

Alienation in Ahmed Yerima's *The Wives and Yemoja*

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Abstract

The study investigated the presence of alienation in the two plays – The Wives and Yemoja by Ahmed Yerima. The purpose of the research was to determine whether alienation is present in the plays. The two plays were read sufficiently and in the course of the reading, we discovered that the characters both females and males exhibited two types of alienation while the female are powerless, the males are normless. Both powerlessness and normlessness are forms of alienation. Powerlessness used in this essay means the inability to help oneself because of certain constraints while normlessness means “the lack of commitment to shared social prescription of behaviour.” It was discovered that the male characters, Esu especially Ogun and Esu in Yemoja and Chief Theophilus Gbadegeshin Olowookere in The Wives exploited the female characters to the extent of alienation – powerlessness. The male characters exhibited normlessness in the treatment of the female characters. The male characters used manipulation intrigues and cajoling to intimidate, suppress and dehumanize the female characters. The work reaches the conclusion that alienation is present in The Wives and Yemoja.

Introduction

The plays *The Wives* and *Yemoja* parade female characters that are marginalized, dehumanized and suppressed by male characters who are in the plays. We see them alienated in one form or the other because of their sex. The female characters in *The Wives* are Auntimi, Tobi, Angela and Cecelia while in *Yemoja* we have Yemoja.

Alienation as of literary term has many definitions. Some of which are powerlessness, meaningless, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement, normlessness and social isolation and anomie (Encyclopedia Britannica). Anomie is also used synonymously as alienation and it is defined as “a social condition similar to alienation, caused by the disintegration of accepted codes (The New Websters Dictionary). Depends on the occasion, any of the meanings above can apply.

In the two plays which we are focusing on in this essay, we would apply the terms powerlessness and normlessness. The female characters in the two plays exhibit powerlessness and the males exhibit normlessness. Powerlessness means that the females have no powers of their own of knowing and solving the dilemma they have found themselves. They have to depend on supernatural being external forces to rescue them. For example, Yemoja in *Yemoja* is subjected to intrigues by Esu – a male character who lies to her about her “husband” Ogun. Esu tells Yemoja that her husband, Ogun is reckless with women and infact has other ‘wives’ lovers outsider her. She is powerless and naïve to realize that Esu is jealous of Ogun, because she, Yemoja had turned down the hand of Esu who proposed to marry her some six months before.

When Yemoja accepts the marriage proposal of Ogun and all of a sudden duty calls Ogun to war front, Ogun gives his calabash of life to Yemoja to keep for him with an instruction that she should not open it for whatever reason. Ogun also instructs Esu, his best friend to watch over Yemoja while he (Ogun) is away.

YEMOJA: Go, if you must, Ogun
 But don’t leave me unprotected

I was advised you would do this,
go Ogun

OGUN: (Ogun breaks into a big laugh)
Is that all?
Howu, Yemoja
Did you think that Ogun was that heartless?
And leave you unattended?
Never! Ogun's own is always protected.
Esu my trusted friend will see to that.
He will keep his watchful eyes on my own.

YEMOJA: Ho oo! That devil of a man. Don't call him Ogun
I would have liked to remember him in sweeter
terms, but the devil of a man

OGUN: Esu is not a devil of a man
He is the spirit of the devil himself
His mind, not his strength, is the restless one.
Yet he is a bag of fun. Esu is my great friend,
and I love him to his trickster bones.
Esu is good, Esu is my great friend.
..... (20-21)

Yemoja opens the 'calabash of life' because Esu, tells her that Ogun her lover has other lovers. Whereas, Esu lied. Yemoja has no way of knowing.

In the *Wives*, too, we see Tobi being deceived by her husband Chief Theophilus Gbadegeshin Olowookere that he was going for a medical checkup whereas he went to see his ex-wife, a banker, where he went to borrow some money and ended up sleeping with the woman. Tobi too, has no way of knowing that her husband lied to her. She is powerless.

TOBI: (crying, runs to the coffin). You old cheat.
Was that the medical check-up you told
me you were going to attend? You said I
was too much for two, but enough for
you. You lied to me... Theo... you lied to
your pumpkin (Breaks down) (51)

Auntimi also suffers the same fate as Tobi. Chief Theophilus-Olowookere had committed incest with Auntimi his sister, while they were young and living together. The incest resulted into a pregnancy which both of them decided to hide till the pregnancy was due. At the due time, Chief takes Auntimi to Ibadan to have the baby. A baby boy is delivered life, hale and hearty, but Chief deceives lies to her (Auntimi) that the baby is still-born and that he had told them to bury the baby, whereas, it is fake news. Chief takes the baby to a place, probably an orphanage where the baby is raised. He trains him as a lawyer and later becomes his lawyer without telling his sister, Auntimi that the boy is her son. Auntimi never knew of the child's (boy) existence till Chief passes on at the revelation of the gods. Other female characters in the novel are also deceived by Chief Olowookere, their husband. Our take is that females have always been subjected to manipulation, intrigues, suppression, and relegation by male dominated African society in particular and the world in general and therefore suffer alienation.

Review of Literature

Many critics have reviewed the dramas of Ahmed Yerima from different perspectives. In particular, Emmanuel Okwechime has examined *Yemoja* from the perspective of the "Theme of Honour" where he identifies the different types of honour to include: "Honour as personal identity," "as inheritance from ancestors," "Dilemma love and honour," "Honour of a good wife," "honour of women," and "honour of trust." (1-8) He sufficiently listed the different characters who struggled to retain their

honour either in an honourable way or using dishonourable method. Esu and Yemoja are those who tried to regain their honour using negative means, while Obatala and Ogun use positive means to regain their honour.

Another critic, Rantimi Jays Julius-Adeoye also ex-ray the dramas of Yerima where he categorises the plays into Historical Realist plays, e.g. *Attahiru*, *Ameh Oboni the Great*, *The trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Erelu Kutu*; Religious Plays – *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil Mirror Cracks*, *The Bishop and the Soul* and *The Wives*, and Socio-Political Realist Play – *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe* and *Little Drops* (14).

Particularly, he says *The Wives* is a domestic dark comedy. Yerima “craftily weaves the age-old societal moral issues of incest, rape, divorce and religious hypocrisy into the play” (15). While, Ade Adeniji and Niyi Osunbade both posit that “Ahmed Yerima’s drama have largely concentrated on plot, structure, characterization, thematisation, stylistic and pragmatic features in his texts” (11). The duo of Adeniji and Osunbade therefore, focus on “a pragmatic investigation of Yerima’s Yoruba culture-based play *Majagbe*, aimed at enhancing an understanding of Yerima, culture-based plays by establishing a thematic link between the play and culture through rigorous application of the theory of pragmeme” (1).

Likewise, Idowu Odebode and Adesewa Odesanya posit that “studies on Ahmed Yerima have focused on the literary aspect of his texts to the exclusion of the linguistic perspective”. They therefore focused on the socio-pragmatic study of the play *Ade Ire*.

The last but not the least of the critics we are reviewing that critique Yerima’s dramas is Osita C. Ezenwanebe. In her work entitled “*The Empowered Women in Ahmed Yerima’s Drama*” she examines ... “the images of educationally empowered female characters in the drama of Ahmed Yerima. The texts she selected to achieve the theme are *The Wives*, *The Sisters*, *The Portraits* and *The Mirror*. Particularly, she opines that “*The Wives* is a gentle satire on the plight of women as sisters and wives in the family” (190). Though the wives here are educated, like Dr. Cecelia Olowookere being a banker and a holder of honorary Ph.D. she is still subjected to

manipulation and intrigues and as such, she separated from her husband, Chief Olowookere ten years before his death. Ezenwanebe also sees Tobi, the last wife of Chief Olowookere as highly educated being an executive cabin crew in one of the major airlines. Tobi, despite her education and empowerment lost everything because nothing is willed to her in Chief Olowookere's Will. She had married Chief with 'her heart' and not her 'head'. She did not think of the consequences of marrying a man of 75 years while she is only 19. She is deceived not to have children from the union by her husband and she accepts forgetting that by the time the man dies, it is the children (male) he will will his estate to going by the culture of a patriarchal society that the setting of the play is based.

From the reviews above, it is very obvious that no critic has analysed *The Wives* and *Yemoja* from the perspective of alienation. Therefore, this essay posits that the female characters in both plays suffer "powerlessness" while the males exhibit normlessness.

Powerlessness and the Female Characters in *Yemoja* and *The Wives*

Powerlessness as one of the meanings of alienation is when a character is confronted with problems and is unable to rescue him/herself or solve such problem(s) by himself or herself. He/she waits or seeks divine intervention to resolve such problems. Yemoja in *Yemoja* falls into this category. She is accused of infidelity with Obatala whereas there is nothing like that. She is unable to help herself to clear the dishonor that has been brought on her name. Esu, the architect of the mischief is supposed to have kept watch over Yemoja when her supposed lover husband, Ogun went to war. As stated earlier, at the call of Ogun to warfront, he tells Esu to help watch over Yemoja so that something untowards does not happen to her. Though Yemoja protested, Ogun did not listen to her. In Esu's presence too, Ogun gives Yemoja his calabash of life and instructed that on no account should Yemoja open the calabash. Esu knows the consequence(s) of Yemoja opening the calabash of life. Yet, he lies to her that her 'husband,' Ogun is not faithful to her. Yemoja, instead of waiting for Ogun to return and then

confront him with the allegation decides to take revenge by opening the calabash of life. At the opening of the calabash, power leaves Ogun in the battlefield and he is wounded. At the opening of the calabash too, Yemoja becomes paralysed in her left hand and leg – Yemoja not wanting to remain in that state of paralysis till Ogun returns, begs Esu to help her get cured. Esu in his mischief demands that Yemoja should spend two nights with him (have sex with him). Yemoja pleads with Esu but he refuses at the end Yemoja agrees to spend a night with Esu so she could be healed.

YEMOJA: Yeh... I am in pain
Esu, save me. My foot, my arm, I
cannot feel any power. Esu save
me.

ESU: I will save you if you can promise
me that once you are well, you
shall spend two nights with me.

YEMOJA: Two nights, Esu, I cannot be
unfaithful to Ogun.

ESU: Then lie there and wait for
Ogun...
She wants to be faithful with one
leg and one hand.
Yemoja, lie there and wait for
Ogun.

YEMOJA: Esu, please, I beg you. I shall stay
with you for one night only,
please, save me from shame. (30-
31)

The same Esu, after sending his friend Obatala to Yemoja to cure her of her disease also goes to the battle field to inform Ogun of Yemoja's disobedience of opening the calabash of life and being unfaithful to Ogun by being immodest with Obatala. Esu also lied to Ogun that it is Obatala who encouraged Yemoja to open the calabash of life.

In all these, Yemoja is unable to help herself she is powerless to know what the future holds for her when Ogun returns. Ogun too, being wounded in battle is suspicious that something evil has happened somewhere. At this point too, Esu appears at the battle field to report to Ogun the unfaithfulness of Yemoja. Esu lies again to Ogun on the circumstance(s) surrounding how Yemoja opened the calabash of life. Ogun is ready to kill both Yemoja and Obatala without finding out the truth of the matter. We therefore see Yemoja as a victim of manipulation, suppression and intimidation. Esu manipulates her to submitting herself to Obatala's nursing. Yemoja suffers suppression going by the method Esu manipulates her to – the opening of the calabash of life. She is also seriously intimidated by Esu to the extent that she agrees to spend a night with Esu after she gets cured.

Yemoja is battered from all angles – Esu, Ogun and even Asipa who is not ready to know the circumstances surrounding why Yemoja opened the calabash of life. Yemoja is therefore, powerless to help herself in all that happened to her.

In the same vein, Chief Theophilus Gbadegeshin Olowookere in *The Wives* also subjects his wives and sister into a state of powerlessness. From Angela, his first wife, to Cecelia his second wife, and Tobi, the third wife and his sister Auntimi, Chief manipulates them, lies to them so much so that Angela the first wife does not know that her own first son Seyi, is not Chief's first son. She stays put in the marriage for thirty-five years without knowing that at the death of her husband, her son will not inherit the father's property.

Cecelia, the second wife leaves or separates from Chief when she notices that Chief was manipulative, suppressive and intimidative. She leaves with her two children and the property she is able to lay hands on and tells Chief that the two cars she takes are for the payment of each child she has for him. Excerpt.

ANGELA: I think Theo (Chief) started dying from the day you left. As he read the divorce papers from the court he cried. Then when he read your letter in which you said you took the children because they were yours to take, and the two cars one each as payment for each child, he wept more.

CECELIA: I was young, and besides I had to hurt him so that he would release me from the yoke of marriage. I had to hurt him... I wanted to go.
(41)

Tobi, Chief's last wife is even more powerless than the first two wives. Tobi at age 19 years marries Chief, a 75 years old man. Chief never disclosed his age to Tobi and it is at his death that she gets to know the age of the man she had married for two years! She is manipulated and cajoled by Chief not to have any child from the union and she accepts. She has no means of knowing that the marriage will not last for long. She has no means to know that when Chief dies, there will be nothing for her in the Will. She has no means to know that she will be thrown out of Chief's house after his burial. All of the above points to powerlessness. It is only Auntimi, who tries to guide and guard her aright but that too did not work because she was not pregnant as at the time chief died.

Similarly, Auntimi, the sister of Chief suffers more in the hands of Chief than even his wives. Auntimi remains unmarried till old age because she has been manipulated and suppressed by chief not to marry. Though she has a child through the incest committed with Chief, she is not aware of the child because chief hides the fact from her. It is an abomination that the brother (Chief) and sister (Auntimi) have a child together, but Chief never allowed Auntimi to know that the fruit of the pregnancy ever survived. Chief takes the child at birth, maybe to an orphanage home, made sure the baby was well catered for and saw him through school till he became a lawyer. He makes the son his own lawyer. All these he did without telling Auntimi. It can be argued that it is because of the child of Auntimi for him that he discouraged Auntimi from getting married. They (Chief and Auntimi) had promised not to hide anything from each other. While Auntimi keeps her own side of the promise, Chief never did. Excerpt,

AUNTIMI: See how still you lie, my dear brother. Cold and still.... There is all this talk about you being a high Chief and Bishop Oladunjoye is threatening not to give you a church service until all this is cleared up. After all you did for the church.... We promised never to keep secrets from each other, but see, all these unveiling truths are getting me all confused. (11-12)

Auntimi is powerless to know the inner workings of Chief till death came calling on Chief and the truth unveils. It is through the reading of the Will that Auntimi gets to know that the lawyer that has always being to the house to attend to Chief's concerns is her own son.

The truth would not have been known had Ifagbayi, a male character who consulted the oracle to ascertain the authentic first son of Chief. At the consultation, the oracle rejects Seyi as the first son of Chief. Auntimi is taken aback. She is not in the know that the lawyer is Chief's son, her own son

too. The lawyer too is not in the know that Chief is his father and Auntimi is his mother. All these go to show that Chief is manipulative. Excerpt.

AUNTIMI: I am telling the truth Baba. My son is dead.
(Begins to cry) I had a son once, Baba, but he died at childbirth. My brother (Chief) never lied to me.

IFAGBAYI: Ifa does not lie. Her son lives.

AJAGBE: Did you see the child?

AUNTIMI: No. But they said he was a stillborn. I was young... and I had no reason not to believe them.

AJAGBE: Who is the father of the child!

AUNTIMI: Gbadegeshin... my late brother. (59)

At the end of the play, Auntimi identifies the lawyer, Akande as the eldest son of Chief. What an irony! That the lawyer that has been part of the family, running Chief's businesses is his son and the wives, Angela, Cecelia, and Tobi never knew! Even the lawyer too never knew he was Chief's son. Excerpt:

AJAGBE: It appears that we are back to where we started. Who is Chief's first male child? Lawyer, did he not tell you? Do you know him?

AKANDE: No. He never told me. I just assumed it was Seyi. I mean it was obvious it was him. I mean who else?

AJAGBE: So you know Seyi?

AKANDE: Yes, like a brother. We are great friends. I took him back to America after the accident...

AJAGBE: Yes... You did what?

AKANDE: Lost my mother. Chief was so kind to us. Twenty years ago. That was when I started working for him (Chukles). *Funny how you think you know someone and you don't really know the person at all.* All the time, Chief never mentioned a first son. Now he leaves me with the burden of finding him. Where do I start from? (55-56)

The underlined lines in the excerpt above show the meaning of powerlessness. All along, all the female characters in the play thought they knew chief very well. Even the lawyer too is in this category. He thought he knew chief sufficiently, being his lawyer! Alas, they are all wrong! They are all powerless to know Chief from Adam.

Normlessness and the Male Characters in *The Wives and Yemoja*

Normlessness according to Britannica as one of the meaning of Alienation "is lack of commitment to shared social prescription for behaviour" (574). Very few male characters are characterized in the two plays under study.

In *The Wives*, the major male character, Chief Theophilus Gbadegeshin is introduced to us as a dead body. We meet him at his funeral lying in state. But from the storyline, he was the architect of the fate of all

the female characters in the play, *The Wives!* As the brother to Auntimi, she commit incest with her and it results to a pregnancy which Auntimi, had at the due time and Chief told her that the child had died; whereas he lied. He deprives Auntimi the choice of marrying after she had a child for him because of selfishness and lack of commitment. But Auntimi was committed to the agreement she had with her brother Chief. This we can see in the opening scene of the play. Excerpt:

AUNTIMI: See how still you lie, my dear brother. Cold and still.

There is all this talk about you being a high Chief and Bishiop Olodunjoye is threatening not to give you a church service until all this is cleared up.

.....

All because of your little indiscretion of joining... that ... oh, I wish you had told me ... How come you never told me? We promised never to keep secrets from each other, but see, all these unveiling truths are getting me all confused.

...

The villagers want you buried at home with them... they claim they own you.

So, I stand by you, and even if everybody now says I am an old witch for instituting, I will stand by you still in death. I have arranged it.

Trust me. (11-12)

The above excerpt shows how a committed character acts in the face of any circumstance. Chief lacks the example above and therefore betrays his sister, Auntimi.

Chief's wives too, Angela, Cecelia and Tobi are all deceived by Chief because he was not committed to adhering to doing the right thing. He

never disclosed to Angela his first wife he married for 35 years that he had a senior son besides Seyi, the first born male child and son of Angela. It is at his death that this fact is revealed. For Tobi, he deceived her not to have a child from their wedlock, knowing full well that at the end of his life, he will not leave anything for her to inherit as a wife. He also did not disclose his real age to Tobi. We are sure, if he had done so, Tobi would not have married him with her "heart" but with her "head". All of the above, point to the fact that Chief Gbadegeshin was never committed to share social prescription for behaviour.

Socially, one would have expected Chief to be committed to doing the right thing. For example, after committing incest with his younger sister and she had had a child for him, which he hides from her, he should have allowed her to get married to a man she loved so that she could chart her own course in life. Instead, Chief deprived her of doing so. He chased away her suitor with a gun. We get to know this from the discussion of Chief's wives (Cecelia and Angela), after Chief demise. Excerpt.

CECELIA: I was not... period. That is why I admire Auntimi. She is dedicated... so loyal... so docile. I mean with all the rubbish Theo threw at her, she took it all calmly, always with a smile. Me? sister or no sister, I would have walked out of here along time ago.

ANGELA: I drew a lot of inspiration from her. Sometimes I think I stayed not because of the children but because she stayed. Poor woman...

CECELIA: Where will she go now? Theo's death must have hit her the most. She is too old for any kind of job. I heard she is well educated. I wish I could help her. May be I should open an account for her at the bank or something.

ANGELA: Well, I will get Seyi to get her something from his inheritance. Theo might have left her

nothing. I guess that is why people looked at her with sadness when they came here. It was her they felt sorry for.

CECELIA: We all owe her. She advised me to leave, you know? She was the first to see the handwriting on the wall. My marriage was over and she felt I was living an unhappy life. She gave herself as the example. How Theo chased the man she loved out of this house with a gun. How they, her brother and herself now decided to play the hurting game. For each happiness Theo drove from her life, she stayed on to make him remember what he had done to her (The Wives: 41-42).

Esu and Ogun also exhibits or display normlessness in the manner in which they treated Yemoja in *Yemoja*. Yemoja, the only female character is betrayed and deceived by Esu. Esu was supposed to keep watch over her when Ogun left for battle front but instead he deceived her into doing what she was forbidden by Ogun not to do – opening of “the calabash of life”. Esu displays this betrayal because he is not committed to prescribed shared social behaviour which makes a society to be harmonious and worth a living. Hence at the end of the play, Yemoja decided to leave the face of the earth and go to where she will be treated like a decent being. Excerpt:

YEMOJA: Orunmila o.....
The great wise one, my lips cannot remain firm, watch all this dust thrown around me. Ogun takes my love beyond me and brings it to the market square to sell me cheap in the eyes of many. Now his temper blurs my emotions and allows the senseless take hold of his manly wits. I shall not be the prized bull of these men. Oh no, I won't.

Orunmila my father
 The dust of these men carry the stain of shame
 leaving the sour taste on my lips. Before
 Olodunmare, I am innocent.
 And yet before your eyes... I hate to think what
 you think I am.
 Therefore, I shall leave you all to the intrigues
 of your minds.
 To a place where I shall be an egg whose yoke
 shall be the key to life
 I shall today step into the big blue sea answering
 to the different needs of all who call me Yemoja,
 Emanja, Orisa n'la.

Ogun, too, is not left out in the display of betrayal of Yemoja. He refuses to listen to Yemoja's explanation about what transpired between her and Obatala, her heater. Even when she tries to convince Ogun not to judge by what he saw her doing with Obatala, Ogun refuses to believe her. This attitude of Ogun goes to show that he never really trusted Yemoja. Excerpt:

YEMOJA: I am so happy, I could sing and dance at the same time. Orisa'ala, I thank you...

OBATALA: You flatter me, Yeye.

YEMOJA: You flatter me with happiness. If I had the powers, I would have given you a new wife myself but Yemowo will kill me.

OBATALA: She will. And the joke is, I won't even know what to do with a new wife unless she can cook as good as you.

YEMOJA: Then, why don't I follow you myself.

OBATALA: Ogun will kill me. (they both laugh)

YEMOJA: Drink the wine, it is very fresh

OBATALA: It is too strong. It is good palmwine only for Ogun. If I take a sip I will dance all night, and forget to go home.

YEMOJA: Very good. That is what I like in a man. A man who can dance, is in tune with the gods. Obatala, dance for me.

.....

Meanwhile Ogun and Esu are in hiding watching the scene. Ogun attacks Obatala....

OGUN: Prepare to meet Olodumare today.

OBATALA: Ogun, you choke me

ESU: Ogun, not now

OGUN: You saw them did you not?

ESU: I did. But not now, not this way.

OGUN: What other way does one destroy a usurper?
Obatala, I shall kill you today.

YEMOJA: Please, Ogun, it is not what you think.
(Tries to hold him)

OGUN: Don't touch me, woman. First him, then I shall deal with you later. And to think I thought we could be married.

YEMOJA: It is not what you think, Ogun. Leave him alone, don't kill him. Control your tempter. (42-45)

The above dialogue/conversation portrays Ogun as a character that is not committed to his promise to Yemoja when he first proposes to marry her before he was suddenly called to the battle field. He promises to protect her but in this scene; he is ready to kill her along with Obatala. He refuses to listen to Yemoja's side of the story. It is true that Ogun saw the scene above, but it is not as if Yemoja means to have an affair with Obatala. Yemoja is highly delighted to be whole again and demonstrates this by her conversation with Obatala.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the two plays under focus, one can rightly say that Ahmed Yerima in the plays displays or exposes the characters both the males and the females as being alienated in one form or the other by the manner they have been characterized in the plays. Firstly, the female characters are helpless. Their fate is determined by the males in the plays while the male characters exhibit lack of commitment to shared social prescription for behaviour – which is the same as having betrayed the females in both plays. We therefore submit that alienation is prominently displayed in the plays.

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