside world. The basic genres of drama in Africa before her contact with outside world include, rituals, festivals, dance, among others. These robust dramatic forms have overtime grown in to the contemporary African Dramatic endeavours. Modern African drama is a child of two worlds. While it is rooted in the rituals and festivals of Africa it also borrows forms and styles from Europe and America.

Thus, unarguably, the indigenous Nigerian drama rose from rituals and festivals performances, as evidenced in African theatre history. It is believed that ritual is a very significant factor in masquerade theatre. Essentially, ritual in itself is, connected largely with religion and performance. Early Nigerian theatre and indeed drama did not submit to the Aristotelian model as most others are. This is because drama is largely more complex and culture based than Aristotle could ever have imagined. Within the traditionalist African context,

it becomes difficult to differentiate drama from ritual because if the context of the performance is to be taken into consideration a ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency. Drama evolved from ritual and, in some cases, it is also a part of the ritual enactment as there are situations where dramatic traditions have come to being alongside rituals without any dichotomy from their sources.

The performance of the dramatic form in these individual regions or ethnic nationalities consisted of a different formation before the advent of colonialism. These different groups utilised the dramatic genre to showcase their lineage's history. Though crafted in European languages, African drama comes out uniquely African. The dramatic genre has become a major tool in the hands of Africans to chronicle the historical realities of Africa. Thus, a foremost use of drama in Africa is to record historical realities of the continent on stage. As a result, an interested individual can have an understanding of Africa and its historical realities by studying African dramatic literature which dramatised the major historical landmarks in the continents. Events like the pre-colonial era, transatlantic slave trade activities, and colonialist domination, anti-colonialist struggles as well as postcolonial rupture being experienced by vast majority of African nations.

Statement of the Problem

A plethora of critical works has been done on the works of playwrights like Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark, and Femi Osofisan while scanty works exist on the use of New Historicism as a theory for the analysis of Ahmed Yerima's history inclined works.

Aim and Objective

The aim of the work is to examine Ahmed Yerima's portrayal of historical reality colonialism of with a view to draw lessons in selfless-leadership, good-governance and communal engagement as tools for national development.

The objective of the research is to identify Ahmed Yerima's perspectives to Africa's socio-political realities as regards leadership, self-sacrifice, communalism and development using themes, techniques and characterisation.

Research Question

What is Ahmed Yerima's perspective to postcolonial realities in Nigeria regarding leadership and governance and national development.

Conceptual Framework

Reading

Unlike the literal reading which involves picking information from a written or typed material. Reading in this context is literary, it is a critical way of looking at the text with a bias to identify the historical temper in them using the lense of New Historicism as theory.

New Historicism

The New Historicism which arose in the 1980s was a vehement reaction against both the formalists view of literary text as somehow autonomous and Marxists views which ultimately related texts to the economic infrastructure. It saw literary text not as somehow unique but a

kind of discourse situated within a complex of cultural discourses-religious, political, economic, aesthetic- which both shaped it and, in their turn, were shaped by it. If there was anything new about this procedure, it was its insistence, drawn from Foucault and poststructuralism, that 'history' itself is a text, an interpretation, and that there is no single history. It also rejected any notion of historical progress or teleology, and broke away from any literary historiography based on the study of genres and figures. In the same way, the 'culture' in which New Historicism situated literary texts was itself regarded as a textual construct. Therefore, New Historicism refused to accord any kind of unity or homogeneity to history or culture, viewing both as harbouring networks of contradictory, competing, and unreconciled forces and interests.

New Historicists can be criticised for a political quietism that accompanies their perceived principled indefiniteness as well as for accepting uncritically Foucault's somewhat disembodied and abstract notion of power which floats free of political and economic agency. This present study has also accused them of arbitrariness in the way in which they relate literary texts to other cultural discourses. Notwithstanding such reservations however, New Historicism-perhaps precisely because it appears to open the possibility of accommodating social context from a non-committed perspective- has enjoyed considerable influence since the 1980s and has arguably contributed to a more pervasive concern among formally liberal humanist and New Critical academics with the larger cultural pattern and forces within which literature operates. All these being said, it is fondly concerned not only with situating literary texts within power structures, but also with seeing them as crucially participating in conflicts of power between various forms of social and political authority.

In practice, New historicists consider any texts as cultural construct, which belong to other disciplines of knowledge. This suggests that text is rooted in cultural heritages because it is a cultural concept. Moreover, New Historicism seeks a historisation of text and then ascribes sufficient significance to the cultural context of its construction, meaning, influence, its interpretation and scrutiny. In essence, a literary production is formed and realised in cultural circumstances, not in vacuum. New Historicists again points out that New Historical critical approach emphasis what they term the political reading of the text because any texts, according to them, apart from being a cultural construct, reveals political, social, religious and economic conditions of the given era.

It has been observed however that, New Historicists do not evaluate a text bereft of its aesthetic qualities, yet they submit that there is no dissimilarity between literary and historical texts. Through its aesthetic attributes, a literary text renders artistic pleasure which is the pivotal purpose of any literary texts. Be this as it may, literature is never a substitute for sociology, history, psychology or political science because it has its own justification and aim which is to creatively reproduce the lived experiences in literary formats. While, meter, rhythm, symbols and imagery enhance the aesthetic pleasure for the consumers of literary productions, literary products with first class figurative language but lacking in its social relevance too cannot render aesthetic delight which is its sole aim. Thus, a great literary produce is one where content, context and form interplay creatively and with a balance. To be able to explain this balance, a hybrid of literary canon of sort, New Historicism coined a term 'Cultural Poetics' to provide a guide for literary studies since literature is a part and parcel of culture and reveals each and every aspect of it. It works on an assumption that literature

depicts 'world view' but world view should not be mistaken with the utopian representation of socio-cultural situation, rather, the manifestation of both harmony and diversity should reflect in literary produce because subversive voices contrary to the dominant power politics are constantly being raised and superseded. Thus, the relationship between literature and history is dialectic because literature always represents whatever happens in the society through the use of various techniques like figures of speech, characters and characterisation, different narrative methods, poetic methods and dramatic techniques among others. Therefore, African literature can be said to be historical, this is in the sense that various historical events of the continent are being creatively crafted into different literary productions. Whereas, post-colonial literature accounts for all literatures of formally colonised people globally, Africa inclusive, by emphasising the influence of imperialism on the colonised as it affects their daily lives and as such presented in their literature. New Historicism on the other hand, engages literature as having a universal quality of being a product of the milieu that produced it. So, whether there is a history of colonialism or not, literature is perennially 'handcuffed' to history. The nexus of Post Colonialism and New Historicism is therefore the fact that while the latter accounts for the impact of history on literature, the former narrows history to colonialism and its impact on the life and literature of the colonised.

African history is too much a burden that African playwrights cannot ignore. They are perennially confronted with the negative impact of the Atlantic slave Trade, colonialism, as well as post-colonial ruptures. The ever-mounting trauma of lived experience of today's world both within and outside the continent is overwhelming. Therefore, African playwrights in an attempt to proffer solution to the problems common people live with seem to be perpetually handcuffed to/by history. This has made the study of African drama fairly predictable. It is often always about how an author has employed history for the betterment of the contemporary time. This is the reason that African drama is easily studied using theories like New Historicism that give allowance for the social, economic and political context from which literary works emerge.

Anti-Colonial Struggle in Ahmed Yerima's Attahiru

One of the recurrent themes of modern African Drama is colonialism. The history of modern Africa is not complete without a mention of colonialism. Several perspectives exist on the concept of colonialism. Essentially, however, colonialism otherwise called imperialism has severally been explained to the practice or policy of controlling a perceived weaker nation by a self-acclaimed stronger nation largely for social, economic and or political rewards. In other words, imperialism refers to a powerful nation's strategic mode of extending its control, dominance, and influence by subjugating other states. One is now left with a question of what could have inspired human minds with the desire to dominate others: Though a number of reasons have been adduced to this. This study however did not set out to provide answer to the question. It does, however, seek to locate, among other things, postcolonial themes in Ahmed Yerima's drama.

Leadership and Governance

It is almost impossible to explicate the theme of anticolonialism without the concept of leadership and governance. Though, Africa is bedevilled by myriads of challenges like poverty,

high cost and low standard of living, fallen standard of education, insecurity, policy failure among others. It is however generally believed that at the root of Africa's problems is bad leadership and misrule. It suffices to claim that the presence of selfless leadership and top notch governance is the brain behind the revolt against imperialism and its evils on the soil of Africa. In the texts under review, prior to the coming of the whites it was severally reported how equity, justice and fairness became the hall mark of societal administration. It is the same selflessness of leadership that prompted Attahiru to make the ultimate sacrifice of his life to fight the aggression and high handedness of the imperialists.

Attahiru

This play enacts the ordeal of Caliph/Sultan Attahiru 1, the twelfth (12th) Sultan of Sokoto Caliphate. Arguably, the greatest Caliphate in the history of Nigerian north and Islam in Nigeria generally because it descended directly from Sheik Uthman Danfodio himself. Attahiru, who ascended the throne in November 1902 as both the Caliph of Sokoto and Sarkin Musulmi met a major problem, which proved fatal, in the imperial penetration of the north of Nigeria. Quite unfortunately, he was only a Caliph essentially for about six months as he used the larger part of his reign till his death in 1903 to fight Lord Lugard and his British determination to rule the whole of the Northern Nigeria. The story brings to the fore the hitherto hidden fact about the courage and bravery people of northern Nigeria exhibited in order to resist imperial oppression and subjugation. Leaders like Attahiru 1 have to pay the supreme prize of their lives in an attempt to ensure continuity, liberty and prosperity for their people. This is a major mindset that is lacking in the contemporary African leaders who would rather sacrifice their followers for their own collective good.

Discussion of Findings

The reason for the success attained by Yerima at the employment history just like his predecessors and contemporaries can be traced to among factors which include the fact that the cultural and traditional history they have been enacting in their works are really neither past, passed away, far away, long gone, forgotten nor desirable than the present. The so-called past stubbornly has continued to live and even reinvent itself.

Furthermore, in order to tell the story of colonialism from the view point of the colonised, the social and cultural values of the people are presented with much reverence theatrically. This now further brings sympathy for the people whose traditions were desecrated by the proud imperialists. This seriously accounts for the minute detailed attention given to ensure that accurate facts of history are secured, faithfully interpreted and respectfully enacted on stage.

The main theme of Attahiru among other themes; the infiltration of colonialism on African soil and the fierce resistance by Africans to it. Part of the many evils of imperialism is the termination of the imperial authority and independence of African traditional rulers. The unbridled thirst for power sponsored by a biased sense of racial supremacy over the natives of Africa was a major reason for the colonial authority's representatives' misbehaviour in the then colonial Africa. Drawing instances from the text, while we see Colonel Frederick Lugard while attempting to show military superiority over Sokoto Caliphate, singlehandedly reversed every

standing agreement with Sokoto and went on to declare that he had conquered Sokoto thus his right to establish colonial rule for Britain.

The mindless brutality with which Britain killed Sokoto military men as well as their leader, Attahiru, which is the common backcloth for the play, *Attahiru*. Generally, the natives perceived the murder of Sultan Attahiru by British military men, a desecration of the worst sort. Attahiru dramatises the destruction of self-government in traditional Africa which further spelled the ruin of any form of resistance against colonial aggression and oppression in Africa.

Having seen the evils of imperialism on the colonised soil, the question one is tempted to ask is what exactly is the reason for imperialism? The answer is really not farfetched; the inordinate desire to have control of the economic power of the colonised is the singular reason for colonialism. However, in order to have the control of a people's economy, it is only strategic to either subdue or destroy their political leaders. The destruction, either directly or remotely of Attahiru, is a calculated attempt at gaining sway over the trade, commerce and economy of the people. This claim of ours is supported by Lord Lugard's discussion with Abbas-the blind beggar in.

This is not a religious war. It is a war of the superiority of wills. I have the machines and guns; you have what I need to trade with, so if one of us is stubborn or refuses to cooperate then a little nudge is needed. But, you all get excited with your charms, amulets, and religion; you refused to be our friends.

Aesthetically speaking, though Yerima conducted much historical research in order to write his play under investigation, he not only shows it off in the play but also ensures to inject robust imagination which causes the work to be first class literary material on the one hand and a historical document on the other. Succinctly, we have such reason to consider the play fictional-historical or dramatic-historical works. Structurally, the text under investigation is crafted in such a way that ensures free flow of presentation.

The use of the revelatory dimension of which dream is a part present in the play. Dream does not only present the Sultan Attahiru as having predictive capacities, it also helps in "dream" motif used by of the impending disaster that is to befall his kingdom. Caliph Attahiru's dream is elaborate. He narrates it both to his spiritual leader and son:

Always it starts in the early hours of the morning. There is smoke, heavy smoke. It is at the battlefield. Dead warriors litter everywhere. Then images of my ancestors appear in a circle round me. They pass the flag from one hand to another. As they chant, la ilahillalah, I watch them helplessly stretching my hands as Caliph Atiku gives it to Muazu, then to Caliph Umoru, then to Abdul-Rahman and, as he passes it to me, the flag falls, dripping blood. In all the smoky confusion, Dan Magaji tries to help me pick it up, but he is tripped by a white pebble, he too, falling on his sword. The dream subsumes me in thought.

Three key messages are succinctly passed to the reader of the play; one the mention of the Caliphs before the current one is to assert that the Attahiru's ascension to the *karaga'* of Sokoto is correct by lineage. Two, the prediction of his demise, on the battle field, as a warrior-monarch, in the hands of the British soldiers metaphorically represented as white pebbles is noted. Thirdly, that the flag, which was blood-stained fell foreshadows the downfall of the Caliphate.

Anyone interested in numerology will agree that the number seven is spiritually significant. In the Bible for instance, the number seven represents completion, perfection of things. It represents inevitability of events. It means almost the same thing in African cosmology. That the three monarchs had a particular dream each for seven days is important because it represents the fact that they are helpless in the matter at hand either guilty as charged or innocent. The message brought by each of their dreams is similar and was fulfilled with digital precision.

Severally, Yerima has been criticised for not attaining a robust presentation of characters and plot in *Attahiru*. He however may be exonerated of such accusations on a few counts which include the fact that the time when Caliph Attahiru reigned in Sokoto did not afford such traditional royal kits critics are looking for in *Attahiru* because firstly, the British annexation of Sokoto Caliphate happened around the same time. In addition, Attahiru is not just a monarch but also a soldier who assumed office as a monarch only to lead his subjects in a war where he and his warriors died. The need to capture the atmosphere of external aggression, internal insurrection and resistance to both did not allow for the creation of an elaborate royal glamour that characterise precolonial Africa in *Attahiru*. In the play *Attahiru*, we see the psychologist in Yerima as he delves into the mental state of the protagonist in the face of myriad of crises that have been prophesied about a century earlier.

Caliph Attahiru's case does not obey the general classical rule of tragedy. It follows the path of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* in that the fall of Sokoto Caliphate was prophesied about a hundred years earlier before Attahiru's time. Who then is to blame for the death of Attahiru and his soldiers? We cannot blame him for standing up to defend what he believes to be true and just. Probably, he chose to fight rather than face humiliation that Oba Ovonramwen faced. The death of Attahiru is the decimation of dissenting voices against colonialism, recolonialism and neo-colonialism.

The question of language and Modern African literature is answered by Yerima in *Attahiru*. Although, African writers have been forced to inherit imperialists' languages like English, French, Portuguese among others. While some playwrights. Like NgugiWaThiong O' in the spirit of decolonisation refused to write in colonialists' language, majority of other have decided to incorporate the materials from their native cultures into the lexicon of the colonialists' language as used in their works. Some playwrights have been magnanimous to give some form of definition to the local terms used; others did not buy such idea. In *Attahiru*, he sets a section aside to explain some terms he picked from Hausa language. Aside this, he brilliantly uses language as a device to create tragic atmosphere in the three plays. Not only this, language is effectively used for character development. For instance, the protagonist who is the personification of his people's culture and tradition uses proverbs, wise sayings, anecdotes and figurative expressions that show how deep and vast his knowledge in the ways of life of his people is. He is also given to interior monologues that give credence to his rights to the throne. The colonial officer in the play is given to superficiality in his understanding and approach to the total way of life of the people.

In an attempt at capturing historical realities in Africa in his works, Ahmed Yerima has been able to be preoccupied with some themes in *Attahiru*. Some of the major themes that preoccupied Yerima in the play include: destiny, conviction, patriotism, allegiance, arrogance, authority, prestige, rage, selfish ambition greediness, dishonesty, deception among others.

The themes of loyalty and trust are also engaged. The issue of trust and loyalty are brought up in the camp of the colonial officers when Morland, expressed his doubt over the trustworthiness of Mohammed Al TahirAliyu who is being considered for the job of infiltrating the camp of Sultan Attahiru. Mohammed Aliyu, is a prince of the Caliphate who could have been the Caliph had Attahiru not been picked. The Europeans planned to play on the fact that he was eyeing the throne too to win him over to their side against the sultan. Just as we noticed earlier, the complex nature of trust and loyalty was considered in the play. Whereas the monarch who gravely needs the loyalty of his own people did not get it, the Europeans who do not mean well for the people were able to secure loyalty from some of the key men in Sokoto kingdoms. In fact, the strategic need for trustworthy and loyal men is much more pronounced in the enemy camp. The supposedly faithful men at the colonialists' camp are real traitors at their home kingdom. If the imperialists succeed in destroying Africa, Africa must be blamed to an extent.

In summary, Attahiru, recreates the evils of colonialism, the connivance of the indigenous people as well as the resistance put up by the people as personified by their monarch. Furthermore, the revolutionary stance of Caliph Attahiru is an authorial statement which corrects the popularly held notion that held opinion that the northerners in Nigeria did not revolt against the imperialists. History as captured by Yerima in the plays are not just for entertainment but has been deployed to correct wrong opinions and to make points that if we heed them, Nigeria will not only be restored as the giant of Africa but a global pride.

It is recommended that the general electoral public must decide to shun ethnicism and other inconsequential considerations and vote for candidates whoever they discover will serve them like the late Attahiru. Meaning voting should be about proper leadership and adequate governance. Thus, the major point raised by the author through his creation, Caliph Attahiru, is to tell the nation that we do not need a Christian, Muslim or a Traditionalist as our leader. The kind of leader we need is neither a southerner, a northerner nor a middle beltan, but *...a man as Caliph. A man chosen by the light..., who will carry the flag ... past the white man's threat. A man who will stand shoulder to shoulder and eyeball to eyeball with white man.*

white man' here is a collective name for every of our national and regional problems. The man or woman must be the best among the best that is to be chosen by light. He must be fearless and unperturbed in the face of danger. His singular mission is to the nation whose flag she or he must carry. No personal flags, no regional flags, no ethnic flags, but the national flags.

In Conclusion

This play has again confirmed that virtues and vices are timeless. Whereas African leaders as depicted in the play showcased high moral standards and good quality leadership ethics while the imperialists displayed gross immoral and unwholesome attitude that made them obnoxious. Moreover, as against the unwritten code among Nigerians, leaders have emerged from Africa though in the past unlike the rulers we have in contemporary times. It is also noted that contemporary leaders need to learn enormous lesson from history if they must lead and not rule their people.

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