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## REPRESENTATION OF DÉJÀ VU AND FEMINISM: A PSYCHOANALYST READING OF AHMED YERIMA'S *AETU*

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### ABSTRACT

Déjà vu refers to an emotion that makes a person to dwell or live absolutely on the past memories of unpleasant or bitter experiences that is strategically used to recreate history as portrayed in Ahmed Yerima's *Aetu*. Existing studies on human emotions and historical plays have mostly focused on celebration and chronicling of male historical characters and their historical predicaments, sometimes ignoring the use of emotion as a technique to create feminine heroism in historical drama. This paper, therefore, examines déjà vu as a technique for interrogating the psychic context for unfolding historical content in order to account for the development of feminine heroism. The study adopts David Lolliff's model of psychoanalysis as the theoretical framework. This is to allow for the investigation of character's emotional feeling and to privilege the psychic context above the historical content. It uses a purposively sampled play by Ahmed Yerima: *Aetu* as data. There will be a critical analysis of déjà vu in both content and form. The study finds out that déjà vu serves as a technique of foreshadowing and flashback to both the physical and psychological conflicts in the play. Déjà vu is used as signifier of heroine's traumas, which are precipitated by her callous and naïve behaviors on the one hand, and revelations of her family and communal histories on the other. Therefore, déjà vu is a strategy in Yerima's reconstruction of history.

**Keywords:** Déjà vu, Feminism, Emotional representation, Historical play, Psychic context.

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### Introduction

A growing number of emotional studies in literary engagement in Africa are brought to the fore in recent time. These scholarly studies have addressed strategically the development of characters especially historical personages in African milieu. They have significantly celebrated and chronicled male historical characters and their historical predicaments in their domains. However, existing studies on human emotions and historical plays ignore female characters with much emphasis on

kings, emperors and princes. This study rethinks this position and argues that there is a patent representation of déjà vu as a pattern of human emotion in some African historical plays. Moreover, this paper postulates that the representation of déjà vu often accounts for the psycho-physiological development of feminine heroism against disillusionment, dislocation, displacement and other societal stases experienced by women in African society.

From the above, this study is an investigation to the characters' unconscious motives and emotions to showcase the experiences, conflicts and challenges of womanhood in African historical play in an attempt to solve the contemporary crisis of gender marginalization and patriarchal hegemony in Africa. It is well argued in this research that the effects of emotional representation of déjà vu on gender consciousness elucidate their indifference, disillusionment and feelings of marginalization in their various geographical locations, this, of course, is the thrust of this paper. The uniqueness of this study lies in its hybridization of drama, history, feminism and psychology to justify the cross-cultural nature and comparativeness of literature from African perspective.

#### **Theoretical Preliminaries**

From Hornby (2015), déjà vu as a distinct pattern of human emotion is a psychological frame of mind or feeling that makes a person to dwell or live absolutely on the past memories of unpleasant or bitter experiences. When characters in literary texts exhibit a behavior of emotional representation of mismatching the present situation with the mistake of the past, it will create an aura of loneliness, dejection, indifference and self-perceived marginalization. How Ahmed Yerima, an African playwright connects feminism with déjà vu to portray prevalent and persistent knotty issues of disillusionment and marginalization shall be explored artistically.

Having highlighted the centrality of déjà vu as emotional material in conceptual perspective, it will be fascinating to overview the concept of déjà vu and its psycho-physiological effects on human beings by extension on characters in historical plays. Loliff (2004) attributes déjà vu to be the feeling of having previously seen or experienced something or having dreamt about a similar situation or place that one seems to be mysteriously reminded of the situation or experience in conscious mind. (26). Titchener (1928:68), a psychologist, explains that déjà vu is caused by a person having a brief glimpse of an object or situation or experience before the brain has completed constructing a full conscious perception of the situation or experience. From

Loliff and Titchener above, déjà vu can be said to be a recollection of a poignant and bitter experience that lingers in the mind of the sufferer and that further determines how the sufferer handles present or current issues or situations. Cleary (2008:355) ascribes déjà vu to "a mismatching in the brain to mistake the present for the past".

From Loliff, Titchner and Cleary's views on déjà vu, it is succinctly glaring that déjà vu as a technique in literary text engages the mind of the audience by providing them with some prevailing and salient revelations and symbolism about some characters, which are hidden from the characters themselves. Thus, déjà vu mirrors the possibilities of gradual realities that are derivable from the unconscious emotional feeling and impression. A very vital observation from these scholarly postulations is that déjà vu is a sensory signal in human being, as it allows the affected to integrate his or her thoughts, to regulate his or her mood and to control or heighten emotions from distressing experiences. Déjà vu, therefore, is an unconscious emotion or feeling whose operation and manifestation creep from the level of unconsciousness to consciousness. Another component of this paper is African historical plays, therefore, it will be rewarding to review critical writings on them. Scholarly engagements on African historical plays have revealed how playwrights of different ages have responded differently to historical materials available to them, whether they are factual or mythical. While some have tried not to deviate from course of history, other have consciously 'forced' on their material, their artistic vision. Asein (1991) and Ogude (1991) see the use of historical materials in plays, especially in the plays that deal with the cruel pangs of colonialism on Africans as an idea of reopening a healed wound. This view fails to appreciate the heroic resistance of the African monarchs to the British imperialists. This is not sacrosanct since not all African historical plays dwell on colonialism. Jegede (2007), Yerima (2007), Asagba (2004) and Adeoti (2009) opine that historical plays are engaged in order to celebrate and propagate cultural dignity and grandeur. This view is apt because it illustrates the importance of cultural hermeneutics and concepts. Although, there

might be celebratory undertones in historical plays, yet their instructiveness to the society cannot be ignored. In another vein, Yerima (2009), Wilson (2005) and Haney (2006) see history-drama nexus as an enterprise for tragedy. This position implies that African historical plays are companion of tragedy and disillusionment. To buttress Yerima, Wilson and Haney is the fact that through biographies of past heroes, one can deduce that the universe is friendly with some and hostile to some. Therefore, historical tragedy assumes or claims that the universe is indifferent to the protagonist or human concerns, and often cruel and malevolent. Sometimes, the innocent appear to suffer while the evil prosper. Some people are capable of despicable deeds while other can confront challenges and adversities with little success or no success. They have posited a good argument, however, the fault in their argument is that, not all historical plays are tragedy. As the critical engagement on African historical plays widens, the relics of cultural contacts and conflicts and their attendant effects on the society become glaring. Nonetheless, the reiterations that colonial histories should be resisted, regenerated and rejuvenated to 'right' the wrong of colonialism are suggested by critics such as Osofisan (2001), Dasylva (2003), Chiegwe (2004), Aliyu (2013). Thus, they argue that historical plays are used as tools for a change in society. In alliance with this, Osanyemi (2015), Abdulahi (2013) and Adedeji (2010) opine that all historical plays not only colonial histories should invigorate and rejuvenate cultural values and lustrous change in human society.

Since the study is on Ahmed Yerima's historical play, *Aetu*, it will be expedient to observe views of critics on Yerima's recourse to history as a source. Uwamsoba, Akoh, Uwatt and Adeniyi in *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (2007) have opined that Yerima's dramaturgy is for specific purpose of either absolving African monarchs, heroes and heroines from alleged guilt of complicity or celebrating their heroism in resisting any form of imperialism. An overview of the above literature and others only celebrate and profile historical characters with little or no consideration for contemporary knotty issue on gender consciousness and patriarchal hegemony through

instrumentality of déjà vu as a technique to redefine or reconstruct history. This is the lacuna that the proposed study seeks to fill.

To establish the turgid effects of unconscious feeling of déjà vu on conscious mind in order to interrogate history shall be the sole aim of this paper with three specific objectives: to examine the paradigmatic representation of déjà vu as a pattern of human emotion to account for the socio-political dislocation, disillusionment and marginalization experience by women in African society, to examine déjà vu as a technique for establishing psychic context for unfolding historical content and to examine to examine the connection between history and drama in order to identify the emerging form of drama from the text.

To achieve this aim, the study will use purposively sampled text with feminine heroism by Ahmed Yerima: *Aetu* as data for critical textual analysis. There will be critical analysis of déjà vu as recurring technique in both content and form in the text. The critical textual analysis be influenced by David Lolliff's model of psychoanalysis. The essence of psychoanalysis is to allow for the investigation of characters emotional feeling and mindset and to interrogate the psychic context for unfolding historical content, our research instrument will be library both the conventional and the internet.

The paper stands to correct the popular argument that historical plays are meant for cultural grandeur and propagation and for chronicling remarkable characters and deeds. Their roles as astute catalysts for a positive change and growth of human society are analytically x-rayed in this work. Similarly, the significance of this work lies on the fact that it will afford the reader an opportunity to a wider knowledge of emotion and déjà vu not only as unconscious memory but also as latent symbol and syndrome for conflicting circumstances in life. Notably, this work will provide a useful insight for the expansion of frontiers of knowledge as it presents déjà vu as a quintessential strategy in African drama for reconstruction of history.

#### The Aesthetic of Déjà vu

*Aetu* is a play that blends factual realities of the common people, the down trodden and the people

that are negatively affected by the past societal traditions which are still creeping into the contemporary world. With dramatic aesthetics and dexterity, Yerima portrays the pathetic and helpless state of womanhood under the firm grip of patriarchal hegemony and neurosis of tradition of inheritance in African culture.

The play places its historical content within the history of the common people. It re-presents the life story of the author's grandmother, Aetu. However, it is not entirely based on the profile of the playwright's grandmother but only on the bitter and unpleasant experiences and dehumanizing treatment the society metes out for as a result of men's strong adherence to the debasing tradition of inheritance and widowhood. In the author's note, he comments:

Aetu... my paternal grandmother, a woman tough to the bones, inspired this play. I never knew her as an adult. But she loved me ... or so I was told by my mother, Sadaatu, who dreads the memory of her till this day. But my father loved her as he had first shortened the longer name Ayishatu and replaced it with Aetu. And then deified her before her death, in his soul.... The real Aetu's life is slightly different from the one in this play. But in a sad way, they were both victims of women as subject of inheritance within one family (7)

From this note, the play presents Yerima as an erudite artist, a mediator of some sort who is equipped with the hermeneutics of historical facts available to him, either written or oral, to blend fiction with fact. The available records of his grandmother, he transfers to a historical play, *Aetu*. To him there is something lucid, lustrous, unusual and remarkable about Aetu, his grandmother that he wants to make known to the public. It is pertinent to note that the play identifies with the proletariat. This idea of blending the factual, history and the experience of the common people proves that Yerima artistic writings and talents are eclectic and commendable because it will afford the audience and society at large to note and know the

plights of the downtrodden and common people and, at the same time, instill the spirit and sense of belonging in the entire society.

As a historical piece, it bemoans the callousness and wickedness of some men in society, especially when issues of personal or individual interest are at stake. It also decries some obnoxious inherited traditions that are dehumanizing in human society. In this wise, the neurosis of patriarchal hegemony in the play negatively affects an innocent young girl, Aetu, whose innocence is bitterly transformed into a perpetual anger, pain and hermitic life of sorrow and revenge. By extension, the negative transformation from innocence to anger and vendetta vividly showcases dislocation, displacement, disillusionment, indifference and marginalization the obvious hallmarks of gender consciousness.

The plot structure exposes the young Aetu in her teen to the intrigue and callousness in the human world. She is denied her heartfelt love, Atiba who is murdered by Oke. Oke a man of about seventy years wants to marry Aetu by force because he has money and influence. When Oke has killed Atiba, he mercilessly raped Aetu. Surprisingly, Oke tries to exonerate himself after committing two heinous crimes – murder and rape. The product of the bitter experience of the rape and forced marriage is Obajimi, son of Aetu. Aetu never knows comfort psychologically. Her mind is always full of turbulence and restiveness since her real love, Atiba has been gruesomely murdered. Consequently, she goes to seek revenge from Esu, a fiery god of revenge and evil. At the Esu shrine, she pronounces curses on her husband, Oke, their son and generations after them. With the pronounced curse, Oke dies mysteriously. After his death, the inheritance rite gives Aetu to another husband, a brother of Oke who also dies of the spell of the curse. She is later inherited by the younger sibling of the dead husband who also suffers similar fate of sudden mysterious death. Aetu, not yet satisfied with the result of the curse, decides to be indifferent to the sons she has by the three dead husbands and she finally commits suicide by stabbing herself with a knife.

In the artistic creation and psycho-physiological development of Aetu as a heroine, the playwright

presents her frame of mind with heavy doses of *déjà vu* as she dwells absolutely on her past poignant experiences. Her entire manner of handling situations in the play is gear towards *déjà vu*. Her inability to let go of the past makes the play to be more tragic than it ought to be. Aetu does not allow the bitter memory of the gruesome killing of Atiba, Oke's rape and her forced marriage to Oke to fade away with the passage of time. She always mismatches the present situation with the mistake of the past and this provides unalloyed credence to the concept and operation of *déjà vu* as postulated by Loliff (2004) and Cleary (2008). This makes her to be vengeful and she explains to Saura, the priest of Esu, the god of destruction and revenge. All she wants is to curse the man who killed her lover, Atiba, and later married her illegitimately. She explains:

He tied my legs to each side of the wooden bed and two of his sons held each hand so that I will not have hands to pull at his grey beard, and scratch his lecherous old face. With his breath burning my chest like the panting of a bull, he forced his way in ..... bringing me to the edge of life. See how now, I am with his calf. Give me the pebble, Baba. Esu awaits my course ..... Like the members of hell, I burn. The whole world hurts me, but ..... the old fool they call my husband, he shall burn into the dark vault of his crypt. Baba ..... The pebble of Esu, please (18).

Yerima creates his heroine with a mindset to mock the patriarchal hegemony and the wickedness of man, and to preach the gospel of flexibility or change. Aetu refuses to change from the past to present. She ignores all the entreatment of Saura, the priest to accept everything as fate. The priest even warns her of the consequences of her rash intention. She does not see anything good in her present world anymore. To her, the only good person has been buried in the past with the death of Atiba. The working of *déjà vu* makes her to be indifferent to the world and the advice of the priest who entreats her:

Be a chameleon who changes colour quietly, not a frog who hops about, croaking for attention. As a woman, you could handle this matter with more caution; and come out the richer for it. Use your charm, woman. Be the ideal woman created by Obatala. Use the woman in you. If you allow my god Esu to weep for you, he may bleed on your behalf for a little scratch. Let tempers cool, and the bitterness of your bile may even taste like honey. Caution! (19).

Surprisingly, as a mother to be, Aetu is very obstinate and she opts for revenge and thereby incurs the wrath of Esu to herself, her husband, her husband's family and even unborn children and grand children thereafter.

The author uses *déjà vu* as a pattern of a strong emotional feeling of strong fascination to the bitter experience of the past and a stimulant for the present action of the life of Aetu and also for the projection of the plot artistically. Aetu, in her further actions in the play, puts her gaze on the past. When the first husband dies, she is inherited by Gbade who cares for her dearly like a loving husband. In what supposes to be a moment of joy to every mother, when she has a new baby for a very caring husband, neighbors come to celebrate with her but she remains unhappy and vindictive to her husband and her new born baby to the consternation of the neighbors. She disdainfully and angrily replies one of her neighbors that her new baby and her present situation are reminders of pain, raw pain soaked in the grunts and sweat of man. (40). The neighbor is thus confused to see a mother who rejects the gift of God, as Iyare, one of her neighbors puts it (40). Psychologically, Aetu is acting on the impulse of *déjà vu*. So, it is not a wonder to the audience because the author dwells much on the unconscious mind or the psychic context of the characters, privileging *déjà vu* over contextual situation and conflict. It is a technique that orchestrates irony and suspense to the play. The other characters in the scene see a new born baby as a gift from God but Aetu sees it as a punishment from the gods: "the gods can have



him (the baby). The spirits can feast on him for their dinner (49)

At last in the play, the psychological distress and in Aetu's life make her to commit suicide. It is germane to note here that in all her marriages, she is being catered for dearly and physically. But the bitter memories of her past life refuse to leave her mind. Artistically, Yerima uses *déjà vu* as a technique to create a tragic heroine; he uses it to show the distinctions between conscious and unconscious minds; reality and illusion. *Déjà vu*, as a technique, is used to unfold realities of the past and as such it becomes the causal-element of the conflict in the plot.

*Aetu* is an African play that employs *déjà vu* strategically to orchestrate the nexus between literature and psychology. It is play that reveals how the unconscious behaviour control the conscious. The playwright uses *déjà vu* as a stylistic device to develop the internal structure of the play, to create and develop the heroine, Aetu and to expose the vices and follies in society in order to correct them. The play decries the debasing and ignoble aspects of African culture of patriarchal hegemony. It interrogates the neurosis of patriarchal hegemony that portrays women as toys and tools of their male counterpart. Aetu cannot marry her choice of man because of this social menace. As she wants to free herself to become an independent woman, Oke, another man with unchecked effrontery, shatters her dream.

The placement of the psychic context of the heroine above the historical and textual content is fully realized when Aetu's mind loses all traces of naivety and becomes devoid of youthful exuberance. She has been shattered and destroyed by men. Her beauty has turned sour. Life has become miserable and unbearable to her Oke, her unwanted husband, has died and she becomes an exchangeable gift from one husband to another due to unpleasant inheritance rite. At this point, she returns to her initial world of strong unquenchable passion for the slain Atiba with desperation and she decides to commit murder in order to join Atiba at the bottom of the sea (the world beyond). An old woman intimates us:

When she found that she could not continue to swallow the stones life was forcing down on her throat. When she found out that it was better to fall from the cliff the river of Yeye Osun, and deeper into the hands of Atiba, six feet below, than walk the interred streets by her peers (35)

Under close perusal of *déjà vu* in the text, it is obvious that the playwright employs it as a technique for foreshadowing whose manifestation surfaces at the end when Aetu commits suicide to afford her the opportunity to re-unite with Atiba in the other world that is free of worries, patriarchal hegemony, pains and unrealistic hope and desire. From the nexus between psychoanalysis, feminine heroism and drama, the playwright has successfully produced sato-feministic or psycho-feministic drama.

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