



Metaphoric Diagnosis and Aesculapian Comorbidity of Nigeria in Iwu Jeff's *Verdict of The Gods*

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Received 29 June 2021; accepted 31 July 2021

Published online 26 August 2021

Studies in Literature and Language, 23(1), 31-35. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12218>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12218>

Abstract

There have been brief reviews of Jeff's *Verdict of the Gods* online, since its publication in 2020, but there is a vast dearth of critical exegesis of the text. Among the four blurbs on the back page of the dramatic text, only one makes cursory remark about it as a reflection of the Nigerian problems. Beyond such casual reference, this study foregrounds metaphoric diagnosis and aesculapian comorbidity of the plagues threatening the wellbeing of Nigeria and her unity in the text. This gives the play dual interpretative mode – literal and metaphoric – just like Albert Camus' *The Plague* and Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic*. Like the precursory novels, *Verdict of the Gods* presents the scenario of a community gone awkward, one in which the gods of healing are irked, when the community is plagued by disease and death, because of the blood of innocent citizens shed by the venal and rapacious leaders. The use of Igbo setting, proverbial witticism and lexis provide a profound proof that the play caricatures, in a satiric form, the contemporary Nigerian sociopolitical scene, using the Greco-Roman medical practice. Jeff cautions Nigeria, that the blood of innocent people killed, or those who die, as a result of the actions or inactions of the leaders is the reason the society may not "see progress" (p.73). The solution to the problems is patriotism and atonement of sins by the rulers and their accomplices.

Key words: Metaphoric allusion; Aesculapian comorbidity; Verdict of the gods; Nigeria

Modahunsi, I. A. (2021). Metaphoric Diagnosis and Aesculapian Comorbidity of Nigeria in Iwu Jeff's *Verdict of The Gods*.

INTRODUCTION

Iwu Jeff is the pseudonym of Iwuchukwu Jephtha, a young Nigerian writer, whose creative wherewithal cuts across dramatic, prosaic and poetic genres. The manifestation of his artistic ingenuity coincidences with the period Nigeria contends with the deadly Boko Haram terrorists, the bandits and the ritual killers, as well as the secessionist agitators, in the face of Covid-19 pandemic. These social-ills, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic, plunge Nigeria into health comorbidity and/or complication, in recent time. Hence, Jeff's debut play, *Verdict of the Gods* (2020), delves into the psycho-moral dimension of the plagues. The play is set in Achara, an imaginary miniature Igbo community in the southeastern Nigeria, upon which generalisation is made about the macro Nigerian society. In the play, Jeff dramatises the comorbidity, or health complication, of a disease-ravaged Achara community and, by extension, Nigeria. The play unravels the cause of the pestilence devastating the community, revealing that it is premised on the social-ills the community leaders have perpetuated. This gives the play dual interpretative mode – literal and metaphoric – just like Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1960) and Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic* (1992). Like the precursory novels, *Verdict of the Gods* presents the scenario of a community gone awkward, one in which the gods of healing are irked, when the community is plagued by disease and death, because of the blood of innocent citizens shed by the venal and rapacious leaders. The use of Igbo setting, proverbial witticism and lexis provide a profound proof that the play caricatures, in a satiric form, the contemporary Nigerian sociopolitical scene, using the Greco-Roman medical practice.

The motives of the playwright are to diagnose the causes of the sickness bedeviling Nigeria and prescribe the antidote that will make her convalesce. This makes the text suitable for literature and medicine. The kernel of the play is to suture a terribly injured nation and make it heal. The play offers a potent model, which seeks solution to a chaotic situation and a sense of taking responsibilities, by being patriotic, in a bid to heal and mend the nation. He makes a metaphoric exposition of the sicknesses affecting Nigeria, in dramatic genre geared towards healing the disrupted nation.

What activates the creative ingenuity of the playwright is the retrogression of the locale reflected in the play. Speaking through Nwokoro, one of the elders of Achara, the playwright avers that “all our neighboring communities are advancing and progressing in all they do” (p.18) but “death is here harvesting souls without satisfaction” (p.18). This quote makes a metaphoric reference to the incessant killings, without cause, of innocent souls across the geopolitical zones of Nigeria. In one of the blurbs of the play, Ebinyo Ogbowie asserts that the playwright draws significantly from the Nigerian situation. He posits that, “like Achara, Nigeria is plagued by a curse brought on it by the ferocious greed of its scheming, homicidal and ostentatious political leadership.... Iwu reveals that Nigeria’s problem is deeply rooted in its savage history of murder, plunder, marginalization and exploitation of the weak”. What Ogbowie underscores in the blurb is the health status of the society in which the play is set, that foregrounds the genesis of the disease decimating it. Like a human being, a society can be sick. Eze Obioma, in *Verdict of the Gods* (2020, p.44), substantiates this when he admits that “our land is sick...” Such a sick land (or society) can also be cured of the infirmity plaguing it, if her leaders want it healed.

The play was published in 2020 – a time the whole world was battling with the devastating scourge of Covid-19. Coincidentally, it is also a period when terrorism, banditry, insurgence, mismanagement and agitations for secession were plaguing Nigeria alongside Covid-19 pandemic. Given the number of Covid-19-induced deaths recorded in Nigeria, in contrast with terrorism-triggered deaths recorded daily, it is obvious that the latter has more devastating effects in Nigeria. Nigeria contends with health comorbidity – insecurity syndrome, disease and death – induced by sociopolitical ills. A close reading of the text readily brings the Nigerian physical and socio-cultural landscape to the fore. The scene of the sacred shrine in *Verdict of the Gods* (2020, p.47), in which Agiriga, the chief priest, calls on Chukwu nke igwe (God of the heavens), Amadioha (god of justice and thunder) and Ala anyi ekele gi (goddess of the earth), to reveal the cause of illness and death in Achara, establishes the metaphoric portrayal of the Nigerian sociopolitical terrain. Since the incessant killings of Nigerians by

the deadly Boko Haram terrorist group and bandits, coupled with political and ritual killings, like the people of Achara, Nigeria is becoming popular for senseless killings and untimely death. The citizenry “are turning into the definition of suffering. Our people are dying like rainfall. Our animals are falling like the fruits of a dying tree...” (p.47). The imagery created in the similitude with “rainfall” depicts the sequence of death in Achara and Nigeria at large. Raindrops are in quick succession and become torrent on the surface of the earth. This is a metaphoric reference to the daily surge of bloodshed in Nigeria.

Killing of cattle and cattle rustling by the insurgents in Nigeria is subtly mentioned in the above excerpt. One of the ills threatening the wellbeing of Nigeria is the wanton destruction of farm produce by the militia Fulani herdsmen, which has led to herders-farmers conflict and deaths in many parts of the country. The playwright captures this ugly incidence and asserts that “our people are dying, crops and animals are destroyed too” (p.54). The sickness plaguing Nigeria has become a common phenomenon, so overwhelming that the playwright laments that “here and there are sicknesses knocking from door to door, seeking...whose house to inflict” (p.54). This perilous situation has prompted many nations to modify their bilateral relations with Nigeria and, in turn, made her a laughing stock in the comity of nations. In the words of the playwright, “our land, Achara, has become the horse that moves about with faeces in its buttocks, attracting laughter and irritation to many” (p.54). This extract creates a scatological imagery, and metaphoric perception of the image of Nigeria in other nations. It denotes a nation reputed for unimaginable irrationalities, and one which is being loathed accordingly.

The play takes its audience through the Greco-Roman medical practice, and medical epistemology, in which aesculapian power is ascribed to the gods, and the causes of diseases are not seen as natural but supernatural. Aesculapius (also spelt in Greek as Asclepius) is the hero-god of medicine in the ancient Greek religion and mythology. He is revered in the Greco-Roman medical tradition as the son of *Apollo*. Like Apollo, his father, he is recognized as a healer. Aesculapius’ snake-entwined staff used as rod remains the de facto symbol of medicine till this time.

IATRICAL LINK BETWEEN VERDICT OF THE GODS AND THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME

Jeff’s *Verdict of the Gods* and Ola Rotimi’s *The gods are not to Blame* (1975) share iatrical link, within the ambit of intertextuality. Intertextuality establishes the relationship among texts. No text is an island and no one

exits in isolation of the others. Jettison of monolithic author-centred literary criticism and an embracement of unrestricted and diversified one birth intertextuality. Nwagbara (2011) asserts that Julia Kristeva is the chief priest of intertextuality. Kristeva (1963, p.37) in Nwagbara (2011, p.2) maintains that each text is constituted “by a mosaic of citations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text”. Terry Eagleton (1983, p.192) affirms this assertion when he avows that every literary work is essentially “re-written”. In the course of the assertion, Eagleton states that a text “directly or indirectly makes reference to another text. This is what Peter Barry (1995, p.91) calls “a major degree or reference between one text and another”. It implies that no text exists in isolation; a text is intertextually connected to another text.

Intertextual link exists between Jeff’s *Verdict of the Gods* (2020) and Rotimi’s *The gods are not to Blame* (1975). The latter is an adaptation of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex; while the former is an adaption of the latter. One can postulate, with certain degree of references, that Rotimi’s play influences Jeff’s. There are indices of intertextual cohesion in both texts, beginning from the classic veneration of the gods. The “gods” assume a venerable position in the title of both texts. Mortal man becomes a malleable instrument in their hands. The gods reserve the power of retributive judgment and take punitive measures against man, whenever he is found guilty of gross misconduct, involving bloodshed and loss of life. The wrath of the gods against mortal man is usually devastating as seen in both texts.

The two tragedians make plague and search for medication to control it the conflict of their dramatic texts. The reverberation of the misdeeds of the leaders of Kutuje, in Rotimi’s *The gods are not to Blame*, and Achara, in Jeff’s *Verdict of the Gods* are responsible for the outbreak of diseases in both texts. That the citizens of both texts look up to their rulers for solution to the diseases affirms that security of lives and properties is the primary responsibility of the leader of any community, whether in traditional or political institution. In *The gods are not to blame* (1975, p.10), Odewale’s subjects complain that “sickness has been killing us all these many days. What has the king done about it?” Moreover, rainfall is deployed as a metaphor of the frequency of death in the milieu reflected in the texts. In act one, scene one, of *The gods are not to Blame* (1975, p.10), Odewale asserts that “sickness is like rain”, so also does Jeff avow in *Verdict of the Gods* (2020, p.47) that “our people are dying like rainfall”. Hence, sickness and death become household phenomena, without exception to the palaces, in both texts.

Eze Obioma, the traditional head of Achara, in *Verdict of the Gods*, is a prototype of Odewale, the king of Kutuje, in Rotimi’s *The gods are not to Blame*. Sacrifice is

a leitmotif in *The gods are not to Blame* and *Verdict of the Gods*. In Rotimi’s text, sacrifice is offered to Soponna, the god of the poxes; Ela, the god of deliverance and Sango, the god of thunder and rainfall. Chukwu nke igwe (God of the heavens), Amadioha (god of justice and thunder) and Ala anyi ekele gi (goddess of the earth) are called upon, through Agiriga, in the latter text. Again, Agiriga, “the great chief priest” (p.19) of Eziakwo in Jeff’s *Verdict of the Gods* is a replica of Baba Fakunle, “the greatest of all the medicinemen in this world” (p.12), in Rotimi’s play.

Rotimi emphasises the imperative of healthy society, the same manner that Jeff stresses its importance. Rotimi states in the authorial blurb on the back page of *The gods are not to Blame* that:

King Odewale’s progress towards a full knowledge of the murder and incest that must be expiated before his kingdom can be restored to health is unfolded with a dramatic intensity heightened by the richness of the play’s Nigerian setting.

In a bid to restore his kingdom to a healthy state, Odewale prescribes herbal medicine or trado-medical practice, to his subjects, during the outbreak of the plague. He encourages them to go to the bush to get medicinal plants and prepare herbal concoction that may fight the plague killing the citizens of Kutuje. He censures his subjects for not being proactive at resorting to herbal treatment. The playwright puts his expression thus: “...you cannot move, you cannot go into the bush and cut herbs to boil for your children to drink. Is that so? Answer” (p.12). The names of some of the medicinal plants mentioned in *The gods are not to Blame* include “Asufe Eijeje leaves...Lemon-grass, teabush, and some limeskins” (p.13). Dogo-yaro leaves (neem leaves) are not left out in the prescription. According to Odewale, long time of boiling the medicinal leaves make “the medicines in the herbs...come out in full spirit to fight the sickness” (p.13).

Another interesting link between *The gods are not to Blame* and *Verdict of the Gods* is the area of the theme of atonement. The tragic heroes of both texts undertake to offer themselves for sacrifice, in order to salvage their kingdoms from the debilitating scourge of diseases and death. In spite of the fact that sacrificial death is difficult to undertake, Odewale and Eze Obioma’s decision to take responsibility for the plagues ravaging their domains is the height of patriotism. A patriotic leader should be able to lay down his life – if doing so is the last option – to save his subjects, during a perilous time such as the outbreak of epidemic.

AESCULAPIAN INDICES IN JEFF’S VERDICT OF THE GODS

The symbiotic relationship between literature and medicine, illness and the gods and the healing process had been budding steadily since the classical Greek society.

McClellan and Jones (1996) describe Apollo as the god of medicine and poetry. Hence, musicians, poets and healers had him as a patron god. The widely held belief on issues related to illness and healing in the Greek society was that disease was caused by the interference of the gods or supernatural forces in the affairs of men. This belief held sway until Hippocrates, one of the Greek philosophers and physicians, took a radical departure from it. Hippocrates is reputed as the father of medicine and originator of the "case note tradition" through which the physicians record, comment or narrate their observations of a patient's ailment(s). Hippocrates was a genius and most of his writings on medicine established the position that illness and diseases are natural phenomena. Aesculapius denotes the healing aspect of the medical arts. Hygieia, his daughter, is the goddess of cleanliness. Laso, another of his daughters, is the goddess of recuperation from illness. Aceso, his daughter, is the goddess of the healing process. Aegle and Panacea, his other daughters, are the goddesses of good health and universal remedy respectively.

Jeff's *Verdict of the Gods* (2020) begins with prologue. The prologue presents the pantheon of Achara and their consensus to remain indifferent to the illness and death ravaging the community. The gods unanimously agree, under an oath, to turn deaf ears and be mute to the plight of the people of Achara, who are contending with epidemic and death. The playwright captures the expletive of the pantheon thus:

All: Yes! [*Holding hand and circling.*] Woe to him who speaks to these mortals. Our mouths must be shut! Our eyes must be shut! Our ears must be shut! Our noses must be shut! Woe to him who communicates with these mortals! (p.5).

Like Nigeria, formerly praised as the giant of Africa, which attracted investors from different parts of the world but now becomes a shadow of itself, the playwright laments the pathetic condition of Achara. He describe Achara and, indeed, Nigeria as "... the powerful bamboo that stands tall which all creatures nest, and look up to for survival" (p.10). Melancholically however, he laments that:

we're no longer what we used to be. Strange things fight to undo another everyday. Our land is cursed" (p.10). ... people are dying in this land minute-by- minute. Sickness is here hand cuffing health second-by-second and bit-by-bit ... (p.18).

From a layman's perspective, *Verdict of the Gods* is a gothic text about rustic life in the hinterland with primitive belief in totems and deities who torment mankind. However, an in-depth analytical thought reveals that the problems plaguing Nigeria are being metaphorised in the play. Reference to the daily exorbitant prices of commodities "in Afor market" (p.28), as dramatised in scene four of the first part of the play, is an allusion to the economic hardship Nigerians face daily as a result of hike in prices of merchandise. This economic hardship,

in an insecure environment, where lives are being wasted every day, is compared to excruciating abscesses on the body. This creates a mental picture of agony and lack. This playwright bears his thought on Nigeria's economic problem in the dialogue between ADAMMA and NNENNA on page twenty-eight:

NNENNA: ...The knife on our neck now is his brother, Oguike. He's getting worse day by day. ... the strange boils on his body increases at every hour of the day.

The extracts above show health comorbidity of typical Nigerian masses. An average Nigerian is plagued by hunger and, often time, malnutrition-triggered diseases. Unrest, kidnapping for ransom, killings and economic instability have made the countries having bilateral relationship with Nigeria and investing in Nigerian economy to desert her, like Oguike's wife in *Verdict of the Gods*. The countries do not want to lose their investments and/or bear the burden of the diseases plaguing Nigeria. Oguike's wife represents the countries that moved their investments from Nigeria. In the words of the playwright, "... she said our land is cursed; that she won't be part of our suffering...She...returned to Orodo, her father's land" (p.28). Aside from foreign investors who are reluctant to come and invest in the Nigerian economy, the playwright affirms that "the evil in the land has pushed everybody aside" (p.32). The social-ills plaguing the country have degenerated into discord and disintegration among the various ethnic groups of the country. It has resulted into agitation for secession, especially by the Igbos and the Yorubas.

CONCLUSION

Jeff employs the Greco-Roman aesculapian tradition to diagnose myriad of social-ills plaguing Nigerian. These are presented in dramatic thought. *Verdict of the Gods* foregrounds the complexity of the sicknesses, the extent of their comorbidity, or complication. The play is not a mere literary piece about the relationship of mortal man and the gods in the face of diseases and death. It is a text in which Jeff bemoans the health of Nigeria and her unity. The playwright makes a lot of illuminating metaphoric references which serve as indices of the present state of Nigeria. As the play climaxes, Jeff cautions Nigeria, that the blood of innocent people killed, or those who die, as a result of the actions or inactions of the leaders, is the reason the society may not "see progress" (p.73). The solution to the problems is patriotism and atonement of sins by the rulers and their accomplices.

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