



Making Images, Re-making Life:
ART AND LIFE IN AHMED YERIMA

Edited by:
Uwemedimo Atakpo &
Stephen E. Inegbe

Chapter Fifteen

PERSPECTIVES AND MEANINGS IN AHMED YERIMA'S *THE TWIST*

By

MARGARET G. AKPAN, Ph.D

Introduction/Background to the Play

Drama is the most social literary form, often seen as a mirror of society. Its ideas could direct people's consciousness leading to social changes both within the individual and the society at large. It is this power of drama to captivate the mind, compelling profound thoughts that makes it a medium through which societal values could be fostered. As Akorede (12) puts it, "dramatic work should embody the social reality of the time so as to become effective and relevant to the development of the society". Yerima's *The Twist* presents the fundamental forces that confront man and compel him to make an assessment of himself. These forces are those of fate, faith, and forgiveness to mention a few. *The Twist* mirrors the Nigerian society and unfolds human nature through revelations that could be felt through pain and death. Man's hopes, fears and aspirations are constant twists in man's attempt to attain freedom. Yerima intelligently uses two characters, Noah and Ojuolape, to expose the depth of inevitable crisis as may occur in life and by this he becomes relevant within the African Society "... as the record of the mores and experience of the society and the voice of vision in his time ..." (Osofisan, 152). Deep within the vein of the story, Yerima uncovers the vitriol of desperation that afflicts the human race.

The Twist, as earlier mentioned, has only two characters Noah and Ojuolape. Noah is a reverend gentleman, a clergy of the

Anglican denomination, while Ojuolape is a Lawyer, a Christian of the Catholic denomination. In the story, Noah's son, (no name) a member of a gang of armed robbers, murders Ojuolape's son, Dolapo. The case is settled in court. As in most murder cases, Noah's son is condemned to death by hanging. A day before the execution, Noah goes to Ojuolape's house asking him to forgive his son and to do all he can to spare his life. As the play develops, a dramatic twist is introduced as it is revealed that Noah's wife was, in fact, Ojuolape's ex-girl friend whom he had impregnated but lost contact with. The twist is further intensified with a further revelation that Dolapo was not actually Noah's real son but his stepson. This turn of events, gives the playscript its outstanding title, *The Twist*. The play script contains many perspectives. In this paper, the perspectives of 'forgiveness' and the meaning of the colour, 'black' in Noah's Costume' will be highlighted.

Forgiveness

Among the virtues which society hopes and believes in are those of truthfulness, humility, selflessness, hardwork, justice and equity, and of course the ability to forgive. Noah's son commits murder and the society expects the law to take its full course. Ojuolape wants his pound of flesh. Nothing is going to change this. His trust in the law is his trust in society. He is desperate and determined to remain within the shelter of society as long as the law takes its course. This is Ojuolape's state of mind when Noah meets him. At the entrance into Ojuolape's house, the wealth displayed in the house holds Noah's attention. He must have been afraid, for he immediately kneels to ask for God's mercy over the 'hardened hearts' of the enemy. Ojuolape is foreseen as an 'enemy' because Noah knows that the crime committed by his son will take the mercy of God to be forgiven. When Ojuolape comes out to meet Noah, he mistakes him for a client he had earlier on denied audience: "I told you at the court premises that I cannot see you..." (83).

To a man in Ojuolape's state of mind, Noah's intrusion is

annoying. The response of 'I am sorry Sir' from Noah must have deflated his ego. He warns Noah to be brief, as he is in mourning and needs to be left alone:

Ojuolape: I told you I was in mourning. There has been a spate of assassinations here in Victoria Island... And three weeks ago, just down the road I lost my only child, my son, to the bullet of one wayward, useless, no good, godforsaken idiot. Please go (84).

Ojuolape is shocked to hear Noah say that:

... the wayward ... useless, no good, godforsaken idiot ... whose bullet killed your only child... your son ... is my son. I am sorry Sir (84).

Quite calm at first, Ojuolape walks slowly to the bar, pours himself a drink which he throws on Noah's face, and says to him:

Ojuolape: Get out... please; go before I do more harm to you. Please, just pack yourself and your sinful bloody soul out of my house... My presence... Out of my life ... your son... kills my son, and you feel that by going on your knees and asking for forgiveness, that that is over?... By tomorrow, you will understand what I am going through when your son dangles at the end of the noose... (85).

At the end of his speech, he breaks down and weeps. His tears become a cleansing balm and a softener as he hears Noah say:

Noah: I am happy I came Sir. At least, I saw what my mind could not have imagined. At least, I saw the depth of the colour of pain... (85).

Yerima reveals here, that everyone is capable of feeling pain, and of shedding tears. Still baffled at Ojuolape's state, Noah continues:

Noah: ... but you must forgive me... us... this is why I beg you to find that place in your tear-soaked heart to forgive my son, even me... for his failure is mine also... I must have failed... (86)

Despite these emotional and heart-breaking pleas, Ojuolape holds on to bitterness and anger. In the above situation, it is difficult to just forgive such a crime. Forgiveness is difficult because most people do not understand what forgiveness really is. To forgive means to let go of resentments and blame. It means to continue to love the individual despite his behaviour. Forgiveness is not earned and it is not conditioned on 'right' behaviour. At the same time, it does not involve letting the criminal off the hook legally. The desire for revenge poisons Ojuolape's being that he hardly gives thought to Noah's pleas.

Ojuolape: It is not all that glitters that is gold... I am sorry, the law will have to take its course... (109).

The only thing that will satisfy the thirst for vengeance is the killing of Noah's son:

Ojuolape: My pain ends tomorrow as I bury my own son, and yours goes to the gallows. They will meet there I promise you... (85)

Ojuolape lacks the will-power to forgive, and rather shifts the responsibility to God:

Ojuolape: ... get up, old man, and beg God not man (89).

Again, he says

Ojuolape: ... Left to me... I would have killed him with my bare hands but... (89).

Also,

Ojuolape: ... forgiveness must come from within. Right now, I do not feel more than a bitter sense of loss... within! I do not feel anything for you or your son within (89).

Ojuolape does not know that for the sake of his mental health, forgiveness is preferable to holding a grudge. Bitterness does not hurt anyone but oneself. To seek revenge will only deplete the strength and prevent the wound from healing. Despite Noah's appeal to his Christian faith, he refuses...

Noah: But you are a Christian. Attend to my cry,... thou art my hope... let the Lord use you (109).

Ojuolape does not know that to forgive is simply to stop wishing for revenge or looking forward to the criminal suffering in the same way. It is hard to forgive when energy is spent on the desire for revenge. The desire for revenge defiles and unconsciously makes the person as hurtful and vicious as the murderer. Forgiveness is a gift one gives out, an act of the will. The willingness to forgive should not even be dependent on whether the harm is acknowledged. In forgiving, one ultimately feels mercy and frees the self from the greatest burden; hatred. Noah admits the

offence which the son committed, asks for forgiveness, and even accepts the punishment.

Noah: ... my flesh has taken your flesh, I beg you to forgive him please (85).

Again, he says:

Noah: ... I need to prepare his way. He has confessed his sins, I just wish God shows him the wonder of His forgiving grace... as life is forced out of him by the noose (98).

Within the Nigerian society, many people commit offences which they refuse to make penance for. Mostly because of their status in the society, they refuse to confess, repent or accept penalty for their injurious acts. Noah exemplifies a man who makes penance and pleads for mercy. Penance consists of confession, repentance and accepting the penalty. If the virtue of forgiveness is inculcated in many Nigerians, then the desire for revenge which often leads to assassinations will likely be minimized. If Nigerians could learn to tolerate themselves, understand and forgive, then jails will almost be empty; for forgiveness can heal, it can uplift the spirit; it can unite and establish peaceful co-existence. Most warring countries in the world would have been living peacefully if they learnt the virtue of forgiveness. World peace would be guaranteed, for unconditional love heals people's pains.

The Colour, 'Black' in Noah's Costume

The costume which Noah wears depicts him as a clergyman. The author's notes include that he is "dressed in a black cassock, with a white collar, and a big black hat. He carries a black bag... wears a pair of glasses and a long gold chain with a big golden cross" (83). This costume shows that Noah is not just an ordinary priest, but a bishop (even though the author did not address him as such) of the Anglican denomination as revealed by

Noah himself.

Noah: I am a clergyman. An Anglican by faith. I have come to see you... (84).

It is only a bishop that uses a long chain with a big cross. A bishop is a high-ranking cleric in charge of an ecclesiastical division of the clergy and the laity. Simply addressed as reverend, his costume depicts him rather as a Bishop. However Noah's costume shows power, authority and seriousness. Ojuolap recognizes this when he says to Noah "... the only thing stopping me from calling the police is your cassock..." Noah is not an ordinary man. His costume is dignifying.

The colour of Noah's costume is black. Apart from the white collar and the gold cross and chain, which immediately project him as a priest, other items namely, his hat, and bag are also black. Within most Christian denominations, especially of the older order, black is usually worn for penitential services. In Pentecostal churches though, a black suit communicates sophistication and uncompromising excellence as it does in business circles. At first sight, a colour is just a colour, just as a rose is a rose. But colours send out certain signals which are associated with certain meanings and feelings. These associations are defined by both the culture as well as personal experiences. The colour black, is essentially an absence of light "since no wave lengths are reflected, and it can therefore be menacing" (Wright, 2). Black can have negative sociological connotations like evil, mourning, night, death, fear, mystery, fatigue, aloofness, remorse, sadness, danger (Kaiser, 1-2), with the reason that these are experienced by human beings as negative and dangerous. McCann explains that the association of evil magic and black colour is common in Africa. The symbolism, he notes, refers to the dangers and mysteries of the night.

In *The Twist*, the colour, black, readily upholds itself by sending out clear signals about the personality of Noah. His life is

enshrouded in mysteries he does not understand. His life experiences amount to nothing and his life has not improved. Before him is someone who has laughed all through his life until now. Noah laments:

... you have never had a day's sweat in your life, and I have had to sweat all my life ... Things have gone perfectly for you, and my life has been one sour fruit... Thank you Sir, I guess I should understand; when a man like you says let it be, it is to mock the essence of my very existence... (108)

In recounting the story of his life, especially his experiences as a young priest, the colour of his habit continues to enhance the mood and to place him in proper perspective, allowing the reader to truly digest the burden he is carrying around and further prompting Ojuolape to use interjections of "I am sorry" (106), as he listens to Noah's life stories. Noah's black habit radiates an aura of penitence as well as fear. Given the circumstances of his situation, he knows he cannot help himself. With all amount of humility, he begs:

By grace, save him! Save my son, please.
Save me from the shame of my church!...
In the name of God, please! I beg you... I
beg... please! ... I beg you please! (108).

A high-ranking cleric becomes nothing before a member of laity who seeks his pound of flesh. Noah's state of mind shows the fragile nature and helplessness of man in the things he cannot control. He is disillusioned and dispirited.

Noah: ... my cassock is supposed to be my protection against the frailness of life. I was supposed to be immunized

against sin. But here I am, the father of a sinful soul...

(101)

Obviously, Noah is a very humble man. The murder of Ojuolape's son he readily accepts, a thing most uncommon among Nigerians. He shows every sign of remorse. His habit projects this too, and puts him in the proper mood as he recalls:

... when I was told about my son, I felt very isolated, vulnerable, alone and afraid, I just knelt down and prayed for a miracle (100).

In describing his mother, Noah says:

... she was a pillar ... my mother. We were born poor, and lived poor... she was as frail as a broom stick (95).

He continues:

... she had nothing, she was nothing, but she was everything to me." (95).

As one reads through *The Twist*, one can see the dark side of existence in which Noah lived, and now enhanced even by the black habit around his body. Earlier, Ojuolape had said to him:

Ojuolape: ... just pack yourself and your sinful bloody soul out of my house... my presence... out of my life. Out! Your cassock angers me the more... (85).

The negative connotation projected by the colour black, subtly affects the psyche of Ojuolape that he sees Noah as the bearer of evil and death. Noah's life is drab and totally frustrating.

He laments that throughout his life, his cross gets heavier and his faith lighter, that he sometimes doubts if God exists (101). He contemplated suicide once when his wife left him. He bears the insults of Ojuolape, and tolerates a drink thrown to his face. He is colourless and hopeless. The black colour enhances more of the negative, mysterious and sad part of his entire life.

Yerima uses appropriate language to convey his ideas and reveal character. Noah is portrayed in the play script as a poor, unfortunate, simple, suffering, and struggling image. The black colour represents the above.

Conclusion

In life, anybody could be a victim of circumstance. In *The Twist*, Ojuolape sees Noah's son as a misfit and shows little compassion. Noah's failure can be attributed to the failure of everyman. It is pertinent to state that evil in man arises as a result of frustration. The knowledge of a person's circumstances will aid in understanding and accepting certain pains. Problems persist because people refuse to accept apologies from those who offend them. But how do we respond to one another when confronted with things we could scarcely provide answers for?

The killing of Ojuolape's son creates anger and a desire for revenge because Ojuolape had focused on what he wanted the son to become in life, and had completely missed the opportunity to learn about forgiveness and real love. He believes that capital punishment will give him satisfaction and healing. Despite the fact that forgiveness is taught in the Lord's Prayer and recited daily in every Christian home, it is difficult for Ojuolape to forgive Noah and his son.

Also, the link between colour, mood and behaviour is clearly seen as Noah's habits create a perception of weight and seriousness about him. As a non-colour that absorbs all the energies around, black is often negatively associated with pain, fear, desperation, worthlessness, repentance, sorrow, mourning, and lack of humour as exemplified in Noah's life. One quickly

agrees with Styan that drama, (in this case, *The Twist*) is “no mere setting up of a camera to nature: it is a presentation in parable of the conflicts between man and his environment (64). Yerima leads the reader to form a judgement believing that people's consciousness of the world and its destinies will change.

WORKS CITED

- David, MaCann. “The Astrology of Colours.” Skyscript. June 23 2002 <http://www.skyscript.co.uk/colour.html>
- Kaiser, J. “Colour Symbolism.” Wired for Success. November 11, 2002 <http://www.wiredforsuccess/coloursymbolism.html>
- Osofisan Femi. “Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre.” in Oyin Ogunba & Abiola Irele (eds). *Theatre in Africa*. Ibadan: Ibadan Univ Press, 1978.
- Styan J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice I Realism and Naturalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Wright, Angela. “History of Colour.” Colour Affects. February, 2002 <http://www.colouraffects.co.uk/psypro.html>
- Yerima, Ahmed. *The Twist*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2004.
- Yetunde, Akorede. “The Playwright and the Consciousness of a Nation in Crisis in Jide Malomo and Saint Gbilekaa (eds). *Theatre and Politics in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications Limited, 1993.