

The Playwright as Seer: Girl-Child Marriage in *Aetu* by Ahmed Yerima

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1. INTRODUCTION

Child – Marriage is not a new issue in Nigeria as its practice has been an age – long one in various parts of the country; thus it is not strange to some Nigerians that right from birth, female babies are betrothed to men old enough to be their grandfathers. However, on July 17th 2013, the course of child-marriage took a national dimension when Senator Ahmed Yerima and his supporters sparked a whole lot of reactions nation-wide with the attempt to review the -----
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Their argument posited that children from 13 years upward were ripe enough to be married. In several quarters, particularly female-oriented ones, a cry of disgust and protest against this fragrant violation of the basic human rights of the child arose. Quoting from the convention on the rights of the child, several people condemned Yerima and his supporters, and one of the supporters, Senator ----- from Ondo State was nearly stoned to death for ever having a hand in such a matter.

2. GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGE: AN OVERVIEW

It would be recollected that the Child Rights Act specifically states that:

..... Child Marriage Constitutes forced marriage: marriage established without the valid consent of one or both parties it is a violation of children's rights and a direct form of discrimination against a child, especially the girl bride who as a result of the practice is often deprived of her basic rights to health, education, development and equality.

Indeed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990 Article XXI, states that: 'child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective actions, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years.....' It is interesting to note that the Maputo Protocol, of which Nigeria is one (1) of the forty-six (46) signatories, defines 18 years as the minimum age of marriage.

UNICEF claims that 39% of girls get married before 18 years, and that globally 14 million girls a year marry as children (Sundaram 2013 web); as a result those who give birth before the age of 15 years are five times likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties. The implication of this is far-reaching as such acts lead to the slow eradication of the girl child because the impact of early marriage on her leaves physical, psychological and social marks on her. This is aside from the health hazards that linger both during and after pregnancy, if she survives at all.

3. THE PLAYWRIGHT AND SOCIETY

The playwright is usually seen as one who is the conscience of society (); (s)he it is that keeps the very soul of the society. The playwright with the welding of the pen (or computer key board) keeps the checks and balances required by society in place. The power of imagination, and by implication, creativity, puts the creative writer on a platform higher than all others where a posture of keen observation is attained to enable the writer see beyond human keen: a position where normal writers cannot fathom or dare to tread.

Literature is said to mirror society (); however writers of literature sometimes predict events before they happen, thus proving they have the power of foresight. Such is the case of Ahmed

Yerima in the play under study. This paper therefore examines Ahmed Yerima's *Aetu* in the light of the present girl-child marriage dilemma, and makes submission on the appropriateness or otherwise of such reviews of acts and edicts.

4. CHILD –MARRIAGE IN AHMED YERIMA'S AETU

When Yerima's play was published in 2007, little would he have imagined that his creative venture would one day be actualized by a Senator namesake who would realistically write his imaginative enterprise not only into history, but also try to concretize it into an edict. The similarities, in the names and thought of the authors are uncanny, but gladly this is where the similarities end.

Yerima's *Aetu* starts when Aetu, the character who the play is named after, is fourteen (14) years old. She has been forcefully married to old man Oke, who has raped her and got her pregnant with child. The case becomes more complex and complicated in Aetu's young and confused mind at the point where Oke's men murder Atiba her young lover, and then hurl her to Oke's house to be raped. One must remember that before this, she and Atiba had entered into a covenant:

Aetu: I was born to love you Atiba (Pause) promise me, you will not be like other men. Will you?

Atiba: (seriously) No, my heart is also for you for life. I swear.

Aetu: Me too, I swear by the gods, no one will touch this body except you.

I will keep it for you until we are ready. I swear I will kill myself if anyone

Atiba: It is okay. (They embrace) (26)

With these words, the die is cast; even before Aetu's curses, Destiny has taken control. In the African context, words are not cheap; every syllable is heavy with consequences, for according to the Yorubas, whose cosmology Yerima reflects in this play, words when uttered are messengers who must deliver when sent on an errand: '*Eyin l'oro*' ('words are like eggs'); thus when eggs fall to the ground, they, like humpty dumpty cannot be put together again. In this wise, the words of Aetu and Atiba have been sanctioned by the powers that be, and so tragedy can only be the result of the enterprise.

The implication of Aetu's curse then starts even before she reaches Oke's house. It only needs the sanctification of a god to make it potent. This god is none other than Esu, the trickster god who is said to change destinies. It is interesting to note Yerima's fascination with this god; to date, he has no less than three (3) plays with the character Saura, the messenger of Esu. At this point, one must warn that Yerima's Esu is not equivalent to the Aramic Lucifer, Devil nor Satan, but a messenger-god in the Yoruba pantheon.

It is to Esu then that fourteen year old Aetu runs to when she is about to birth her first child. At this point in time, no longer a child physiologically (although in age), Aetu sees herself more of a woman than a child, as she declares in the following:

Saura: Your tongue, girl ... mind what you say to me before my god.

Aetu: Then, look at me again, Abesu, would a girl carry this?

Eight months of pain gone Enh? I say would a girl carry

This? A man did this, baba.

Her girl-hood has been violated and she is forced into woman-hood from the tender age of fourteen (14) years! No wonder she is pained and her curse is potent; in her pain, hatred, immaturity and confusion she adds another layer of power to the supernatural forces already at work; she declares:

Lalu o!

Hurry now to the house of Otediran

They have killed Atiba,
Then they raped me
Let the fool, Oke who calls himself my husband not find
Peace till he dies
Let his child that I carry die the same way.
Let anyone who decide to deep with me whether hatred or in love, die the same way.
Let any child I will have in this world suffer the same fate. For both my passage and womb
belong to know me but Atiba
Before they die, let them be sick in head, one leg ...
Here on earth and one leg in the land of the dead.
Let them remain haunted by the death of Atiba.
Here! (Throws the stone of the shrine) Baba, I have said my mind (20)

Like Saura, one agrees these are indeed ‘Heavy word’ (21); but the dies is caste, Oke must feel the full consequences of his male chauvinistic actions. However, in examining Aetu’s actions, one echoes Kande’s concerns in the play. The philosopher – cum – lawyer that he is, he observes:

.... The man was bad, but the unborn children The innocent souls did not have to burn with their elder’s greed. Besides it is against our tradition. Visiting the sins of the father on the younger generation is not our tradition. Each man carries his own load. Mama, it was too much (20)

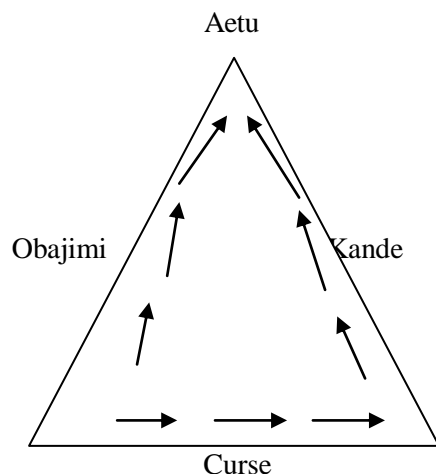
The extension of the curse to a generational curse is indeed going beyond the borders of injustice meted to Aetu’s off springs. In this one observes that rage, pain and hatred, when married together with youth and innocence excludes logically. Even Esu’s antidote to exclude the lineage from the curse is ignored by Aetu as she refuses Saura’s gentle nudge to see reason. He says:

..... for the sake of the unborn child, Esu says if you drink this water all you said shall be forgotten, but if you pour it at the shrine of Esu, then know that you, Aetu shall roam until eternity Like me, until you drink water from this shrine, Omi idi Esu, to quench your thirst of anger (21).

Aetu choice is to roam till eternity as she does not drink the water but ‘pours the content at the foot of the shrine (21)’.

In Saura’s option, lies the antidote to the curse, which is finally achieved at the end of the play. It is only when Saura given old woman – who is later discovered to be the spirit of Aetu who as a result of Saura’s utterance seventy (70) years eelie, has refused to nest – water from Esu’s shrine, can she, Obajimi and his lineage be free of the words set in action over seventy years ago.

The number seventy is significant, particularly seven; seven is the number of perfection and it is meet then that the curse is broken seventy years after Obajimi’s birth when all three generation are present at the place of death. It is significant that the place for the scarifies is a grave-yard; after-all where should dead thing be but in a grave-yard. Yeriman’s portrayed of the grave-yard is scene in the sense that the mystical numbers seven and three are associated with this scene seventy years which symbolize – and three generation which represents the three sides of a triangle. At apex is Aetu who represents the metaphysical reality: linked to her at the sides are Obamimi and his brother on one side and Kande and his brother on the other, with the curse at the base linking the together.



The cycle of this curse then will continue till there are no male seeds in this lineage; this seems improbable as all three generations seem to exhibit that only male seed are born to this lineage as seem in the following dialogue:

Iyawe: Another reason why the brotherly fools love her she must have been the handmaiden of Obatala on her first coming. Each time she takes in, she has male children, while some of us scrape the pot of children, and come up with skinny lifeless female twigs. See what my husband's withered stick has come up with. He was so sure she will bear him a son. Oh, what wont I give to have one girl like him.

Agbesu: So she has blessed this house with sons? The house has blessed her too. She is also luck to have your (47).

Likewise, we are informed that Kande has brothers: therefore we share his concern that the curse be truncated. This Saura do so by giving from Esu's shrine – Omi idi Esu in drinking this, one resources a form of devil ex machine, because after this water is taken by Old Woman (Aetu) the following answers.

Saura: Now, Mama, drink. My maters Esu endows me with everlasting youth. He and I are one. We shall talk later. Drink, iya. (She drinks) slowly. Let it all melt away. It has been too long. Let is go, Mama, and you can rest now.

Old woman: Your water has a slight taste of salt. It rinses my mouth and throat with certain freshness. I thank you. Yeeh, my bone creak.

Saura: You need the rest.

Old Woman: I need to rest ... do I?

Saura: Yes ... my master feels your journey has been long and tedious. Let it go, Mama. Eje bure awo igbele, forgive all, Mama (53).

With these words conquering the previous words uttered, the spirit Aetu is weakened and has no other choice than to declare that the curse has 'Gone with the will-wind it come with (54)': however she leaves the stern warning that it must never happen again 'that act which forces a human spirit against his or her will (54)'.

5. CHILD-MARRIAGE IN YERIMA'S AETU: IMPLICATION

Looking at Yerima's Aetu without a doubt child-marriage is not to be encouraged because of its negative and destructive influence on characters in the play. Aetu, for one is a young, unformed individual, who is forced into womanhood long before her age. Physically, her body is not ripe for the duties of motherhood. In Yerima's play unfortunately, he does not deal with the physiological disadvantages of marriages contracted among early teenagers as Aetu is made to birth three (3) years to three (3) brothers. This shows that either Aetu lucky or that the playwright does not wish to that about the damage done to her body that has to bear children between the age of fourteen and seventeen years, when she commits suicide.

Secondly, Yerima, the playwright does not consider the educational damage done to Aetu. At fourteen, a child should be in the Junior Secondary School, particularly one who is in the Yoruba-speaking part of Nigeria; by seventeen years many children are in the final lap of the Senior Secondary Education or even in the tertiary institution. Aetu therefore has been deprived the right to education by this singular rape on her personality.

By implication, because she is not educated, she cannot be economically viable neither can she be self-reliant. She then is a zero-contributant to national development.

Examining the play *Aetu*, Yerima's main focus seems to be the psychologically training caused by early girl – child marriage. Aetu is left numb with pain, anger bitterness and confusion as a result of the injustice meted her; remember her lover Atiba was killed under her nose and she was certed off like a goat to be raped by Oke. Even in death this bitterness longer but for the intervention of Saura. Her reaction to her situation is to curse her oppressors and make sure that painful death be their end. However, in doing this she sentences herself to restlessness for as the Yoruba say 'Omo to ni ki iya re ma sun, ohun o ni foju k'orun' – a child who says its mother will not sleep, will not itself sleep'. She is sentenced to immortality, roaming till eternity until she drinks water from the shrine of Esu.

Thus, another implication of early girl-child marriage portrayed in the play is the fact that these 'babies with babies' die at pretty young ages; even the children born to these girls die early because they do not have enough maternal care, even when they survive their mothers they lack balanced parenting. This is the complaint of Kande when he remark 'my father grew up not knowing the touch of his mother, she was too hard, she did not love even her own children. Not to talk of us he blood (44)'

Even if she wished to look after them, the children would be taken from her and given to a senior wife as is the case of Aetu, particularly if the husband died. The question then is what chances of survival does the girl-child have in such situations. The end it seems, can only lead to frustration, depression and eventual suicide.

The controversy on the girl-child marriage is still on, albeit not as river as when Yerima the senator noted it. It is the considered opinion of this writer that salient policies against girl-child marriage be noted. This is because one of the fundament rights of the child is the right to live; the right to shelter, education etc. A child at thirteen is not developed enough to even make correct choices in life, talk less of thinking of self sustainability or economic viability. To one mind it's a cruel society that arts of a child to a man's house in the name of marriage and forces her into the sexual act at such tender age! Seen in this light one recommends the following.

1. The evil edict should not be made to see the light of day;
2. All such people, be the parents or prospective husbands and in-law, caught in this obnoxious act, should face the wrath of the law;
3. Institutions of rehabilitation centers by governmental and non-governmental organization (NGOs) to cater for young children who have been so violated; be -----
4. Craft and skill programmes that can redirect the misguided economic destinies of these girls along the path of self-reliance, ethical and social revolution, be designed;
5. Free primary health care be concentrated teenage mothers and regular health talks on sexually related matters be established;
6. Sex – Education be included on the Primary School Curriculum.

If all these things are put in place, it is believe that the girl child will be equipped to live a better life than that envisaged if these recommendation were not put in place. Given the inevitability of life's action, children need to be protected against the future; they therefore need to know more about their bodies, gone are the days when the word 'sex' was a taboo word: in the light of global events transmitted via the internet and satellite dishes, it would auger well for parents and teachers not to shy away from educating children on this Germaine issue. Better an adult explain extensively for the teenager to learn the bitter way of kid Aetu.

This paper therefore has examined the negative impact of girl child marriage especially on her psyche and the deviating after effects that such acts leave on only on the girl-child, but also on her off spring and the society at large, hoping that the perpetrators will desist from such dazedly because useful to their society in particular, and the nation in general. All this, and more, the playwright Ahmed Yerima had foreseen in 2007, six years before the obnoxious edict the playwright can see far into the future and porter solutions to inevitable problems or expose these problems to scrutiny as Ahmed Yerima does in the play *Aetu*.

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