



# The Unconscious, History and Power in Ahmed Yerima's *Mojagbe*

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## Abstract

Human obsessive inclination for power is depicted in Ahmed Yerima's *Mojagbe*, a historical play that interrogates human callousness and intrigues through the use of the unconscious - dream's patterns. Existing scholarly engagements on historical plays and power have focused on the socio-economic predicaments resulting from the unscrupulousness and lackadaisical attitudes of some leaders especially in African society, sometimes ignoring the dramatic technique engaged by the dramatist to address the thematic affiliation. This study aligns with this untoward, however, it examines the use of the unconscious as the playwright's dramatic technique in order to investigate the psychic context of the characters and privilege the psychic context above the historical content. The major focus is to examine the various patterns of the unconscious in the text and relate them with socio-political realities of its time. The play is subjected to critical analysis that is influenced by psychoanalysis as the theoretical framework. It is discovered that the patterns of the unconscious used in the play are nightmare and daydreaming. They are used as technique of flashback and foreshadowing to both the physical and psychological conflicts in the play. They also serve as the signifiers of the protagonist's traumas and autocratic and callous behaviors. The unconscious, therefore, is the significant strategic technique in Ahmed Yerima's reconstruction of history.

**Keywords:** The unconscious; History; Power; Predicaments; Intrigues.

## 1. Introduction

The unconscious will be seen in this study as the various patterns of dream that manifest as mental images and symbols in the mind when the mind is unconscious. The influence of dream on the dreamer, his or her family and society at large will be paramount to this work. How the use of dream reconstructs, interrogates, rejuvenates and authenticates historical characters and situations will be explored. The reconstruction, interrogation and authentication of historical characters or persons and events will bring to the focus the issue of historicity. The relationship between historians and dramatists will also be examined to accommodate Childs (2005) view that the connection between history and drama has accounted for the fascination shown by some playwrights in adopting history as veritable source for playwriting.

History as an important integral of this study, does not only deal with memory of the past, it also has a link with the present. In this regard, Fadeyiye (2010) defines it as:

an attempt to rethink the past. It inquires into the past, in terms of what happened, when it happened and how it happened. It equally examines the developments and changes that have occurred in different human societies in the past and how such changes affect, influence and determine the present conditions of life in the society (2).

Although, throughout the ages, history has been the study of the past, the past, is however, not 'dead'; rather, it is constantly impinging on the present (Olaniran, 2018). Lee (2013) buttresses Olaniran that people, cannot escape from the past as the past is built into the concepts employed to cope with the everyday physical and social world. It will suffice to see history as a dialogue between the present and the past. History is purposeless if it does not have a soothing link to the future. Adesina (2012) attests to the usefulness of history in this regard, when he posits:

The knowledge of history gives people a collective sense of corporate achievement and thus enlarges the personality of each member beyond the self. Unfortunately, we have all somehow fallen into the temptation of ignoring history and history matters a great deal. For a country like Nigeria attempting to define its national purpose and identity, the neglect of history is therefore a tragedy of immense proportions. (32-33).

The reason that over time, history has provided the framework and plot for many plays in different societies is, perhaps, because it is an embodiment of the soul of the community (Adesina, 2012). Hall (2013) corroborates this assertion as he opines that 'drama, like history, is a medium for creating or recreating the struggles of the people as a community. It is also useful in measuring the pulse underlying such struggles' (Umar-Buratai, 2007). Since history and drama are souls of community and enabling forces that attempt to prioritize the survival of the society, then, it will be pertinent to examine the role or significance of history and power struggle in drama. This of course, is the thrust of this paper. Analysis of the text shall be influenced by psychoanalysis especially Carl Jung's dream theory as the theoretical framework. The essence of this theory is to provide for the investigation of characters' unconscious motives and the examination of various patterns of dream and their effects on the conflicts in the play, *Mojagbe*.

This is a play on king and Nigerian historical character based on the history of Oyo empire in the pre-colonial era. But, looking at it from the postcolonial point of view, it reveals sordid human intrigues, fears, autocracy and all sorts of dehumanising atrocities that characterize the reigns of unscrupulous and proud rulers that are prevalent in

many contemporary African nations. The play records the historical deeds and, notably, the curse Alaafin Aole placed on Oyo kingdom because of the disloyalty the Oyo people demonstrated during his reign. The curse is a heavy burden on the people and the manifestation began to surface immediately after the demise of Alaafin Aole.

Consequently, the once united and revered Oyo Empire began to disintegrate in the wake of Alaafin Maku's ascension to the throne of Alaafin. Maku succeeded Aole. The disintegration begins to manifest when Afonja, the Aare Ona Kankanfo decides to have his own autonomy and refuses allegiance to Oyo kingdom. It is a turbulent and critical time. It is at this time that Oba Aderemi Mojagbe of a neighbouring town to Oyo also decides to secede from the stranglehold of Oyo kingdom. Many inter and intra communal wars take place between Oba Mojagbe and Alaafin Maku and Oba Mojagbe wins all these wars to maintain and stand as a formidable kingdom. But his personal excessive desire to be immortal, pride, egocentrism, highhandedness and terrorism prevent his kingdom to stand the test of time. Prior before the collapse of his kingdom, he becomes obstinate and defiant to the voices of his people and ancestors. He is deaf to the pleas and counsels of the chiefs and priests on how peace and harmony will reign for the growth and economic stability of the kingdom. His strength and personal flaws blur his sense of reasoning and, in the end, his reign is terminated tragically.

The 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 (2008) 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 informs the writing of the play is 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 reflections 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) 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) 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.

## 2. The Interplay between Dream and Power

The accuracy of the historical leaning of the play is immaterial to this study but the pedagogy and exegesis of the dream motif as the author's dramaturgy in the nexus between history and drama. Presently, we shall dwell thoroughly on issues of nightmare and daydreaming as the patterns of the unconscious in *Mojagbe*. In the play, Yerima penetrates the mind of the protagonist, Oba Mojagbe, through dreams to develop the plot structure and the characters. The playwright presents two dreamers simultaneously – Oba Mojagbe and Olori (the king's wife).

In Oba Mojagbe's nightmare, there is an exposition of an outright rejection of his tyrannical reign by his forefathers and unborn children. The forefathers represent his ancestors – who appear as Yeye in the play while the unborn children symbolize the future generation. From his nightmare, it can be drawn that Oba Mojagbe is compelled to see the futility of his inordinate ambition and autocratic reign. His nightmare epitomizes anxiety – related neurosis fuelled by guilt. And he seeks to overcome his worries and guilt-laden mind. The symbolic creations or images he encounters in the nightmare are cumbersome and worrisome. As such, he becomes fearful and jittery in his conscious mind after the dream. As part of actions to unravel the mysteries behind the nightmare, he consults his personal priest whom, he believes, is capable of placating the angry gods, ancestors and the unborn generation. He narrates the nightmare to Isepe:

Two nights ago, I had a dream. A fearsome one I hold a big party in this palace. Everybody was there. Both the living and the dead. They were eating and drinking. They all ignored my presence. As if I was not there at all. All the kings before me sat on one long bench made of ivory

and gold. Each time I tried to sit with them, no one would move or give me a place to sit. I woke up worried. What does this portend my friend (24).

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

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

As [Kramer \(1993\)](#) posits that nightmare regulates mood and controls the sad emotions resulting from distressing experiences of the unconscious mind, Oba Mojagbe makes frantic efforts to avoid the manifestation of the dream. But, he is proud, highhanded and obstinate. He becomes more stiff-necked and tyrannical than before. To him, he believes that is the way he can reduce people's antagonism, hatred and opposition but he has forgotten that it is not only the living that reject him but also the dead. The more he does this in the play, the closer he gets to the webs of death. Yerima x-rays the various psychological reflections of Mojagbe's mind through the artistic presentation of nightmare to provide a similitude of the actual happenings in his reign. From the dream, his hope and aspiration look somewhat shattered. In the plot structure of the play, every other character, event and action similarly become shattered. The neighbouring villages are waging wars against Oba Mojagbe's kingdom; the market women are making protest against evil disaster and economic hardship in the land. In the midst of all these uproars, the king becomes extremely disturbed physically and psychologically and he makes an inquiry to know what the future holds for him. It is from this final inquiry that he suffers the most intensive psychological or mental torture. Isepe tells him, "Eledumare... The almighty god who consents to the death of any man, before Iku can kill him, has consented to your death. (*Mojagbe*, 43)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thus, it becomes humorous to the audience when they see Olori worried, restive and nagging in order to have a child that will be heir to the throne. Yerima also uses dream to portray the theme of human intrigues, wickedness and unfaithfulness through Olori's nightmare. The art of creating and developing character through dream and dramatic irony proves Yerima to be a dramatist of peculiar ingenuity. He uses dream, especially nightmare, in this play to interrogate the reality in history. He creates the manifestations in the society through the unconscious minds of prominent members of the society in order to expose the fault lines and to guarantee the survival of the society.

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

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

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

Unlike Ajamalede in *Ameh Oboni*, another historical play by Ahmed Yerima 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 Mojobe 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 Mojobe 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.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the aesthetics of dream in this text, the psyche and desires of the protagonist is crystally portrayed: the past is presented as the 'present'. The border between the physical and spiritual is blurred. Thus, time and space are collapsed and the psychoanalytical analysis and critique of the text is made possible. Similarly, a survey of dreaming as reflected in this study not only displays the stylistic device of Yerima as a historical dramatist but also describes him as a playwright that strives to produce new thing literarily from the past and known history and dramatic genre. It is noteworthy that the playwright employs patterns of dream not as mere instrument of the unconscious but as a literary device to redefine history as a plausible pivot for a better tomorrow in human society.

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