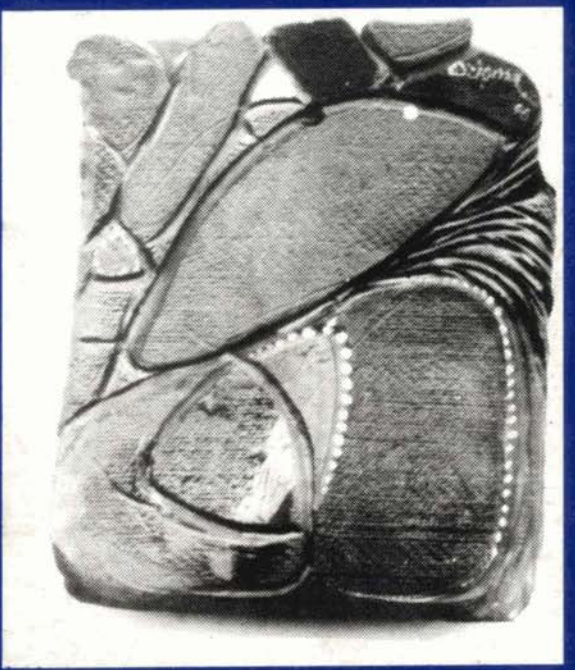
Okike

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



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OKIKE
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CHIDI ONYEIWU

My Fatherland

You were like a woman jilted by her lover.
Naked, you hungered for his love.
But you got trapped by bloodhounds.
And yours was a gang rape.

Now, you are like a tree on diseased soil.
You asked for life but got its shadow.
You craved for love, but got raped.
So your birth was your death.

Yet you continue to breathe
As their lecherous hands hunt
Your beauties like terminators
And the kisses of your beloved
are like the rhythm of a stale song.

IRO AGHEDO

A Strangled June

The trap fractures the rodent
But the rodent haunts the trap...
A harvest of whirling dilemma

The hawk gulps the arrested dove
But the dove sticks in the hawk's throat...
A season of troubled times

The sky floods the earth
With thunderous grains of storm
But the earth swallows the sky's emissaries

...Our land is surfeited with entanglements
Arising from a strangled June...

Endless Cycle

A dirge swallows the lullaby...
The land is silent, SILENCED
By the drums of death

A stream snakes into the river
The river meanders into the sea
And the sea bundles into the ocean, CONQUERED

The lullaby overshadows the dirge
Derobing the land, our land,
Of sackcloth and ashes

An egg breaks life into being
Wrapped in the tender hands of newness
Pregnant with pluses and minuses

We are the sacrifice
Buried in the Ocean's womb
Born again by tidal waves, RISEN

Time is the umpire
Of this infinite duel

We are lilies of the battleground
Worshipping with our comings and goings
On the mouth-altars of life and death.

A Dirge for Fatherland

The sun saw it and fled the sky
Abandoning the land to darkness.
The plants smelt the holocaust
And wept off their verdant foliage

The lion tears in our jungleland
A jungle bubbling with legion tribes
Of diverse and divergent tongues

Who wrests the antelope
From the lion's ferocious grip?
Who rescues our land
From the hunter's flying bullet?

The staccato rhythms
Of his incoming anthem
Jolted the land like an epileptic fit

Barrel smokes overshadow the land
Like the acrid fumes of exhaust pipes
But we have not shouted Barowo![+]
Behind the rocky powerhouse

He casts a milestone
Into the bosom of clay pots...
And the land reaps the harvest
Of the laughters between tears

[+]A Hausa word for thief

... Cataclysmic deaths
Trails of blood.

Saints are sinners, sinners are saints
Chiefs are thieves, thieves are chiefs
I know my fatherland.

The paths are strewn
With cobras' syringe fangs
To strangle our arrested will

Our land, a tower of babel,
Is a gigantic bed of spikes
Dripping with the cold blood of innocence

Yet we had not muttered murderers!
Behind the hangman's haven

On the fasting dunghills,
people and rodents scramble
For non-existent morsels

Sackclothed, ashes over us,
We behold the junta
Wrapping fire under its bloody cloak.

PATIENCE JUNE URHIAFE-ESAN

A Heathen's Niche

He reached for Celia's left hand and caressed it gingerly. She stared at his face with eyes that said he meant more to her than human language had conceived adequate words to express. A smile puckered her dimpled cheeks momentarily. Her large tender eyes were aglow with expectation.

"I told you . . . I wanted us to make our relationship permanent." Oscar stressed 'permanent' with the suggestive twist to his full lips. Everything about him simply mesmerised her. She leaned across to rest on his shoulder, drinking in his subtle cologne, utterly devastatingly confused by the emotions that riffled through her.

He stroked her neck as she gazed adoringly up into his deep-set eyes, shrouded by a rich crop of silky, black, brows and moustache that became him so well. Her pulses raced. "Was he asking for marriage barely six months into their relationship?"

She liked the idea of a picnic which she had interpreted Oscar's "Just a romantic drive" as. Oscar always knew best ... knew just how to handle her. He reclined the front leather seats of the Volkswagen Beetle and she rested comfortably with his right arm protectively around her. "Celia ...."

"Yes," she cooed dreamily. Oscar must be as much in love with me as I am with him but like a man, he has to hide his feelings ... control himself," she thought, a glow of content spreading through her.

"We've known one another for almost ... well quite a long time now."

He arched his brows and scratched self consciously with the long talon on his little finger. Celia closed her eyes and listened to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

"I've become very keen on you..."

His voice thickened with emotion.

"Celia, love me please... he finished lamely, holding her tighter to his chest. "Celia opened her eyes and looked into his flawless brown skin, his aquiline nose which flared slightly. He was the stuff dreams were made of, her knight in shining armour. Who said life was not a bed of roses... she did not want this moment to end as she held him. "I am in love with you, Oscar," Celia started saying.

"Celia...," he moaned, kissing her suddenly full on the mouth. With his full head of rich black hair, collar upright, pips and buttons on shoulders, he oozed off masculinity. Celia gasped for breath. The pounding of her heart was so hard, she thought it would burst.

"Celia, promise me you will always love me."

Celia had always loved the thrill of the chase, but with Oscar she was almost sure it was the ultimate. Why! She could give him anything... even her very life, she admitted to herself. He peeled off her left arm around his neck.

"I want you to show me how much you want me," he said earnestly.

"But how?" Her consternation was written all over her face, reminding Oscar they were getting nowhere....

"An oath," Oscar said with a chuckle.

Celia took in a sharp breath.

"Its very simple really... it won't hurt you."

He averted his gaze, avoiding her pleading eyes.

"It won't hurt you," he repeated as if he had done it often "... its just a small cut... just to bring out some blood in your thumb...

and then mine too."

Celia peered into his face, her disapproval obvious.

"Then we will mix our blood..."

"That's all?"

"Puff...," he simulated the sound to ease tension, "... but it'll bind us forever.

"Blood." Celia groaned revealing all her agony.

"I know... blood... you know, I know... it's powerful but goes to show... after that I will be sure we belong together... no matter where you are."

Celia looked beyond Oscar's fine brows, his six feet two inches loose limbed frame for the first time. Only recently back from Britain, his West Indian ancestry clearly distinguished him. His was the proud heritage of a Medical doctor father; his Nigerian grand father, a judge of the Supreme Court had immigrated and settled in the United Kingdom after marriage to a Briton and brought up all his children there.

"How did you get to know about this?" she asked suspiciously, looking more carefully at the untarred path and uncompleted buildings in the deserted layout where they were having the picnic. She wondered how much she actually knew of Oscar. He shrugged one shoulder, raised his right arm and cuddled her close.

"If you don't want it..., its okay," he said softly against her ear.

"No Oscar... I want it if you want it," she suddenly stated obstinately, moved by his nearness, and pushing her left thumb in front of him. "It's just that I never knew people did things like that to ... keep them together."

"I said you don't have to ... unless you want it," he said, barely audible as if his heart was not in it.

"It would have made no difference to me," Celia continued. "I mean...," her voice trailed off, overcome by a plethora of emotions as he fondled her neck. She had a singular fear of losing Oscar if she appeared uninterested.

They had met by chance at her cousin Julia's office end-of-year party and had soon become inseparable. Oscar had only dropped in to please a friend and it was quite by chance that they met. She was still a "Jambite", the popular term for a freshman at the University. There was so much that was new in her life that she was often out of her depths. Her notion of love was such that she considered Oscar a Greek god, the man of her life and destiny.

His position as supervisor in L & M, one of the very promising oil companies in town was not the least of her considerations. There was no woman alive who would not be excited by such a suitor. Perhaps she was naive to be so certain. Oscar loved her. How did she know? She knew, every woman who ever found true love knew. So far she had been the envy of her roommates and coursemates who could not come to terms with the gifts and endless hours Oscar spent with her.

"Will it last... hmm we've seen it before."

"Eh e o." they sniggered good naturedly... "I go love o." What would they say if they knew he wanted it *permanent*...

"I'll take good care of you," he had assured her and had since then put her on a weekly allowance.

Once while watching a film, she had dozed off in the crook of his arm. She felt him caressing her and responded drowsily encouraging him on. He had unbuttoned her blouse and as she awoke to the sensation of his hot kisses and urged him on, he had stopped and buttoned her up kissing the tip of her nose apologetically.

"We went very close to the forbidden," he had chuckled still holding her close. She felt the intensity of his desire, yet she had to hold back. That night, at least two times, between the settee and the main exit of Julia's small flat, a distance of one easy adult stride, he moved her from his left side to his right. On both occasions, Celia felt his protruding crotch press uncomfortably into her back side.

At the top of the stairs under the shelter of the dark stairway, Oscar turned her around to look into her eyes. He cushioned her head within his elbows, Celia felt him convulse as her full name escaped his lips. His heartbeat thundered so loud against her breast she was momentarily confused. Slowly, however, he opened his eyes and with a self conscious laugh excused himself, reached for his handkerchief in his breastpocket and turning away from her pushed it down his zipper, to soak up the wet mess.

Phew! he hissed at his discomfort, apologetic at his carelessness. Celia looked away as he briskly tidied himself up.

Oscar loved her, she decided feverishly. She would do all in her power to fuel this love. With a warm smile, feeling gloriously in love, she stretched out her thumb again, and closed her eyes while her heart sang a favourite tune by Teddy Pendergrass ("fifty-fifty love") which celebrated reciprocity in love.

Celia imagined Oscar grey haired, slightly rounder but as handsome as ever, content, pushing the trolley beside her as they shopped together in the supermarket. He sat at the head of the dining table at home, a large luxurious mansion. While the children bickered over one issue or another, she heard his voice, warm, loving, masterful, but gentle, help them clear their differences.

As he left for work, she kissed his revered forehead before he stepped into their elegant silver chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce. The children, healthy, beautiful, decent and very clever, followed closely at his heels. Already, Simeon their first son, every inch his father, wished to be a business man some day and be on the board of the Stock Exchange.

Celia felt she was the luckiest mother and wife under the African sky and she would deserve it. She vowed passionately, because her devotion would forever be unquestionable. She would deserve every loving touch or tender look of her beloved wonderful husband, she concluded, feeling the sharp prick of the

Nacet razor blade cut clean into her fleshy thumb.

For a while, Oscar pried at the thumb lamely a couple of times, caught between the desire to avoid causing his beloved pain, and anxious to severe the skin deep enough to draw blood. Soon enough they both looked fascinated, as the rich tomato paste oozed warmly out. The blade had sunk completely into the fleshy pad and all the pressure of his neatly manicured nails failed to stop the flood of blood. Celia chose to suck at her incision and leaned backwards to watch him. With one deep plunge, he cut through to release bright red blood from his large, pinkish thumb. Then like a high priest performing a sacred rite of passage, he carefully positioned his wet slit upwards and beckoned for Celia's blood smeared palm to be placed atop his thumb face down.

It was sacred coition. All Celia's senses, her very being, condensed into a little red bloody hole which reached through time to embrace the red pulsating heart of this male. His genes coursed through her veins 'for better for worse', and as hers infected and mangled his life line into solid coagulated drops, their eyes met. Triumph, contentment, elation, all emotions of an uplifted state were boldly expressed on his face, softening the squarish contours of his jaws. His moistened dilated pupils were of a man rocked heavenwards, in the throes of ejaculation. Celia suddenly longed to attain this height of emotion she had never known in their union. Perhaps it was the blissful glow which emitted from him like a messiah straight from the peak of a divine revelation that whetted Celia's interest in love making, for bashful Celia still mentally a virgin had always believed sex is a duty to be performed with the most deserving of men, her husband. 'The *book worm'* of the block often described as an S.U. suddenly lost all reservations hereafter.

Her weekend started early on Friday, when Oscar often urged her to travel out of town with him. The lecture notes could be copied on Monday. Oscar, however, grew more possessive. He

wanted her to himself all the time. Her friends were a bad influence, he insisted and should be avoided. Even at parties, he cordoned her off between his knees and in the middle of a group, would start an entire private discourse on the things he would buy her once they got married, such as, an entire library of books, just for her own use. Whenever she returned from a day or two on campus he would take extra care to "find out" if she had been with any one else. She could not pay any man, even his cousin, a compliment or receive one, no matter how bland. On one occasion, she mentioned how funny his friend Sammy was, after just giving him a ride back to his hostel at the medical school where he was on housemanship. The shattering of the windscreen leaving bits of crystal flying at their faces and necks was what followed, as Oscar punched the glass. Such was the vehemence with which it was done, it took a while to regain full control of the vehicle.

Oscar would not relent despite her apologies. Accusation and defence now constituted their relationship as Celia was forced to give in to his every whim.

First it was sex: she ignored the pangs of anxiety and agreed.

Next he asked her to move in with him... she agreed. Then it was her hairstyle... too flamboyant... too expensive. She promised to braid it then!

"What's wrong with simply combing it..." Oscar stammered in contempt.

At first, lovemaking had been a discovery, an assurance of oneness which Celia had learned to cherish. Oscar was her husband, after all she reasoned. But like a nightmare, it become Oscar's's method of '*finding out*' if she had been unfaithful. The more shamelessly he treated her, the more suspicious he became that she might be tempted to cheat on him.

The sessional examinations were barely a month away, Celia, unable to resist the urge to face her studies squarely, moved back to the campus, although Oscar had tried to urge her to start

making babies and forget education till later. Both her parents liked him, but it would be disappointing to them if instead of graduating she went to them with a pregnancy.

Shortly after moving into the Fagunwa Hall for women, she fell ill. Her girl friends eyed each other as they supported her to the emergency ward of the campus clinic. An urgent message was sent to Oscar expressing their suspicion that Celia could be pregnant.

Oscar never showed up. The only comment he was said to have mouthed with an ugly sneer and a warning scowl to the "Messenger" was to tell Celia: "She can't fool me any more... she'd better look for the father of her bastard."

Celia recovered from a severe bout of typhoid fever and just made it through her second year examinations. The thorough rest during the long holiday provided plenty of time for her to think and discuss with her parents. She realised how much of her youthful *joie-de-vivre* Oscar had tried to suppress. He was terribly insecure as her father confirmed, and Celia felt sorry for him, for it would forever remain her secret that not even heathenish blood oath could give Oscar the peace of mind he sought.

YUSUF M. ADAMU

Almajiri

Sadaka iya
Allah Ya baku mu samu*
So he goes chanting
from one door to another
in search of something to eat
innocently he was sent
the city has a place for him
he can learn the Qur'an by heart
far away from home is right
learning in luxury usually fails
so reasoned his parents well
he is very young and frail
the economy is biting hard
the malam cannot sustain him
tens and tens like him abound
he must search for himself
certainly malam shall teach
the little almajiri must learn
to struggle in the city to survive
how else should he learn?

Almajiri: literally a Quaranic school pupil

* Give me alms oh mother, may God give you enough to give us.

Professional Beggars

the leper
the blind
the paralysed
the amputated
the limping
rejected and dejected
their society certified
that they don't fit in
they took to the streets
with their blinded eyes
damaged fingers and toes
amputated fingers and legs
paralysed hands and legs
manifested in each disability
a distinct professionalism

OBI NWAKANMA

A Straw in the Light

THE LOOP of the rope is the sign of the road

whoever walks among the stalks of the corn,
will hear the rustling of the wind ...

The loop of the rope is
the sign ...
the sign of the darkening road,

the ears which listen which clutch to this fevered moment
renews a world and several worlds after it:

Ebenebe is the bearer of tales, yet he bared
his throat to the glint of famished steel:

He said: 'how can I sit and preen about the sky,
when the clouds are heavy with rain?'

He chose the death of the pagan

Ebenebe ...

He sang and there was none to listen

Ebenebe ...

He screamed and the world merely grinned

Ebenebe ...

He shook the entrails of the river

Ebenebe ...

He carried the offal and drowned it in the rainbow

Ebenebe ...

He chose death, the death of the pagan

Ebenebe ...

And all the waters of creation flowed downhill at his funeral.
Among them, the greying leopard
pounced, he did, upon the road, where the signs multiply:
The loop of the rope is the sign of the greying road:

yesterday we mourned the death of the Elephant
today, we have cleared the path for a new throne:

The sun crowns the hills, laughing
the drums wander into the orbit tremulous ...

Between I, and the smouldering see, the rope becomes
a bond: says, we are like the towering rocks,
naked at midnight and the straw in the light
burning bright until nothing is left:
We saw the groom approach,

and on the face of the bride was reproach
for we who had kept the vigil
must utter a mouthful:

But the drums wander into the world quaking ...

And they are sauntering into the sun, the exiles,
willing the drums speak
with terrified voices
rousing the dead, from their long dreams and their crumbling graves:

The exiles return to their places, after strange gods, dancing to the drums
After their flights into several kingdoms:

Whoever says the sea is dry
let him dare a step: the exiles return to the land
Wearing amulets ...
For it is the play of dogs: each one leans on one and the world flows, incessant like the river ...

But we who know say: the loop of the rope is the sign of the beaten path.

CHUKWUMA OKOYE

The Town Crier

We thought he was a stranger
The Town Crier
Awakened from the limits of a dream
Palm bearer
On the esplanade of lustral waters
Feeling for audience.
Everything stood between him and us
A stonewall of clear darkness
He had a gong, an iron bell
Chanting and descanting
Solemn songs of faithless peace
Of panthers about to pounce
The menage of terriers and tigers
And condolences
Quivering before the throne of new conquerors
Of paid prophets and preachers
Placating wearied ears
And stomachs bereaved
In the dawn of new supplies ...
Of anxious evening squads
Scanning prowling wet sky
"A night of deep waters"
"Unprintable dreams"
Seething beneath sea lull.

O, friend
Not these tones,
We frowned.

We put on the armour
Of master moonmakers
Diviners in the ninth sphere
Whose uplifted arms
Upbraid the tardy sun;
We worked out a new scale of certainties
A symmetry of lips and eyes
Fingers and steady heels
And adjusted our watches.

We thought of space and spectacles
Strength and speed
A short work, the quick fall
Of two or three brown branches
A withering of accursed leaves
And a harvest of ribbons and places.

He intoned and descanted
Time's plastic grimace
Presages of grey cycles
Callow-skinned bellies
Drunk on a phial of praise
And a pitcher of promises
Wrinkled hands paying taxes
To batten gain-fed bodies,
Jungle tetrarchs
Who strip the forest of foliage....

O, man
Not these tones,

We warned.

Now nothing troubles his faithful peace
No bells, no sore palms,
No gongs, no weary lungs,
No midnight hurricane
No hard hands blind
To the swift turning of bleeding knives...
And nothing stands between him and us,
No tall walls
No shafts of granite
No dark clouds of incense
No tales of Tamus
No puzzling schisms:
Only the trembling, colourless lines of ageing life.

Homage to Life: Whitman

Walt Whitman! Rainbow-radiant forerunner
Poet of earth and navel of heaven
We will never part ways, seer
Of the clouded sun in every heart
Your tongue luminous and august
Your feet mortised in granite recesses
Pure waterproof against slow rust,
The crowing diadems of awakened hearts

Roused by the sleepless wind
Shall greet the reign of your unchiseled excitements
For even Pound, prodigal,
And half-savage at birth,
Whose itching feet and heady hands
Reached and raised the leaves of distant tongues
Self-exhausted
In search of pearls to praise
Pounded out his exile on alien crags
And fell naked, penitent acolyte
Adoring at your redeeming feet.

IROHA UDEH

I Mourn for Onome

I mourn for Onome.

The diviner's soothing words had been clear:
"A hundred cowries, twenty tubers of yam
A he-goat, a white cock, and the deed is done".

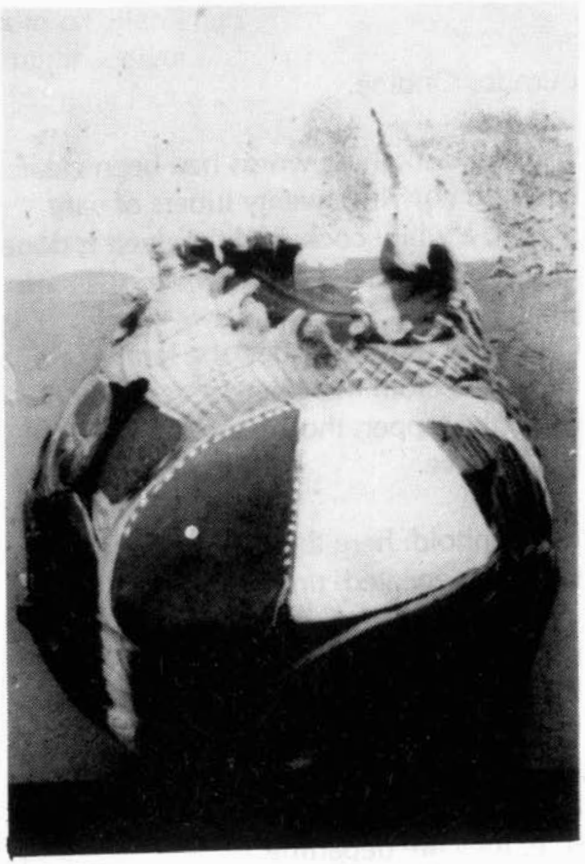
Just let her live:
To Obote the money-lender, the family farmland
To Oshia the cloth merchant, seven wrappers
To Osifo the tapper, the ancestral palm trees
Just let her live.

At the treshhold: here they are, complete.
Three times repeated, tired, I'm tired.
Just let her live.
Here they are, complete.

Shut up woman! noise obstructs them.
Ah! they are here, but. . .
What? No! No! Not again . . .
Onome, they are departing
Departing? Who?
Yes, departing and with her too
With her? Who?

A wailing crescendo from across the fence
Answered it all.
They have departed, her peers, and with her too.

I mourn for Onome
At this fourth season of mound-making.



EBELE OSEYE

Someone at the Gate

A man.
Opens the gate as though he is on familiar ground.
His walk is straight. He doesn't even look around.
I don't know that face.
He is not the Plumber
Who came yesterday, his Okada
Reving and beeping, his lean form neat in tight beige leisure suit.
His fine hips bouncing in place.
(I rushed to the gate.)
He is not the Carpenter, aged and underfed and mumbling, displaying his bent nails
Complaining that he has not been paid, then
Smiling. He has. It's just a game he plays . . .
He is not the Christian Thieves who have planted on my rented land
Slipped through the rear to drop their seeds, pretending great surprise
at my protest.
First they dress and go to church then come
To greet me in their Christian clothes explaining their deceit as courtesy.
They did not want to interrupt my peace by requesting permission
from me . . .
He is not the Electrician with missing front teeth, tall and flexible

and quick to laugh
Bending to half his height under the weight of the tiniest joke.
He flips the switch, prepared to join live wires I flip it off and fuss.
Be careful with your life . . .

Someone at the gate
It is not the school girls from across the way.
He is not the Painter who "rubbed" the wall a blotchy white.
He is not the Plumber with fine lean hips.
He is not the Carpenter with crooked nails.
He is not the Christian Planting Thieves.
He is not the Electrician with missing front teeth.
I don't know his face
His walk is straight.
He carries a letter.
He says one word.
"NEPA"*

*"NEPA" Nigerian Electricial Power Association

Night in Nigeria

Women of Nigeria,
Help me. It is night
And my love comes.
Quickly, bring bowls of bitter wine
Bring yam and pepper soup
Bring oil and strings of beads to tie around my waist
Before he comes.
I am a newborn river, rushing with life.
He is the terrible tropical rain
Lashing Enugu's hundred hills.
Help me sustain his flashing love.
He enters
And birds become boisterous, the iroko touches burning sun
He enters and winters disappear.
He says I am the tender grape.
He tears the wine.
His left hand holds my head.
His right braces my back.
Women of Nigeria, ignore my screams and cries.
Do not disturb my love until he has tasted every tender plant
In the garden.

He is Nigeria's sweet, rough, pounding rain.
I am a newborn river, rushing with life.

I Will Be Brief

Beware of people who say
I will be brief.
They cannot
Having descended from a long line of sadists.
Corner them
And they will cite their hereditary rights.
They have
Long talking genes.
They will double talk eternity
They will make lexicographers weep.
Their sense of time is corrupt.
Position yourself near the door early in their speech.
They will go to any length to thwart your unvoiced prayers for relief.
These experts in torture through talk know that boredom slowly kills.
I have heard such speakers "conclude" without concluding
Saying in conclusion and finally and the last thing I'd like to say and so on and on.
They are embarrassment-proof, immune to hints: a discrete cough, a glance at the clock, a note
All audience after talk about the time long spent
Admire their stamina,
But "hear" them only when you're short of sleep.
Beware of people who say I will be brief.

Your Mother Is Larger than the April Sun

Your mother is larger than the April sun.
You snuggle close to her solid belly when the gusting wind blows.
Her voice is peaceful as long shadows on rainy days.
She is more than magic, your mother.
You stretch her body walls to force your way into life,
You make her scream, yet she smiles and cries when she sees your tiny face.
Her laughter is like the surface of a swift flowing river.
She makes the morning spill in long straight lines.
There is no substitute for your mother.
The earthy smells of your mother's legs, her oiled hands against your face
Her voice fills the tiniest corpuscles of your body.
Her comfort is constant.
Inhale her sweet salt smells after her evening bath.
Her voice is like paper shades on tight springs zipping up to let in sudden floods of winter sun.
Her slippered footsteps, her winter glance pricks a thousand year old memory.
Her rapid supple fingers at the piano make you laugh.
Feel her body, warm and solid, resting against you as she examines your school compositions. . .

Death Does Not Honour Your Battle Fronts

Death does not honour your battle fronts.
Death does not always come first from the weak and aged.
The sick, the lunatic mope about the earth long after the strong and brilliant are gone.
Death is a trickster feeding off human fear.
Man goes out to meet death in proscribed arenas,
Arranges a "controllable"war, and death, amused
Watches from the smallest vein in the human eye,
Circulates in the finest capillaries of our system.
Death appears oceans away
On our doorsteps,
In our bedrooms,
In our hearts.

Racists Are Not Normal

Racists are not normal
They're going to get to heaven
And plead
Temporary insanity
And
They're going to get away with it.

OBIOMA NNAEMEKA

Literary Criticism as Disciplinary Failure: Rereading Mariama Bâ's Novels

Introduction

> In African studies, as in other branches of humanistic and social science, the subordination of human and social problems to disciplinary trends has pronounced negative effects that undermine the integrity and social utility of scholarship (Richard Sklar, "The New Modernization," 20).

As I prepared for graduate work in French literature, I was haunted by the image of what I could become - a literary critic. To my young mind, the literary critic was a middle-aged (or older) scholar (usually male) who often shuttled among libraries and private collections clutching his worn leather briefcase and poring painstakingly over manuscripts and published texts. When I was in graduate school, some of my professors lived up to this image but since leaving graduate school, I have watched the image progressively disappear in the horizon. The progressive disappearance of that image marks, in many respects, the gradual disappearance of the literary text itself. Reading, understanding, and interpreting literature entails distance - how far or how close the critic is to the text and/or context. Both the myopic focus on the text that totally ignores context and the obsessive focus on context (theoretical and otherwise) that alienates the text undermine the integrity of the text and have dire consequences for the interpretation of literature. From my graduate school days to the present, I have witnessed literary criticism swing from the myopia to the obsession.

In a speech on women and creativity given in Japan in 1966, Simone de Beauvoir discussed distance as she reflected on the privileged perspective of the woman by comparing her marginalization to that of a war correspondent who is on the sideline viewing the entire battlefield but close enough to document the war without being embroiled in it:

> In order to create... it is necessary to want to reveal the world to others; consequently, one must attain a certain distance from it. When totally immersed in a situation, you cannot describe it. A soldier in the midst of the fighting cannot describe the battle. But equally, if totally alien to the situation, you cannot write about it either. If somebody were to try to provide an account of a battle without having seen one, the result would be awful (27).

Richard Wright's essay, published half a decade later, also examines the role distance plays in the creative process: "Perspective ... is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things." The literary critic is also implicated in the creative process in the sense that he/she creates from the literary texts new mythologies and levels of discourse. The concern of Wright and de Beauvoir for a balanced distance in their discussions of the writer and the woman/war correspondent respectively is equally applicable to the literary critic.

In these poststructuralist/postmodernist times, the obsession with discourse and trendy jargon creates a distance between the critic and the text, thus allowing the emergence of the critic who is so alienated from the text that he/she resembles in a way a correspondent reporting on a war he/she did not see. Two recent events - the Alan Sokal versus Social Text controversy and Frank Lentricchia's "Last Will and Testament" - bring up for scrutiny

once again the issue of distance in the relationship between the critic and text/context.[1] Postmodernist indeterminacy, postcolonial universalism, and overall poststructurallist inordinate focus on discursive trends pose problems for the analysis and understanding of African literary texts rooted in cultural specificity.

The above concerns lead me to reexamine polygamy in Mariama Bâ's works, revisit its articulation in criticisms of Bâ, map its relevance to the feminist debate about speaking for others, and reexamine how it is impacted by global, historical and ideological shifts. In my view, polygamy in Bâ's works stands as a sign of cultural hemorrhage and societal rearticulations, and also as a sign of disciplinary failure in African literary criticism. It is puzzling that a novel, *Une se longue lettre/So Long a Letter,*[2] in which the word "*la polygamie*/polygamy" *never* appears and polygamy (the institution) does not operate has been debated and analyzed *ad nauseam* in literary criticism (feminist criticism, in particular) as a novel *about the institution of polygamy* (derided as one of Africa's chronic ailments). Obsessed with putting Africa and its strange customs on trial, most feminist analyses of Bâ's work avert a close reading of Bâ and a serious engagement with the complex issues she raises. Cultural imperialism and irrelevant theoretical wanderings constitute impediments to a meaningful engagement with African literary texts. It is important, however, to make a distinction between discourse and experience in any discussion of polygamy in Bâ's first novel. *So Long a Letter* operates within a discursive field that centres mutations of polygamy but peripherizes the actual experiencing of polygamy as a marriage institution. In other words, the novel as a discourse on polygamy serves as the impetus for a long and painful commentary on gender relations in modern, urban Senegal without providing the site for the actual day to day experiencing of polygamy. The two friends, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, talk about and react against polygamy but they never lived it -

Aïssatou walks out on her husband as soon as he takes another wife; Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou, abandons her for another woman in spite of Ramatoulaye's willingness to stay in a polygamous marriage. Furthermore, neither Binetou nor la petite Nabou lived with a *de facto* polygamist. By abandoning Ramatoulaye without divorcing her and marrying Binetou, Modou remains a *de jure* polygamist and a *de facto* monogamist. By failing to divorce Modou and thereby end her marriage to him, Ramatoulaye is subjected to the period of confinement. This stylistic manouevre allows the novelist to create the space (confinement) for Ramatoulaye to write her story, as well as the other secondary stories that are implicated in it. In its discussion of polygamy, this paper reexamines Bâ's work in the light of the cultural hemorrhage, societal rearticulations and disciplinary failure, noted above, within the context of feminist debates about voice, agency, and cultural imperialism.

Feminism, Speech, and Silence (d)

> While the prerogative of speaking for others remains unquestioned in the citadel of colonial administration, among activists and in the academy it elicits a growing unease and, in some communities of discourse, it is being rejected. There is a strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others - even for other women - is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate (Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," 97-8).

Linda Alcoff's article, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," wrestles with the dilemma and discomfort facing feminists as they debate the issue of involvement or noninvolvement in speaking "other people's business." As an African woman (a.k.a. "Third World"[3] woman as a member of the global community, and "minority" as a member of the citadel of learning), I find the distinction Alcoff makes between "the citadel of colonial administration" and "activists and the academy" problematic. In

actuality, the "unease" that speaking for others elicits "among activists and in the academy" is precisely due to the fact that, although it pretends not to, the academy actually operates like "the citadel of colonial administration" with its hierarchy of district officers, court clerks and "natives." Both "the citadel of colonial administration" and the citadel of learning are mired in power politics; the only difference is that "the citadel of colonial administration" is *always* comfortable with *showing off* its hierarchy and hegemony, while the citadel of learning is *sometimes* uncomfortable. It seems to me that the problem in the feminist debate about intervention or nonintervention is that of extremes: total involvement or complete withdrawal. Feminist discourse and practice have not quite figured out how to bridge the gulf between this purported irreconcilable difference. Feminists ought to look for ways to allow involvement (proximity) and withdrawal (distance) to evolve into a workable symbiosis that is fashioned in the crucible of mutually determined temperance.

The feminist dilemma would not be that daunting if only feminist practice could allow itself to be guided by feminist ideals. As a philosophy and a pedagogy of social change, feminism mandates involvement, and as an ethic of a fair share and of live and let live, it advocates moderation and negotiation and counsels against extremes and the winner-take-all mentality. Furthermore, I believe that the feminist debate about speaking for others should focus more on issues; we can lend our voices to or speak up against problems facing others without necessarily *speaking for* them. We should aim at *speaking up with* them *against* the problems and *speaking up with* them *for* solutions. Speaking for others involves questions of how to share the site of affliction with the "afflicted" and as defined by them without claiming the whole territory in order to articulate it *for* and *on behalf of* them. *Speaking for* others (in the sense of *speaking with*) does not create absence and exclusion; rather, it ensures

presence and participation. In Western generated controversies about African customs in which the West is talking to the West, Africans are silenced by those who have usurped their discursive territory just as their physical territory became a West to West *palaver* in Berlin in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

In its engagement with the "Third World," Western feminism operates on a system of indirect rule in which a select group of "Third World" women (either studying or working in the West or operating from the "Third World"countries) are *authenticated*, naturalized and installed as mediating forces. The feminist dilemma noted above is complicated for the legitimized *authentic* voice/woman from the "Third World" by the angst she feels for doing what she is called upon to do - that is, speak for the rest of "Third World" women "victims." The *authentic* voice is faced with the dilemma of producing a counterdiscourse to Eurocentric discourse without monopolizing her own sisters' discursive field. Peter Hitchcock[4] rightly notes that this "reobjectification" of the African women is an epistemological one: "[t]he epistemological question here is how to counteract the 'all-seeing I' of Eurocentric discourse without assuming the position, as guarantor, of the alternative knowledge that may be at issue." The *authentic* voice from the "Third World" feels uneasy as she executes her assignment: "she feels like such a fake, albeit enmeshed in varying degrees of complicity with social and educational privilege."[5] Not only that, the *authentic* "Third World" feminist finds herself paradoxically sandwiched between speech and silence; she speaks for her "victimized" sisters but at the same time, she is silenced and spoken for by her Western feminist collaborators. As Huma Ibrahim concludes from Audre Lorde's May 6, 1979 letter to Mary Daly that Lorde turned into an open letter "to the community of women" after four months of no response from Ms. Daly,

> [T]he price for the continuance of this collaboration is very high, for alliances can only be made with "friends" who wish to be

> absolved through their white feminist discourse because that discourse has allowed room for a very spatially limited and far too well defined monologue in which Third World feminist discourse must learn to have a precarious residence. There is no room for the Draupadis in that dominant discourse. I may add that, even though real alliances are being sought, feminist discourse still resides positionally at the juncture of the non/exchange that occurred between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly in 1979 and recorded in Lorde's collection of essays, *Sister Outsider*.[6]

Western feminism's search for and legitimation of *authentic* feminist voices from the "Third World" set these voices up for attack and ridicule from all fronts. Installed as the voices that speak for the rest of their "down-trodden" sisters, and expected to testify against their society by condemning all that is "wrong" with it, these *authentic* feminist voices face resistance, no matter what position they take vis-á-vis their culture: if they accord their traditional culture some modicum of respect, they are dismissed by feminists as apologists for oppressive and outdated customs; if they critique their culture, they are faced with put-downs and ridicule from the members of their own society for having sold out. In both instances, they are marked as *speakers for*, on the one hand, feminism, and on the other hand, indigenous cultures.

Femi Ojo-Ade, a Nigerian literary critic, reserves his harshest criticism for the incorporated, authentic African feminist voices:

> Grace Ogot, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Adioo, Flora Nwapa, women writers all, constitute the 'old guard', steeped in the traditions of the land, complaining of their sufferings as subjects of the male master, but seeking solace in a society that has proclaimed woman the mother. That group's conciliatory position has been superseded by a current of revolt. Compromise is replaced by criticism and condemnation. Respect turns into repudiation. Devotion is buried in divorce. Buchi Emecheta, Nafissatou Diallo, Mariama Bâ, those are the voices currently crying out for the liberation of woman, the second-class citizen ... Feminism, an occidental phenomenon like many others, has spread ever so slowly but steadily to the forbidden land of Africa ... Such 'aberrations' as feminism are abhorred by many

> who are, however, the very purveyors of the bastardization of that culture whose contents remain confusing to the civilized minds... The war between male and female is now a comtemporary constant, and new literary voices from among the once silent minority cry out to be heard, even if there is reason to doubt on whose behalf the revolt is being declared ("Still a Victim," 72).

Ojo-Ade's position is well taken. However, African feminists who are committed to effecting necessary changes in the African environment need not be deterred by such remarks; rather, they should engage them critically. "Feminism" is an English (Western) word that speaks thousands of different languages on the African continent. Feminist ideals and spirit are indigenous to the African environment; we need not look far into the annals of African history to see the inscription of feminist engagements. Indeed, the dilemma and frustration of the African woman emanate from being expected to testify for/against feminism or African culture when she is compelled by the feminist ideals in African cultures to articulate simultaneously feminism *and* African culture. For African women who are aware of and demand the preservation/observance of the powers that are *formally* and *structurally* guaranteed women in African cultures, feminism and African cultures are not mutually exclusive. The confusion is generated by internal and external hegemonic forces - cultural imperialism and feminist arrogance from the West, on the one hand, and patriarchal conceit within African cultures, on the other hand, throw a wedge between feminism and African culture.

Recently in the United States, the private life of a polygamous family has been the subject of bemused public discussions. My reading of polygamy in Mariama Bâ's work against a backdrop of these public discussions unfolds into feminist debates about voice (*speaking for*) discussed above. In an article, titled "I Share My Husband with Seven Other Wives," that details the life of the Josephs, Ross Laver and Paula Kaihla claim that "[h]appily

married with children, these eight *well-adjusted* American women insist their one man is more than enough. We visited their Utah-based commune and are surprised to report that this unorthodox family is a living arrangement *that - believe it or not - works*" (45, my emphasis). Alexander Joseph, 59, "a businessman and former mayor of the dusty town of Big Water, Utah, 375 miles south of Salt Lake City," is now married to eight wives - Diane, 48 (store manager), Margaret, 45 (sales consultant), Leslie, 47 (factory worker), Joanna, 42 (tour supervisor), Boudicca, 42 (real estate broker), Elizabeth, 42 (lawyer, journalist), Delina, 32 (municipal clerk), and Dawn, 25 (secretary) - although he has married about twenty women in the past two decades claiming, "I guess you could say that I'm the overachiever type"(48). The reasons these women give for marrying Alex range from falling in love with him to seeing polygamy as an act of defiance against their family and society. Although money is the greatest source of conflict, sex and privacy are sometimes concerns: "[i]n the early years, Alex had the luxury of deciding whom to sleep with on any given night. But soon the women rebelled against that system ... Now each woman books a night with Alex when she wants to have sex. The only problem, they say, is that sometimes Alex loses track, accidentally scheduling two women for the same night. When that happens, one wife is forced to retreat, silently cursing Alex"(48).

Unanimously, the wives assert that the benefits, ranging from freedom to pursue their interests and bonding with other women to child care and stability, far outweigh the disadvantages. All the wives agree that "their decision to enter a 'plural marriage' means they can each truly have it all - security, independence, children, and a career" (46). According to Elizabeth Joseph, "[y]ou would think that polygamy by definition would be oppressive to women ... in fact, a plural marriage is actually empowering. This way, I can have the freedom to explore my own potential without worrying about having to tend to my husband's every need" (46).

What do the neighbours think?: "To most of the people who live in and near Big Water, Alex and his wives are merely eccentrics - good for a bit of gossip, but otherwise harmless. But others find much praise about this arrangement. 'The argument that it is a feminist lifestyle makes a lot of sense to me,' says Beth Russler, an announcer at the radio station" (50). What does Alex think?: "When I first got into this, I thought the most difficult part would be to find a woman who would do it ... Hell, that was the easy part. The minute I made it known that I was available for this lifestyle, I got more marriage proposals than I could possibly accept" (46). Meanwhile, Alex is in a hiatus. In spite of his wives' attempts to recruit more candidates, he is not ready to pop the question *for now*: "Elizabeth, in fact, has not given up trying to recruit more eligible bachelorettes into the Joseph clan. She currently has a list of three or four candidates - 'including one of my bosses, a real quality person.' So far, though, Alex has shown no interest in popping the question - this time" (50).

This report is pertinent to the issues I raise about voice and agency primarily due to the *manner of its telling*. I have written at length on the report in order to tease out the different categories of speaking subjects - the wives spoke, Alex spoke, the neighbours spoke, and the reporters "reported" without any noticeable insertion of the reportorial voice. The reporters did not *speak for* the Josephs. They treated with respect these "well adjusted" women who "are virtually indistinguishable from typical, modern American women": they visited the Joseph wives, saw them as reasonable adults who are capable of making personal decisions and choices, *talked with* them, and walked away convinced that the "living arrangement works." On the contrary, in debates about African traditional cultures and the ways in which they are "oppressive" for women, different categories of "knowers" (from anthropologists and historians to literary critics and journalists) are not willing to accord African women the same respect and subjectivity extended to Alex

Joseph's wives - African women are *spoken for, about and against*. Alex *chooses* to marry many wives, his wives *choose* to be married to him and the neighbours *choose* not to bother them since they are "harmless." In Western/feminist discourse, African traditional practices are reified and cast as impositions on women. It is unthinkable in such imperialist discourse that African women actually *choose* to have co-wives and some *choose* to be circumcised. All African women who are in polygamous marriages are not powerless, exploited, downtrodden victims. Many of these women are intelligent, highly educated, successful, independent women who *choose* polygamous marriages as what is good for them. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist of Bâ's *So Long a Letter* chooses to stay in a polygamous marriage against the advice of her family: "And to my family's great surprise, unanimously disapproved of by my children, who were under Daba's influence, I *chose* to remain" (45, my emphasis).

It is troubling, but not surprising, that feminism, while promoting "choice" as a central issue in its theory and practice, often fails to factor the same issue into its analysis of African women's lives. The unfortunate persistence of feminist arguments premised on the assumption that African women are too downtrodden to make their own choices and decisions constitutes a stumbling block to genuine engagement and meaningful collaboration. The perpetual casting of African women as powerless and downtrodden remains a raison *d'être* of imperialist discourse. If it is accepted that African women can choose and speak for themselves, the intervention of those who have arrogated to themselves the right to speak and choose for African women will be unnecessary. The construction of the voiceless African woman is, therefore, a necessity. My earlier observation about Linda Alcoff's demarcation of "the citadel of colonial administration" and "activists and the academy" should be understood in the context of the provenance of these

"interventionists" on behalf of African women. In their state of (re)objectification, African women do not speak but are spoken for, they do not choose but are chosen for. The objectification of the African woman renders existing feminist criticism of Bâ's *So Long a Letter* incapable of capturing Ramatoulaye's different "voices" on polygamy.

Modernity as Subversion

Culturally and epistemologically, *So Long a Letter* is sandwiched between two interpenetrating contexts (African-Islamic), on the one hand, and what Uzo Esonwanne[7] calls Enlightenment epistemology, on the other hand. Ramatoulaye's power lies in her successfully maintaining balance as she reworks different cultural and epistemological imperatives, while still mired in them. In my view, polygamy is inscribed in *So Long a Letter* as a sign of the rupture emanating from these competing forces and their continuous reworkings. A good understanding of the cultural articulations of the novel requires that one listen more attentively to Ramatoulaye's complaints. Her complaints against the so-called oppressive cultural institutions and practices are framed in the context of a profound awareness of the subversions of the institutions themselves. Bâ's novel articulates simultaneously the critique of polygamy and the critique of its subversion and recoding. More importantly, Ramatoulaye's complaint is less about polygamy as an institution and more about its subversion with particular reference to what she calls men's *instincts polygamiques* (polygamous instincts) - instincts that are found in polygamists as well as among monogamists. It is important to note that the word, *la polygamie* (polygamy), is not even in the novel (*Une se longue lettre*). In the three instances where Ramatoulaye refers to polygamy, she does not use the noun (la polygamie) but uses instead the adjective *(polygamique)*[8] - *instincts polygmique* (53/34), *domaine polygamique* (69/46) and *problème polygamique* (100/68) -

usage that absorbs polygamy as a propensity and as an institutional question. This nuance is lost in the English translation (*So Long a Letter*) where "le problème polygamique" is translated as the problem of polygamy," which is similar to translating "*le problème politique* (political problem) as "the problem of politics" (*le problème de la politique*).[9]

Two of the three instances where *polygamique*/polygamous are mentioned relate to the two letters that are embedded in Ramatoulaye's long letter; the first instance is immediately after the presentation of Aïssatou's letter to Mawdo, and the second is in Ramatoulaye's letter of rejection to Daouda Dieng. Both instances are replete with words - such as *abandonnée* (abandoned), *trahison* (betrayal), *joie éphémère* (ephemeral joy), *changement* (change/variety) - that have more to do with philandering than with polygamy as an institution. Even on the two occasions that Ramatoulaye makes reference to the institution, *la polygamie* is not used; she chooses instead to write about the modalities of its operation as she accepts Modou, "I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam" (46), and rejects Tamsir, "My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis... my 'turn' every day" (58). As will be discussed later in this paper, Ramatoulaye's acceptance and rejection of polygamy underscore her ambivalence *vis-à-vis* polygamy as an institution. These observations are particularly important in the light of some criticisms of Bâ's work that are nothing short of imperial fictions by their casting of Bâ's work as a referendum on African customs. Imperialist (re)inventions of African customs as stigma and dilemma will not let African customs die because if they do, the basis for the "othering" of Africa will be eroded. In this regard, a rephrasing of Jean-Paul Sartre's famous remark on antisemitism is pertinent:[10] "If polygamy did not exist, Western imperialism would invent it," or "If circumcision did not exist, Western feminism would invent it."

Mariama Bâ's most important legacy to the literary world is her extraordinary gift as a *writer*.[11] She wrote with the ease and elegance that make even pain and the ugly sound like a beautiful poem. The qualities that earned *Une si longue lettre* the Noma award are echoed in the endorsement on the dust cover of *So Long a Letter*: "its undoubted literary qualities, which seem to place it among the best novels that have come out of our continent." I have yet to see an analysis of Bâ as a *writer* pursued with the same enthusiasm and vigour that is shown in knocking down polygamy. Bâ's work is not primarily about the institution of polygamy, although literary criticism has catapulted it to a treatise on polygamy as "part of a scarlet badge on the African face, preserved there for the imperial gaze."[12]

So long a Letter inscribes simultaneously oppression and resistance/subversion. In the novel, subversion functions on two levels: the overall subversion of traditional institutions in a modern, urban milieu, on the one hand, and Ramatoulaye's own subversion of traditional practices, on the other hand. Ramatoulaye appropriates a space of silence (confinement) to write herself out of silence. Through the Islamic ritual of *mirasse*, confinement draws the line between speakers and listeners/observers. It simultaneously inscribes speech and its containment. Circumscribed, Ramatoulaye navigates the boundaries of silence and containment through writing. Culturally marked as listener and observer, - "my back propped up by cushions, legs outstretched, my head covered with a black wrapper, I follow the comings and goings of people" (3) - she listens to her husband's *mirasse* during a family meeting held in her living-room: "the *mirasse* commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed" (9). Her husband's *mirasse* creates the space for her to (re)strip not only the dead but also the living. With outrage in her voice, Ramatoulaye collapses the telling of individual and collective

histories. In one narrative gesture, she renames her husband's life of deception and betrayal as she had heard it in her living-room, and narrates her own story as well as Aïssatou's and Jacqueline's in the context of collective/national history with its gender politics and economic, class, and ideological conflicts. Ramatoulaye's success in reinventing herself is due to her ability to rework a religious practice by possessing it, not rejecting it; in other words, she challenges the practice by possessing and subverting it. As Uzo Esonwanne rightly notes, "Ramatoulaye circumvents the constraint of confinement imposed by Islamic custom with an Islamic ritual. Never an apostate, she works within Islam, finding novel uses for its rules, rituals, and regulations, cross-breeding them with alien generic formats."[13]

African women writers often make a distinction between love and friendship - on the one hand, the painfully debilitating love and sexual relationship between men and women in marriage and outside of it, and on the other hand, the affirming and empowering friendship between women inside and outside of marriage. Nowhere is the line as clearly drawn as in Bâ's *So Long a letter*: "Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (79/54). I argue that at issue in Bâ's novels, particularly *So Long a Letter*, is the transformation of traditional African institutions by "modernity" and the manipulation of these transformatory stages by men to their own advantage thereby creating the pain of their female partners. An examination of polygamy in both African tradition and Islamic culture will, hopefully, provide the context to assess its operation in Bâ's novels and interpret Ramatoulaye's complaints and pain. It is not sufficient to assert that *So Long a Letter* is a battle cry against polygamy. It is true that the discourse on polygamy is at issue here but so is the author's concern about the changes that the institution has undergone. *So Long a letter* interrogates

simultaneously polygamy and its subversion in contemporary, urban Senegal. By making the distinction between polygamy as an institution and its practice in post-independence urban Senegal, Bâ details how the subversion of the institution further complicates women's lives. Words such as deception, betrayal, and abandonment, that punctuate the complaints of the female characters are not necessarily synonymous with the institution of polygamy in Islamic or African culture. On the whole, Bâ's work succeeds in bringing up for scrutiny "polygamy' as it is practised in African urban areas, particularly by the affluent, middle- and upper-middle classes.

I agree with Femi Ojo-Ade's identification of the confusion in some "civilized minds" (72) in his assessment of Bâ's work: "*Une si longue lettre* is a study of these contradictions." However, we differ in our naming of the confused minds and interpretations of the origin and nature of the confusion and contradictions. While Femi Ojo-Ade ascribes the contradictions to culture conflict between Africa and the West, I see them at a level that is more complex than the tradition/modernity binary, particularly in the light of the gender politics that (re)structures and intensifies the confusion and contradictions. In order to account fully for the ways in which these contradictions are complicated and exacerbated by the dissonance in the African environment itself, one must examine critically the ways in which the "modern," urban (but not so urbane!), African man juggles and manipulates different, sometimes conflicting, systems in an attempt to enjoy the best of all possible worlds. In many ways, the so-called modernity has intensified the masculinization of the African tradition, thereby deepening the marginalization of women and creating instances (for the women, in particular) where tradition is progressive and modernity reactionary. If Mariama Bâ's work speaks about aberrations, it is not against "such 'aberrations' as feminism" that it speaks. The voice of outrage in the work is screaming high against aberrant behaviour and practices of

specific men. The issue of specificity is very important because criticism of African literature tends to naturalize, "normativize," and generalize the behaviour, inclinations, and actions of the characters in the literary works. In this regard, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* is installed in criticism as the norm and as a paragon of Igbo virtue when the author, Chinua Achebe, has taken pains to cast him as an embodiment of what his people value (hard work and responsibility) and what they condemn (excess, intolerance, arrogance, and violence), through the simultaneous inscription in this one man the normative and the marginal, the acceptable and the aberrant. Unidimensional analyses of *Things Fall Apart* fail to factor in the repeated condemnations and sanctions Okonkwo receives from his people for his excesses. Mariama Bâ's exposé of aberrant behaviour is generalized and etched in literary criticism as a critique of an "aberrant institution" (polygamy) with its *natural* and *inherent* propensity toward misogyny. If the women are confused, as Ojo-Ade claims, it is precisely because they are living with contradictions and enigmas as husbands. If the woman is "still a victim,"[14] it is to these confused minds that she remains so.

It will be helpful to examine the contradictions and discrepancies that exist between theory and practice as they relate to the institution of polygamy in modern, urban Africa. How does polygamy as an institution and as an experience affect the lives of women in Ba's novels? In examining the practices which distort and even vulgarize the institution thereby leading to the excruciating pain of the women, this paper will attempt not only the exegesis of the tenets of the institution of marriage in Islam and the African traditional culture, but also the transformations the institution has undergone in modern times.

In his study of the rights of women in Islamic Sharia, Rafi Ullah Shehab notes that according to the Holy Quaran, polygamy was initially introduced as a means of rehabilitating widows and orphans: "And if you fear that ye will not deal fairly with

orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two two or three three or four four; and *if ye fear that you cannot do justice (to many wives) then one only*" (Al Quaran, Surah Al-Nisa-3, my emphasis). More importantly, Islam allows polygamy with certain restrictions and conditions. A man should marry only when he can afford it: "And let those who cannot afford marriage keep themselves chaste until Allah provides them with means" (AL Quaran-Surah Al-Noor-33). Shehab explains that under Islamic law, the would-be husband is responsible for all marriage expenses. The custom of dowry (especially as practised in India and Pakistan) is foreign to Islam as evidenced by the non-existence of the word "dowry" in the Arabic language.[15] Islam considers love as an essential ingredient in marriage; consequently, a man should not compel a woman who does not like him to marry him.[16] Marriage is thus a life-long contract requiring a firm agreement, *Messaqan Ghaleezan*, between a man and a woman. Although, in principle, Islamic laws grant equal rights of separation to both spouses, in practice, these rights are only enjoyed by men. Shehab identifies the three important conditions in Islamic marriage:

> The main condition mentioned in the Holy Quaran for allowing polygamy is to solve the problems of orphans and widows but it also mentioned three conditions such as justice between wives, sexual capability and equality in meeting expenses. *It may be mentioned here that if a person is not in a position to meet the expenses of one wife, he, according to Islamic law, is not allowed to marry* (Rights 43, my emphasis).

He concludes by noting that Islamic marriage has undergone changes due to contact with other systems with the result that certain rights which the institution guarantees women are denied them in practice.

In his study of "polygamy, the estate revered by traditionalists as a function of Africanity" (Ojo-Ade, 76), Patrick Merand[17] notes

that the reasons for contracting a polygamous marriage in the traditional African society range from the superior numerical strength of women to female infertility. Another form of polygamy is the leviratical marriage that aims at caring for and protecting women and children. In the polygamous family in indigenous African society, a particular living arrangement is observed and respected. The man lives in the *same compound* with *all* his wives and children. Usually, boundaries of marked spaces are respected; the man has his own house and each wife lives in her own house with her children. The man is responsible for the general welfare, maintenance and operation of his compound while each wife is directly responsible for her children. Sexually and materially, the man seeks to maintain fairness, equity and justice among the wives. The children all grow up together and the man is *always* there for his family. Arthur Phillips and Henry Morris[18] note that "the normal position is therefore that, among Africans who are living under their tribal law, polygamy is permitted, and the rights and obligations arising therefrom are legally recognized" (88). The man, or the woman, enjoys the rights and privileges of the arrangement but must also execute his/her obligations. Peace and harmony are maintained through the observance of not only equity but also hierarchy - between the man and his wives and children on the one hand and between co-wives on the other hand. As Patrick Merand rightly observes,

> "The importance of rank among co-wives is emphasized. The first wife, usually the oldest, enjoys undisputed authority over her co-wives; she is the only wife not chosen as "replacement"(*Vie* 89).

Like the Islamic institution of marriage, the traditional African polygamous marriage aims at maintaining equity, justice, harmony and sharing of responsibility. More importantly, the man is *physically* there for his entire family.

Regarding the sharing of responsibilities, the Josephs' family in

Big Water, Utah, is not different: "Alex takes care of the major expenses of the compound with the money he earns running a dry-dock business for boaters... Each of the wives, meanwhile, is responsible for her own children's clothing and groceries expenses, as well as phone bills and other minor charges" (50). Alex's wives point out that "countless 'monogamous' men have multiple relationships - everything from one-night stands to long-term affairs - they just don't tell their wives. 'Our family life is a lot more honest,' says Dawn Joseph, a petite 25-year-old with curly blond hair. 'I can't imagine a more satisfying and fulfilling relationship than the one I have with my husband'" (46). Recall Nwakibie and Okonkwo in the African village of Umuofia (*Things Fall Apart*). Although Okonkwo has his own problems of arrogance, impatience and intolerance, he is a decent, honest, responsible family man who executes his obligations to his wives and children; who is no absentee landlord but lives in the *same* compound with his family and is *always* there for them; who maintains harmony in his household through fairness, justice and equity; who is no philanderer (like Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou) that abandons his family. Like Okonkwo and the other polygamous men in Umuofia, Nwakibie respects the space each wife occupies:

> Nwakibie sent for his wives.... Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear. She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little, and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order, and went away. (*Things Fall Apart*, 18-19)

"Proper order," rank and superior position of the first wife are respected and maintained. Usually, the senior wife reciprocates the respect through friendship and bonding. Of course, like all

other types of marriage, some polygamous marriages are good and others bad. The polygamous arrangements mentioned above capture in essence the following notions: harmony, responsibility, fairness, honesty, equity, order, friendship, respect, satisfaction, sharing, bonding, etc.

However, the "polygamous" arrangements that operate in Mariama Ba's novels are radically different from what I have noted above. Patrick Merand makes an important distinction between the practice of polygamy in *African villages and among the urban poor*, on the one hand, and among affluent urbanites on the other hand; the former aims at cohesion and shared responsibility, the latter arcs towards anarchy and irresponsibility:

> *In the villages and poor urban milieus*, the husband, his wives, and children live in the same family compound. Each woman has a room or more and everyone has equal access to the courtyard. Children live with their respective mothers but spend the day together. *In rich urban milieus*, "geographic polygamy" prevails (*Vie* 88, my emphasis).

In my view, "la polygamie géographique" is nothing short of a euphemism for formalized concubinage. In his study of the practice of Islam in Dakar, Vincent Monteil[19] identifies an extreme and more disruptive variant of polygamy:

> Certainly, polygamy is in decline in a big city like Dakar where it is difficult for a civil servant to maintain two or three homes. In practice, what obtains is a "serial" polygamy facilitated by quick divorces and conjugal instability ("L'Islam", 82).

Monteil makes a distinction between polygamy (the institution), which is on the decline, and its vulgarization in practice, which is on the upsurge. Ousmane Sembene lends his voice to the exposé of these urbanized variants of polygamy through his depiction of the irresponsible, vagrant, urban polygamist:

> *In the urban milieu*, because each wife and her children live in a

> separate location, the children have little contact with their father, whose vagrant lifestyle allows him during the day to move from house to house, villa to villa, and come home at night to sleep. He is, therefore, only a source of financial support when he has a job. Each woman is responsible for the education of her children (*Xala*, 104, my emphasis).

What emerges from the foregoing is a systemic contradiction that I call "monogamized polygamy." In this strange marriage of two different systems (which goes to support my earlier assertion that the modern, urban African man juggles different systems to his advantage), the man avails himself of the companionship and services of one wife at a time while avoiding responsibility. What the women find psychologically and emotionally disturbing is the confusion resulting from this oxymoron of monogamy in polygamy.

Living with Contradictions: Different Lives, Same Story

> I was irritated. He was asking me to understand. But understand what? The supremacy of *instinct*? The right to *betray*? The justification of the desire for *variety*? I could not be an ally to polygamic instincts. What, then, was I to understand? (Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, 34; my emphasis).[1]

This section examines the lives of three victims of these variants of *de jure* and *de facto* urbanized polygamy - "polygamie géographique," "polygamie successive," "monogamized polygamy - Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou (*Une si longue lettre*) and Mireille (*Un chant ecarlate*). The three women have a lot in common - they married their respective husbands at great personal risk by alienating their own families temporarily or permanently; all three are humiliated by their husbands' *secret* second marriages. When Ramatoulaye met and fell in love with Modou, she had many suitors but still preferred her "homme à

l'éternel complet kaki" [man in eternal khaki suit] (28/16). She waits for him while he studies in France during which period he writes her eloquently reassuring letters: "It's you who I carry within me. You are my protecting black angel. Would I could quickly find you, if only to hold your hand tightly so that I may forget hunger and thirst and loneliness" (14). When Modou returns to Senegal, Ramatoulaye marries him in spite of her other suitors and strong opposition from her family, especially her mother:

> Daouda Dieng also knew how to win hearts. Useful presents for my mother, ranging from a sack of rice, appreciated in that period of war penury, to the frivolous gift for me, daintily wrapped in paper and tied with ribbons... Our marriage was celebrated without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving looks of my father, before the painful indignation of my frustrated mother, under the sarcasm of my surprised sisters, in our town struck dumb with astonishment (16).

After twenty-five years of marriage and twelve childbirths, Ramatoulaye discovers that her husband, a *sugar daddy*,[20] has abandoned her for her daughter's adolescent classmate, Binetou. Despite the hurt and humiliation, Ramatoulaye decides to stay in the marriage but Modou leaves her and her children anyway. The novel opens at Modou's death when Ramatoulaye is in seclusion as commanded by Islamic law. During the Islamic ritual of *mirasse* in which the dead (Modou) is stripped of his most intimate secrets, Ramatoulaye is outraged to discover her husband's deception and betrayal during their married life.

It will be useful to isolate some of Ramatoulaye's complaints to see if and how they relate to polygamy. First, she complains about her sisters-in-law who do not respect her status as the senior wife by treating her and Binetou on a basis of equality: "Our sisters-in-law give equal consideration to thirty years and five years of married life. With the same ease and the same words, they celebrate twelve maternities and three. I note with

outrage this desire to level out, in which Modou's new mother-in-law rejoices" (4). As I noted above, through the observance and preservation of hierarchy, polygamy aims at order and fairness. Aware of the hierarchy that prevails in the system, Ramatoulaye complains against her in-laws' disregard of her superior position.[21]

Second, Ramatoulaye complains about Modou's secret marriage to Binetou because she is her daughter's friend and family friend and, more importantly, he marries her secretly, without consulting his wife. More than anything else, it is the humiliation of Modou's deception/betrayal that causes Ramatoulaye the most pain:

> And in the evening of the same Sunday on which Binetou was being married off I saw come into my house, all dressed up and solemn, Tamsir, Modou's brother, with Mawdo Ba and his local Imam... I sat in front of them, laughing with them. The Imam attacked: "There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side... There is nothing new in this world"... I thought of the absent one. I asked with the cry of a hunted beast: "Modou?"... "Yes, Modou Fall, but happily, he is alive for you, for all of us, thanks to God. All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place" (36-37).

There is *nowhere* in Islamic or African polygamous practice that an irresponsibility of this magnitude is inscribed as either legal or acceptable. Modou's second marriage deviates from the institution of polygamy as it is inscribed in Islamic law and African culture. The polygamous institution in traditional African society is not designed to spring such devastating, lunch-hour surprises. Usually, the first wife participates in marriage ceremonies performed on behalf of her co-wife. Modou's unspeakable act of betrayal is inconceivable in the world of the Okonkwos and Nwakibies of Umuofia (*Thing Fall Apart*); or even in the case of Alex Joseph of Big Water, Utah, whose wives actually recruit co-wives.

For Ramatoulaye, the discovery of her cheating husband's secret second marriage unravels the mystery of his numerous absences that he claimed were job related. Although shocked and confused by the unexpected news of Modou's marriage, Ramatoulaye shows restraint, dignity and maturity:

> I thought of his absence, all day long. He had simply said: "Don't expect me for lunch." I thought of other absences, quite frequent these days, crudely clarified today yet well hidden yesterday under the guise of trade union meetings... I forced myself to check my inner agitation. Above all, I must not give my visitors the pleasure of relating my distress.... Alone at last, able to give free rein to my surprise and to gauge my distress. Ah! yes, I forgot to ask for my rival's name so that I might give human form to my pain (37-8).

What she forgot to ask marks her disarray and the secondary importance of her rival, or even polygamy *per se*. In spite of her pain and humiliation, Ramatoulaye decides to stay in the marriage with young Binetou as co-wife, *according to Islamic law*: "I cried every day. From then on, my life changed. I had prepared myself for *equal sharing, according to the precept of Islam* concerning polygamic life. I was left with empty hands" (69/46, my emphasis). Unfortunately, Ramatoulaye does not get the equity and justice that are mandated by "the precepts of Islam." In fact, at this point, she is not even in a *de facto* marriage (polygamous or monogamous). Modou has abandoned her and her children.

Third, like the shortest verse in the *Bible* that carries in its brevity an event of tragic proportions, "Jesus wept." Ramatoulaye's most serious and painful complaint is encoded in one of the shortest sentences in the book and strategically inserted at the very end of chapter fourteen of the twenty-eight chapter novel: "He forgot about us" (46). The insertion of this painful sentence exactly at the half-way mark (centre) of the novel underscores its centrality, pertinence, and importance. Ramatoulaye chooses to stay in a polygamous marriage but,

and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal. And yet, what didn't he do to make me his wife!" (12, my emphasis). Second, she is troubled by the discrepancies between the institution of polygamy in Islamic and traditional African cultures on the one hand, and its practice in contemporary urban Senegal, on the other hand. She is guaranteed neither the justice and equity mandated in Islam nor the *moral and material* support of her husband as well as the superior position of the senior wife as mandated in African traditional marriage.

Ramatoulaye remains ambivalent about polygamy. She does not walk away from it like Aïssatou did. However, even as she accepts to remain in it, she is aware of and deeply concerned about its subversion (conjugal responsibility, respect for hierarchy among wives, etc.). Ramatoulaye's position *vis-à-vis* polygamy/monogamy at the end of her letter is not as clear as Esonwanne's claims.[22] Esonwanne argues that Ramatoulaye's implied preference for monogamy is due to her captivity to Enlightenment epistemology as learned from Ponty-Ville. However, it will be useful to examine some of Ramatoulaye's utterances on which Esonwanne's argument hinges:

> I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, as imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings. To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other! If each could only melt into the other!... The success of the family is born of a *couple's* harmony, as the harmony of *multiple* instruments creates a pleasant symphony. The nation is made up of all the families, rich or poor, united or separated, aware or unaware. The success of a natión therefore depends inevitably on the family (89, my emphasis).

One can call this an endorsement of monogamy based on the following assumptions: 1. Complementarity of man and woman functions only in monogamy. 2. Two beings can love each other and "melt into the other" only in monogamy. 3. Partners exist

only in monogamy. 4. Partners can sincerely move toward one another only in monogamy. 5. Successful families and harmonious couples are prerogatives of monogamy. 6. Couples exist only in monogamy. Will a polygamist and one of his wives walking down the street not be called a couple (meaning two)? In my view, these assumptions on which rests Esonwanne's forceful argument have more to do with Enlightenment epistemology than Ramatoulaye's ambivalence. If the case for monogamy is made because of Ramatoulaye's use of "couple," we must not forget that she articulates simultaneously the harmony of the *couple* and the harmony of *multiple* instruments. Ramatoulaye sees the family as the building block of the nation but her emphasis is more on the recognition of different types of families than an endorsement of a particular type. We must not also forget that faced with three chances to enter a polygamous marriage, Ramatoulaye accepts one (with Modou) and rejects two (with Tamsir and Daouda Dieng).

Aïssatou's marital woes came to a head three years before Ramatoulaye's crisis. Faced with a similar crisis, each woman takes a different path to a solution - Ramatoulaye remains in her marriage but Aïssatou seeks divorce. Aïssatou's marriage to Mawdo is as controversial as Ramatoulaye's: "Then came your marriage with Mawdo Bâ, recently graduated from the African School of Medicine and Pharmacy. A controversial marriage. I can still hear the angry rumours in town" (17). After several years of a happy marriage and four sons, Aïssatou walks out on her marriage when she discovers, again *after the fact*, that her husband has married another wife, a blue blood and a much younger woman hand-picked and indoctrinated by his mother. It is true that Mawdo's mother, perched on her inflexible aristocratic arrogance, never forgave Mawdo for contracting a misalliance with a jeweler's daughter and consequently vowed to have her only son properly married to a true blue blood. However, Mawdo's claim that he became a polygamist to avert

the untimely demise of his implacable mother is contested by the crucial subtext the narrator, Ramatoulaye, provides: "Young Nabou was so tempting" (30)! Like Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou is kept in the dark, and like Ramatoulaye, she is devastated by the humiliation and betrayal. Everyone, expect Aïssatou, knew that a co-wife was on the way: "I knew about it. Modou knew about it. The whole town knew about it. You, Aïssatou, suspected nothing and continued to be radiant. And because his mother had fixed a date for the wedding night, Mawdo finally had the courage to tell you what every woman was whispering: you had a co-wife" (30). Aïssatou divorces her cheating and conniving husband, leaves with her four boys and settles into a good job in Washington, D. C. However, her dramatic departure is marked by a symbolic gesture - she writes her husband a scathing letter of loss of confidence and leaves it on their matrimonial bed:

> I cannot accept what you are offering to me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance, however little that may be. If you can procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable... Your reasoning, which makes a distinction, is unacceptable to me: on one side, me. 'your life, your love, your choice', on the other, 'young Nabou, to be tolerated for reasons of duty'... I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way (31-2).

Aïssatou's letter is very illuminating. Jealousy of her rival is really not the issue. In fact, she expresses concern for her rival ("la petite Nabou") who, according to Mawdo, is brought into the family, not to be loved, but as a breader of children, and a mark of filial loyalty. Aïssatou takes issue with every single one of Mawdo's weak arguments. She finds, in particular, his separation of carnal and romantic love abhorrent and unacceptable. Furthermore, it is important to note that Aïssatou's *first* complaint in her letter is a brief but virulent attack on classism and caste

hierarchy, particularly in view of Mawdo's mother who is eminently "déclinante"/condescending: "Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it" (31).

In fact, *So Long a Letter* is more complex than a simple discussion of polygamy. The novel examines specifically how the caste system, class stratification and conflicts are implicated in, complicate and determine gender relations, between genders and within genders. The fact that Ramatoulaye lives in a class and caste conscious culture is evidenced in the many vernacular words in the novel that refer to caste and class distinctions based on birth, economic status and proximity to "civilazation": *ngac* (bush [unsophisticated, uncivilized] woman), *ndol* (the poor), *Guélewar* (Princess), *guer* (statutory nobleman). In addition to Mawdo's mother who in her aristocratic arrogance treats Aïssatou condescendingly because she comes from the caste of craftsmen (*artisanat*), the novel is replete with articulations of class consciousness, one of which shows that Ramatoulaye herself is equally guilty of class arrogance: "I don't understand... the entrance of Modou, a 'personality', into this extremely poor family" (39). The society's class consciousness is certainly "un aspect important/important aspect" with its "soubassements culturels/cultural underpinnings" that the blurb on the dust jacket of *So long a letteer* claims the novel unearths: "Every page, every paragraph and almost every sentence emphasize an important aspect of Senegalese society whose cultural underpinnings are exposed in order to explain behavior and attitudes".

After Mawdo - "fils de princess" [son of a princess] (33/19) - takes a second wife, Aïssatou ... "enfant des forges" [child from the forges](33/19) - nurses her humiliation in the context of the troubling ambiguity and incomprehensibility of human nature which is flawed even as it arcs towards the ideal: "Mawdo, man

is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity. None is pure bestiality" (32).[23] The question of bestiality raised here will be resurrected later by Ramatoulaye's use of "instincts" (in the sense of irrational and out of control) in her assessment of Mawdo's betrayal (53/34). Mawdo is a seriously flawed, "vil/despicable" man; his fatal (in the sense of "deadly," not "controlled by fate") flaw brings him crashing down from the pedestal where Aïssatou had placed him: "At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I have placed you" (32). Aïssatou is a respectable woman with a tremendous sense of direction, but more importantly, she has the courage and will - "you had the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands" (32) - to follow with dignity the path that she has carved out for herself.

In recounting Aïssatou's failed marriage, Ramatoulaye pinpoints the issues at stake - infidelity, betrayal, and lack of trust - as she addressed Mawdo:

> Thus to satisfy himself, he reduced young Nabou to a 'plate of food'. Thus, for the sake of 'variety', *men are unfaithful to their wives*. I was irritated. He was asking me to understand. But understand what? The supremacy of instinct? *The right to betray*? The justification of the desire for variety? I could not be an ally to *Polygamic instincts*. What, then was I to understand (34, my emphasis).

In actuality, much of the argument about polygamy in *So Long a letter* rests on this statement by Ramatoulaye. What is at issue is not polygamy as an institution but men's *polygamous instincts* that give rise to philandering, betrayal, infidelity, distrust, and the abandonment of trusting ones. One need not be a *de jure* polygamist to have *polygamous instincts*; monogamists are equally prone to such maladies. The issue Ramatoulaye raises here cuts across religious affiliations and geographical boundaries; it has less to do with Islamic or African culture and more with men's inability to control their "polygamous instincts."

Dawn Joseph of Big Water, Utah, rightly notes that "countless 'monogamous' men have multiple relationships - everything from one-night stands to long-term affairs - they just don't tell their wives" (46). This observation is equally applicable to Modou, Mawdo, and Ousmane (as will be discussed later) who do not tell their wives until it can no longer be hidden. Mariama Bâ puts on stage a bunch of irresponsible philanderers who use the institution of polygamy as an alibi; men whose wealth and easy mobility in an urban setting make it possible for them to manipulate the system to their own advantage.

In Mariama Bâ's second and posthumous work, *Un chant écarlate/Scarlet Song*, Mireille's marital woes are complicated by racial conflicts. Mireille de la Vallée is a young, white woman from France, and Ousmane is a young, black man from Senegal. When Mireille's father, a French diplomat working in Dakar, finds out that his daughter is dating a black man, he puts her on the next available flight back to France. From France, Mireille keeps in touch with Ousmane who eventually goes to study there. In spite of the vehement opposition to her relationship with Ousmane, Mireille marries him at the risk of alienating her family - sounds familiar. In his letter to his father after their wedding, Ousmane admits the immense positive contribution Mireille has made to his life, which again sounds familiar:

> If I have made a success of my life, if I am, as you say, your pride and joy, if I have fulfilled all your wishes, if you have left the dust of Usine Niari Talli behind you, if you can contemplate serenely the months and years stretching out before you, it is all thanks to her. It is difficult for a man to undertake anything alone... Mireille has helped me, by her unflagging moral support, to realise my potential. She was always before me, like a flaming torch, lighting up my path. She is not one of those common women, on the lookout for the main chance, who use black men to get themselves out of deep water. Mireille comes from a noble family that goes back in time (64).

The couple returns to Senegal to settle. Mireille gives birth to a

son and soon discovers that contrary to Ousmane's earlier assertion: "Entreprendre est difficile pour un homme seul" [It is difficult for a man to undertake anything alone] (99/64), it is not "difficult for a man [Ousmane] to undertake anything alone." Ousmane starts cheating on her (a *major* undertaking). Like the Ivoirienne, Jacqueline (*So Long a Letter*), who is demoted to a "gnac" (bush girl) when her Senegalese husband, Samba Diack, starts flirting with Senegalese girls, Mireille is now "une Toubab" (white woman) and marked for exclusion. Unknown to Mireille, Ousmane starts dating a Senegalese girl, Ouleymatou, whom he eventually marries. Another home is rented for Ouleymatou, and Ousmane is now the privileged master of two homes! Like the other men who abandon their wives, Ousmane claims that the devil made him do it - it is destined to be! He suddenly discovers his *négritude* and "function of Africanity" (Ojo-Ade, 76):

> 'My meeting with the white girl was determined by Fate; my will, more than ever, influences me to retain my identity as a black man.' 'Ouleymatou, the symbol of my double life!' Symbol of the black woman, whom he had to emancipate; symbol of Africa, one of whose 'enlightened sons' he was. In his mind he confused Ouleymatou with Africa, 'an African which has to be restored to its prerogatives, to be helped to evolve!'... 'Must I back down because of my white wife's anger? Because she may get violent in her fury? Because, every day, my conscience hears a warning bell? Back down because of the universal code of honour and dignity? Impossible!' (149-50)

Oh Mother Africa, one of thy "enlightened sons" taketh thy name in vain! This deceit wrapped in naturalized, originary, feminized, idealized, and "motherized" Africa and sung in poetry will be met with poetic justice at the end on the novel. Ousmane is not in the least confused, he knows what he is doing; he is only battling his demons. Underneath Ousmane's bravado and manipulation lies Ba's poignant sarcasm.

Driven crazy by the shock, anger and pain of Ousmane's deception and infidelity, Mireille pastes Ousmane's love letters

to her all over their home, kills their only child and stabs Ousmane when he comes home, as usual, in the early hours of the morning. The contradictions of Mireille's married life take a human form in her mulatto son whom she kills as a rejection and possible resolution of the contradictions. Her letters feverishly pasted all over the house contain sentiments - "*I shall never love anyone but you, as long as I live'... 'You, my "Blanche", you my "Blond", how I miss you! ...Without you, life has no relish.'* (63, emphasis in the original) - that contradict Ousmane's current attitude towards her. Ousmane's bravado - "Must I back down because of my white wife's anger? Because she may get violent in her fury?" (150) - is not a smart move, after all. Mireille stabs him. Fortunately for Ousmane, he is left bleeding but not declared dead; fortunately for Mireille, the plea of insanity remains a legal recourse.

Mariama Bâ's novels show the extent to which religious and traditional institutions are subverted by "modernity" in Africa's urban areas, particularly among the more affluent middle- and upper middle-classes. A. B. Diop, in his study of the organization of the African family in Dakar, also makes the connection between affluence and "polygamie geographique."[24] It is ironic that the wealth that the first wife helps to acquire is eventually used against her. Furthermore, there is the related issue of responsibility; particularly the ways in which the abandonment of responsibility is at the core of the manipulation, distortion and dubious, selective, and misleading exegesis of religious canonical texts. Oftentimes, the privileges are appropriated and the responsibility ignored. For example, one of the epigraphs to Femi Ojo-Ade's articles is taken from the *Bible*: "The head of every man is Christ, the head of every woman is man." This is one line of a longer quote from St. Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, chapter five. Read alone (as contained in Ojo-Ade's text), it unequivocally establishes male power, authority, and privilege, but if read together with the part omitted in Ojo-Ade's text, one

sees that the Bible is less strident and more benevolent; it stipulates that male authority must be tempered by love and responsibility. The following is the part not incorporated in Ojo-Ade's epigraph:

> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... Even so husbands should love their wives as their bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does to the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (1421).

The distortion and misleading interpretations that emanate from such acts of omission sustain the oppressor/oppressed dialectic in which the oppressor, as interpreter of the canon, reigns supreme.

Revenons a Nos Moutons![25]

The above remarks are presented not as an apologia for polygamy but as an appeal to critics of African literature to dismantle the unidimensional, simplistic, and sometimes irrelevant analytical paradigms/contexts that oversimplify and distort African literary texts by their failure to absorb the complexity of the issues presented therein. Or as Uzo Esonwanne states more elegantly in his study of Mariama Bâ, "[t]he theoretical advance the notion of consumer production makes possible is offset by a problem endemic to postcolonial literary theory, namely, a tendency to mortgage the interpretation of subalternist writing to the hegemonic modes of literary production."[26] In her work, Mariama Bâ examines how personal traumas and disorders are symptomatic microcosms of broader issues of postcolonial dislocations and cultural hemorrhage in an environment where internal systems are undergoing self-induced

and externally enforced rearticulation. On another level, this essay interrogates the articulation of polygamy as the centerpiece of Bâ's work. As I discussed above, a distinction ought to be made between polygamy as an institution and the way it functions in Ba's novels, particularly in view of the fact that what is at issue in some of the relationships is not even polygamy as an institution but the men's inability to hold in check their *polygamous instincts*.

Furthermore, the reification and demonization of polygamy as an institution short-circuits a serious engagement with its internal dynamics. Apart from the usual charge of unorthodoxy leveled against polygamy in the West (as in the article on the Josephs), a major problem with some analyses of polygamy is their overemphasis on sex/sexuality. Such an inordinate focus on sex overinvests the husband by casting him as the major beneficiary of the institution because he gets more sex than each of his wives. As we heard from the Josephs, polygamy is not just about sex, it is about human relations. In addition, polygamy has the potential of decentering male power because it inaugurates potential points of insurrection that, if well organized, can dilute male authority (like the rebellion led against Alex Joseph by his wives), although the points of insurrection can remain fragmented and ineffective if male authority succeeds in maintaining a strong and consistent divide and conquer strategy. The objectification of women in discussions of polygamy invests all power in the man and, consequently, distorts, dislocates and mis-un-articulates locations of power. One of the major arguments against polygamy is that it dehumanizes women who are compelled "to share" (appears in the title of the article on the Josephs) one man. Such an argument ignores the fact that much more is shared - friendship, companionship, expertise, time, child care, loss, misery, happiness, etc. Above all, there is the central question of *choice* (sometimes, women *choose* to have co-wives), an issue that is at the core of feminist theory and practice.

In his reading of African women writers, Ojo-Ade designates a second generation of African women writers as "the voices currently crying out for the liberation of woman." I doubt that the women in the literary works are declaring war on men as Ojo-Ade claims: "the war between male and female is now a contemporary constant" (72). The women are simply pursuing happiness, [27] which is fairl and to be encouraged; they are demanding respect and honesty from their spouses, and that is not asking too much; they are rejecting deception, humiliation and betrayal from their spouses, and that is not a bad idea at all. The women are not enthused about living with enigmas - "for Mawdo, and through him all men, remained an enigma for me (33) - and that is understandable.

In my many years of researching this extraordinarily gifted Senegalese writer, Mariama Bâ, I have come in contact with people who knew her very well and their unanimity on two fronts is encoded in the two phrases that I have heard repeatedly: 1. "She knew how to write" and 2. "She knew how to love. This beautiful woman with great love in her heart saw deception and wrote a masterpiece against it. Mariama Bâ's works stand as an eloquent psychoanalysis of deception/deceivers (those captives of the devil-made-me-do-it syndrome that permeates the works). The women have no illusions about such "captives" because they can literally read deceit on a man's face. For example, Ramatoulaye's mother sees trouble in Modou's gapped teeth; she warns her daughter but she is too much in love to heed the warning: "She often spoke of the wide gap between your two upper incisors" (14). Ramatoulaye learned the hard way; she takes the absence of the gapped teeth in Ibrahima Sall's face as a sign of his trustworthiness: "I let my gaze rest on the set of his teeth. No treacherous gaps (84). Nonetheless, like Mariama Bâ herself, some of her protagonists still have faith in the cooperation between men and women. Ramatoulaye ends her long letter on a hopeful note: "I remain persuaded of the

inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman" (89). After all, didn't Mariama Bâ also dedicate Ramatoulaye's long letter, *Une si longue lettre*, to men (qualified, however!): "to men of goodwill". Are Modou Fall, Mawdo Bâ, Samba Diack and Ousmane among these honorable men? I wonder.

NOTES

1. Alan Sokal, a Physics Professor at New York University, concerned about what he calls "the decline in the standards of rigor in certain precincts of the academic Humanities," decided to "try a modest experiment" by deliberately writing an absurd ("liberally salted with nonsense") article laced with postmodernist jargon - "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" - and submitting it to a leading journal of cultural studies, *Social Text*, to see if they would publish it and they did. As expected, Sokal's hoax generated intense debate for and against the professor prompting him to write another article, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies," in his defense. Although one can pick holes in some of Sokal's arguments and can understand, to some extent, the furor over Sokal's method (entrapment), the disturbing and embarrassing fact remains - *Social Text* published nonsense. Shortly after the *Social Text* debacle, another related event occurred at Duke University (*Social Text* comes out of Duke). Frank Lentricchia, one of the most visible literary critics of our era, announced that he had "over the last ten years, pretty much stopped reading literary criticism, because most of it isn't literary" (60), and given up teaching graduate students obsessed with analytical paradigms and contexts that obfuscate the literary text and obliterate its pleasure: "I believe that what is now called literary criticism is a form of Xeroxing. Tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say in advance about any work of literature, especially those you haven't read. Texts are not read; they are preread" (64). Although Lentricchia is now fighting the monster he helped create, the issues he raises are important and pertinent. In an engaging article - "Why Poststructuralism Is a Dead End for Progressive Thought" (*Socialist Review*, again from Duke) - Barbara Epstein addresses the consequences of some of the concerns expressed by Sokal, Lentricchia and other scholars (see Richard Sklar, "The New Modernization") by examining the ways in which obsession with discourse

and disciplinary trends throws a wedge between scholarship and social change.

2. All English translations of *Une si longue lettre* are from Mariama Bâ, *So long a letter*, Trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas, Oxford: Heinemann, 1981. Translations of *Un chant écarlate* are from Mariama Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, Trans. Dorothy S. Blair, Essex: Longman, 1985. All other translations are mine.

3. The expression, "Third World" ("Tiers Monde," "Tercer Mundo," etc.), is so inappropriate in a *civilized* world that I strongly recommend it be banned. A starving American called a meal I prepared "Third World food" after gulping down every bit of it. What can I say? It is only a *small* price a "Third World" woman must pay for hobnobbing with "civilization." I use "Third World" guardedly and parenthetically.

4. See Hitchcock in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed. *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. London: Routledge, 1997.

5. See Ibrahim in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed. *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. London: Routledge, 1997.

6. Audre Lorde, Sister Outside, Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 66-71.

7. See Uzo Esonwanne in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed. *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. London: Routledge, 1997.

8. Although "polygamic" appears in Modupé Bodé-Thomas's translation of *Une si longue lettre*, I will use "polygamous" in my paper.

9. The noun - *la polygamie*/polygamy - does not appear in the French original (*Une si longue letter*) although it appears in the English translation (*So Long a Letter*). The central argument of this paper (i.e. Bâ's use of the adjective (*polygamique*) instead of the noun (*la polygamie*) could not have been made if I had relied solely on the English translation of the novel. The ongoing debate about the pitfalls of working solely with texts in translation is a complex and important one.

10. In his book, *Anti-Semite* and *Jew*, Jean-Paul Sartre notes that "if the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him" (p.13).

11. In fact, a test of the power and beauty of Mariama Bâ's writing is that, to a great extent, it survived Modupé Bodé-Thomas's sometimes inelegant mot-à-mot (word-for-word) translation of *Une si longue lettre*.

12. From Chimalum Nwankwo's abstract of his paper on polygamy and imperial refractions.

13. Esonwanne, op. cit.

14. From the title of Femi Ojo-Ade's article.

15. By making an issue of her marriage without dowry ("*sans dot*"), Ramatoulaye implies that dowry payment in her environment is the norm. Ironically, her marriage adhered to Islamic tenet (the non payment of dowry) by default.

16. Rafi Ullah Shehab cites the example of Jamila, wife of Sabit bin Qais. Jamila, dissatisfied with the ugliness of her husband, decided to separate from him. She approached the Holy Prophet who granted the separation without hesitancy but on condition that Jamila returned the Orchard which Sabit gave her.

17. See Patrick Merand, *La vie quotidienne en Afrique noire à travers la littérature africaine*.

18. See Arthur Phillips and Henry Morris, *Marriage Laws in Africa*.

19. See Vincent Monteil, "L'Islam".

20. A rich, flirtatious, married old man who preys on girls young enough to be his daughters.

21. It may look odd that Ramatoulaye is insisting on senior wife privileges after Modou's death when he ceased living with her after his marriage to Binetou. Ramatoulaye's claims make sense in view of the fact that Modou did not divorce her.

22. Esonwanne, op. cit.

23. This and the next quote from Aïssatou's letter are instances of Bodé-Thomas's *mot-à-mot* translation that undermines Bâ's poetic rendition.

24. A. B. Diop's research shows that polygamy in the urban areas increases as one goes up the economic ladder: "On the other hand, there is an increase in the rate of polygamy for male heads of households as one goes up the professional ladder. The rate increases from 8.2% for houseworkers to 10.8% for workmen and craftsmen, to 17.5% for tradesmen and reaches 19.5% for senior civil servants . . . Polygamy . . . becomes rampant only among the very affluent.

25. This phrase which literally means "let's return to the sheep" is taken from a medieval French farce, *La Farce de Maître Pathelin*, and is used to bring people back to the issue at hand if they start wandering away from it. I find this expression appropriate for my repeated calls to all of us as critics of African literature not to wander too far afield into all brands of epistemologies, theories, and methodologies that have little or no relevance to African literary texts as *cultural* productions. Although the African texts are written in languages with which we are familiar - English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish - they are all encoded in the *language of culture (in all its specificity)* that demands other levels of understanding and other manners of "speaking." These are not easy, superficial texts, although sometimes our readings of them make them look that way. They are complex texts whose decoding requires a firm grasp of the *language of culture*. Our interest in and commitment to African literature, particularly for those not born in that environment or without formal training in the field of African literature, is a laudable one that can be sustained only by a serious engagement in/with the *language of culture*. Cultural illiteracy engenders paralysis, and African literature is too effervescent to be mired in paralysis. A very good understanding of the texts and the environment from which they evolved must be the engine that drives the car of African literary criticism. Any epistemology or theory that is alien to that environment must be used guardedly as a frame of reference, at best, and not as a substitute for the literary texts themselves; to do otherwise is suicidal. As my people say, *okenye adi ano n'uno ewu anwuo n'ogbili* (a goat does not die at the tether when an adult is home). We, as critics, are the adults who must not watch the goat (African literature) strangle to death, or worse still, participate in its strangulation.

26. Esonwanne, op. cit.

27. Edris Markward's essay examines the quest for happiness in Bâ's novels.

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TITILOLA SHONEYIN

That Which You Stole of me

My dusk-dreams still border
on your sooty profile: Statuesque
before the yellow bloom
of a stagnant glow.
But you know,
your smile just fails me.

groping, searching
for that which you stole
of me.

My mound still murmurs
from the rumours
of a whispering plunge.
But I've lost your name
somewhere within the bitchin'
of marketplace bargaining.

groping, searching
for that which you stole
of me.

My pupils still shimmer.
"Goodbye!" screamed
the pair of dusted pockets.

"So long!" hollered a couple of callous heels.

I'm still groping, searching
for that which you stole
of me.

Wounded Trampodisiac

The itch is dry
but the scratch is sweet
Toward pain is where all pleasures slide.
The lingering smart? To die for;
but what about the blood under her fingernails?

So she stalks the street-corner food stands
and skulks around the Os of the wolf whistle
she wears her smile on her dress like dried spittle
and combs the hair she's got for strands.

The itch is dry
but the scratch is sweet.
Toward pain is where all pleasures slide.
The lingering smart? To die for;
but what about the blood stains on her fingers?

She swallows the zipper in a careless grope
then they crucify her nakedness to the floorboard
she bites her lips and her teeth strum a chord
it comes, it comes, he comes and she longs for hope.

The itch is dry
but the scratch is sweet
Toward pain is where all pleasures slide.
The lingering smart? To die for;
but what about the taste of blood on her tongue?

She doesn't care about your stale horrified looks,
she knows how to survive in a world of strangers,
she longs to be a song and not one of the changers.
Riding your conscience like a golden chariot, she cooks.
She cooks, she cooks her dreams.

The itch is dry
but the scratch is sweet
Toward pain is where all pleasures slide.
The lingering smart? To die for;
but what about the blood on her fangs.

Trucks on the Expressway

Farting queenbees
Must you roll your derrier
around the road
trumpeting the blinding gas
from your fevered arms.
bullying your subjects
who hide in the roadside greens
tarrying, till your raging selves disappear.

Her Head Is Full of Demons

Her head is full of demons
Her restlessness, a curse
the kind that stinks like a drooling wound
harbouring shit flies in a technicoloured dawn.

Her heart is full of stage-light dreams.
Like the soleless slippers on the feet of the ghosts
that trail her heels, they've got claws and eyes
and arms... they smell... they talk...

She won't have a man, any big-boned man,
telling her what colour to paint her eyelids.
Can't put a girl in prison. Can you?
just because she likes the smell of black

She's signed a kiss under her epitaph
But it's a secret. Her pains are voices.
And the voices? Sheer pain, nails and knives.
Angel wants to glide to hell on a speed boat.

They say her head was full of demons
and her restlessness, a curse.
Do her soul a damned favour!
Put her memory at rest!
Place her travelling shoes on a witness stand.

KENNETH KANU

The Dancers

The talking drum
has lost its tongue
Its promises lie cold
like an impotent cock

The promises that made
many vend their humanity
precious precious humanity

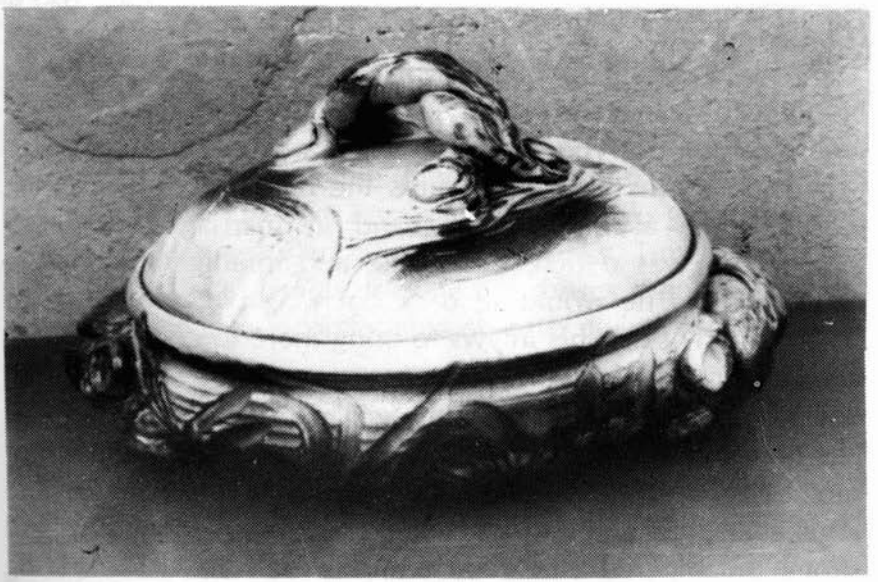
The dancers are weary of feet
They have danced themselves lame
The masses are weary at their sight
Yet the dancers refuse to leave the arena

Shameless opportunities
Grabbing and looting
Consecrated criminals
Theirs is no crime
It is their share of the national cake
National cake indeed

Their drama is drab
The audience is not amused
The same dismal, insipid drama

We are tired of it
We clamour for a change
They can never accept
They are wrong
Even when manifestations are rife
Divine intervention tolls a knell
They can never accept they are wrong
Until they leave with a wrung neck

Divine Intervention
Indeed.



KENNETH KANU

The Story of Nnuona

Nnuona (meaning four hundred jewels) was the second daughter of Eze Idozuka. As her name suggested, she was by every inch a jewel. Her nose stood like a gong, her eyes like that of a cherub, her shape no less a figure eight. Her beauty was a conquering kind. A conquistador.

She was aware of her beauty which manifested in her carriage. Nnuona knew that she was of a noble ancestry - a typical Nwa-amulu-na-obi. Everybody revered and adored her beauty.

Eze Idoka was looking towards the day eligible bachelors would come asking for her hand in marriage. Idozuka's expectation was a rich, handsome and intelligent man. He reflected how he would sit back counting bags and bags of cowries and asking his inlaws to bring more to commensurate with the beauty of the bride Nnuona.

Time and tide passed. Nnuona got matured and full blown. Her height was something breathtaking. It was the height of her mother Ajija, a one time village beauty. Nnuona's gait was like a gazelle's, graceful and articulate. Her breasts stood firm and strong, untampered with. They swung as she walked, tantalizing and alluring. She was a virgin.

Suitors started to come. The first was Ikpo, who was ready to pay any price to own Nnuona. Nnuona complained he had a broad nose and asked him to discontinue coming. Ikpo left humiliated. Nnaka came, handsome and intelligent. Nnuona complained he was not tall enough. Nnaka left annoyed.

Akuebube had heard of the suitors who had tried and failed. He thought his own would be different. He came with pomp and panoply, for he was a Prince. Nnuona complained he had a protruding stomach and said it would be a barrier to satisfying her. Akuebube felt slighted. He cursed, yelled, made much noise, and finally left, downcast.

The years continued to roll by like some rolling wheel. Nwakibie, the only child of Eze Agadagbachiriuzo said he would go to marry Nnuona. People discouraged him. He swore he would. Nwakibie and his people came with a retinue. Eze Idozuka pleaded with Nnuona to consent and marry Nwakibie. Idozuka saw all the qualities he needed in the young man. Nnuona disagreed with his father and said Nwakibie had tiny legs. Eze Idozuka was disturbed. Nnuona reassured his father that there was time and told him that more promising and dentless suitors were on their way.

Days rolled into weeks and weeks into months and months into years no suitors came. Nnuona became worried. Time, a destroyer started to warp her beauty. Her cheeks got sunken, her shape became distorted. She looked wonky. Time had made a one time village beauty look like a rhesus monkey. Nnuona became edgy and uncomfortable over her dwindling beauty and unmarried status.

When every hope of her getting married was lost, Nwankwo the village wine tapper whose characteristic features were a broad nose, a protruding stomach, a short height and tiny legs came asking to marry Nnuona. Nnuona enthusiastically agreed. Though married, she was full of regrets for her past actions and foolish procrastination.

UNOMA NGUEMO AZUAH

Forbidden

My hair is a palm tree
Where birds build their nests
But hatch their eggs and fly
I droop, heavy with their excreta

My head is a mortar
Where you pound pain
And gaze into my hollow

My body is a bin
Where you dump your crumbs
And set me on fire
to cast my ashes to the wind

Burn me in your gathered fire
I will not become a liar

Grind me on your largest slab
I remain, a taboo

My legs are a pair of windy paths
leading to a gully
I will defy the rage of the rain
And erode no more.

Queen of the Night

Lie me low
in your fever
Like snails in their season
creep into the tunnels of my tide
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Through the contours of my ridges
Till I convulse in your arm of armoury
You are my queen of the night
You emerge at full moon
And fill me up like a yawn.

CHINWEIZU

Birth: the Newborn's View

And they asked the great-great-grandmother: "When, ma'am, were you born?"

And she answered them and said: "I don't know. I wasn't there. Or rather, I was there but wasn't aware. I certainly didn't look at any clock or calendar. But I'll tell you what I was told about it by those who claim to have been there. But, knowing you, you wouldn't be interested in hearsay. So, if you insist on knowing, on knowing for sure, from eye witnesses, you better ask those who witnessed the event, and who were fully alert. But who now can give an eye witness account of that moment? Who on earth can, considering how old and gray and stooped with the weight of age I myself am?

And they put her under hypnosis, and sped her memory back to her primal moment.

"Yes! I remember it all now," she declared. "Oh yes! This was how it felt at that time. Unconsenting, unconsulted, without my asking at all, I was dragged through a tunnel of blood, tight and lightless. I popped out, head first into a strange, unfocussed air. Ghostly figures gathered around baring their teeth. Unfamiliar noises issued from holes in their faces, and assaulted my ears. I felt a rush of air into my lungs. And like flat, sticky, rubber

tubers, the walls of the air sacs in my lungs peeled apart. A scream escaped my lips. And between screams I asked: Why all this pain? What have I done? Why am I here? Why all this blood? But none of those standing around seemed to understand me. They kept on smiling and grinning and smiling and grinning, happy at my pain. I felt lonely and afraid, and I cried out again, and again, and again, to no avail, till my first sleep rescued me from my dismay."

Burn-And-Go, the Audit Man

No bodyguards flank his table: no sentries intimidate the anterooms of his office; not even a coat of arms hangs on the wall above his head. There he sits, the Audit Man, calm and unassuming. Yet his power is great in the land. When they hear he is coming their way, great buildings burst into flame. Make way, make way, make way! Give respect where respect is overdue. Make way for the Audit Man!

Good day to you sir. Mr. Audit Man, starter of mystery fires! We stand in deep humility before your quiet power. You walk about town looking more harmless than a worm. You travel incognito, without outriders. without sirens blasting a war path through acres of jammed traffic. No koboko boys whip pedestrians into the gutters to make way for your convoy. Yet, at the rumor of your coming their way, sensitive files in the greatest offices begin to smoulder; and when your shadow crosses the front gate, top secret cabinets bust into flame. Who would have

guessed that a man so cool and so calm could incite spontaneous combustion: not grass huts in the dry savanna after a seven-year drought; not in kitchens or petrol depots, but in our grandest towers of air-conditioned concrete and steel? The Republic Building. The Ministry of Education Building. The NET Building. And now the NNPC. And which shall be next? The Independence Building? The Central Bank? The National Mint?

You may not be a Kill-and-go, Mr Audit Man, but your shadow is a Burn-and-go! It burns up the sins of the world better than the blood of Jesus can wash them away. Take a clerk on N2,000 a year, who has 17 Mercedes cars, 25 houses and 7 mansions. The purifying fire from your shadow can make him cleaner than the Holy Ghost!

We must give gratitude to the gods that the Audit Man does not pay frequent visits to households and offices. If he began dropping in at homes and offices every day, for beer or for lunch or just to say hello, he would set the whole land ablaze. Cities would burn; villages would burn; all buildings in the land would soon be roofless and blackened with soot, as embezzlers of every stripe, from housewives to high officials, hurry to bury their misdeeds under smouldering ashes. Even the forests and grasslands would burn to destroy the evidence which hunters and farmers hide in tree trunks and rabbit holes.

Now Sir, Doctor, Cardinal, Generalissimo, Emperor Audit Man, we bow and tremble at your feet. Your power is greater than great, for even the greatest tremble at your coming. Tell us Sir, which is your patron god? To whom should we pray and offer sacrifices to keep our buildings safe? Is it Shango? Shango who tosses lightning across the skies and, from afar, ignites trees and houses and people? Can you imagine it: Shango, Lord of the Thunderbolt, as patron god of auditors!

Oriakudiya

Oriakudiya! Consumer of her husband's wealth!
Plump with the waters of health, like a ripe pumpkin!

My friend, look at her now! Look at her now!
Do you remember that stripling from five years ago?
Remember how thin she looked
When she left her father's house
And moved into her husband's care
To be oppressed with endless housework,
With doing ninety per-cent of the family toil
For no pay at all,
As some mad feminists say?

Remember those grasshopper legs?
That bony chest and string bean neck?
Those flat cheeks and hungry eyes?
Remember how she looked like a starved gazelle?
Now look, look at her now,
Bursting with matronly fat
As she huffs and puffs along the road
Leading her pack of servants!
Can you believe it is the same woman?

What man, except a giant,
Could carry her across a gutter
As her tailor husband did on her wedding day
Just five years ago?
It would be easier to stuff an elephant into a midget's trousers

Than to get her double-barrel thighs into those slim jeans
She wore in her maiden days.

Guess who looks thin and haggard now - its her husband
Guess whose eyes are full of worry - its her husband's!
Guess whose shoulders sag with toil - its her husband's!
He used to be cheerful and thickset - not anymore!
He now looks like a sad ghost
From doing nothing all day long
Except eat and drink
And talk the night away in smoky bars
While his enslaved wife
Toils and exhausts herself to obesity!

Oriakudiya! Consumer of her husband's wealth!
What is your secret
For brimming all over with freshness
And wearing your husband ragged,
When, according to the Feminazis,
You are down-trodden by him?

The Privatization Paradise

Then came that glorious day when every bit of earth was privately owned. Every gallon of fresh air, every ray of sun , every drop of rain, every pebble on every beach, every square inch of grass, every square foot of road, every cubic foot of mountain was at last privately owned. Every stream, every brick, every

cloud, every bird, every sound, every tree, every smell, every view, all were privately owned. You couldn't use your ear unless you first put money into some hearing slot machine. You couldn't walk from here to there without paying money at a toll booth each step of your way. You had to buy every drop of moisture you inhaled with your breath. You even had to pay to sneeze into your own handkerchief. Some smart operators had cornered the market in sneezing acts, in sweating acts, in urinating acts, in throat-clearing acts. And there were fines, heavy fines, even prison terms and death penalties, for disregarding their private property rights and yawning without first paying a fee. You even had to buy sleeping rights before you could stand on your own two feet and snore.

Even talking and writing had become extraordinary financial feats, even for trillionaires! Every word had become privately owned. Everyname, every phrase, every rule of grammar that you might use or abuse was copyrighted: "is", "go", "come", "good", "welcome", "good morning", even the words "I" and "me" were privately owned, and you couldn't use any of them without paying stiff royalties to some smart hustler who had copyrighted them. You couldn't dream, couldn't fantasize, couldn't even recall your own experiences, because the right to dream had been snapped up, the privilege to fantasize had to be paid for, and Universal Memory Inc, had a monopoly on remembering acts, and you had to rent your own memory from them before you could remember your own name. You had to carry tons of money, in coins and bills, just to pay your way to cross the street and ask your neighbor how his sick cow was doing. Many took to not eating, not walking, not breathing, not talking, not clearing their throats, not opening their eyes if they were already shut, not closing them if they were open, not wetting their pants, not emptying their bowels, for fear of how much it would cost to do any of that! Health freaks and other determined joggers took to jogging on one spot. The cost of running space, breathing rights,

trespass penalties and sweating fees had all shot beyond everyone's reach in that happy paradise where everything, at long last, had become private property. Cash registers rang and sang; the GNP doubled every second; and with fanfare and infectious euphoria the media experts hailed the dawn of the privatization paradise, and assured the world that humanity had never been so happy or so free.

God's iq

The whispered news hit the groves of academe like a hurricane. A crazy research report had shown that Homer, Hitler, Shakespeare, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Socrates, Mena, Ikhnaton, Imhotep, Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Jesus, Confucius, Sun Tzu, Satchmo, Beetoven, Tom Paine, Jefferson, Mark Twain and many many more, the overwhelming majority of the most illustrious dead, never had a PhD, and worse, never needed one! What a scandal! Shaken to their very soles, the grand wizards of academe held a secret conclave where they launched a massive cover-up of the affair. Their agents stole the one-page, one dollar report, stamped "Top Secret" on it, and hid it in a vault, away from the prying eyes of newshounds from AP, UPI, AFP, Reuters, Tass, Xinhua and other news agencies on the planet. They staged a top secret, million dollar ceremony in the catacombs in Rome, to which the Pope summoned the ghosts of all the illustrious dead, and in one mass baptism posthumously conferred upon them Ph D's, D. Phil's, Md's, Lid's, DSc's, JD's

and whatever other Ds they could invent. Thus, at long last, these illustrious dead were rehabilitated and made fit to lead humanity in their respective fields of endeavor.

But just as the lords of academe concluded their secret ceremony, and happily retired to their tenureships, rejoicing that they had definitively covered up that scandal, some ignoramus wrote to UNESCO to ask: What is God's IQ? The story hit the grand trustees of academe like the blast of Armageddon. They promptly set about to suppress all news of the query. Some even wanted the inquirer secretly burned for blasphemy, heresy, apostasy and other anti-divine activities. But wiser counsel eventually prevailed. Instead, a multi-disciplinary, multi-national, multi-racial, inter-gender, inter-faith, inter-climatic research team was set up to determine God's IQ. It was empowered to spend as much money as necessary, even all the gold ever mined from the earth under Johannesburg, provided it came up with results that would please the Party of God. When the money was all spent, but not a moment before, the team threw up their hands in despair. They had failed to ascertain whether God could read, or write, or talk, or watch TV, or take multiple choice tests; much less whether he or she or it had enough brains to earn a BA, an MA, an MBA, let alone enough IQ to suffer through a Ph D program.

It was then that the oldest and wisest of the researchers suggested that, since God was omniscient by definition, and omnipotent by definition, they should declare, again by definition, that he had an infinite IQ. They had to be consistent, hadn't they? The exhausted researchers nodded in relief, and voted to do as suggested.

Having at last satisfied themselves that God has more than enough IQ to earn a Ph D, the lords of academe held a convocation to surpass all convocations. It was a great assembly, in their serried ranks, filled the huge auditorium: the emeritus

professors in the front rows, the full professors behind them, the half-professors behind them, then the quarter professors, the half-past professors, and the quarter-to professors. And the novice lecturers were packed, cheek by jowl, in the topmost rows farthest from the rostrum. The Pope rose and conferred a Ph D on God, and pronounced God fit to be the creator of the universe.

Fear of Rot: the Anti-Putrefaction Recipe for the Health Food Freak

1. A balanced, wholesome, nourishing meal must contain protein, starch, fats, oils, acids, vitamins and bulk in proper proportions. The proportions will vary with the size, age, shape, sex, weight and density of the individual diner. It is therefore most advisable, when cooking for one or more, to segregate the items, and cook them separately in the right quantities.

2. Protein does not digest properly if sent to the intestines in the company of carbohydrates, acids, fats or oils. You should never ever mix proteins with anything else in pot, plate, mouth or digestive track. Neither should fats be mixed with acids or vitamins, nor milk with cereals or other suppliers of bulk. To mix them is to begin the deplorable process of putrefaction right in the pot or plate. This would reduce the nutrient value, as well as the palate pleasure, of even the choicest foods. For maximum nourishment with optimum palate delight, you must cook, serve, chew, swallow, digest and absorb each food item separately.

3. Chew each bite at least a hundred times. This is important in

order to mix the food granules properly with ptyalin from your saliva. Proper mastication will ensure thorough digestion without putrefaction.

4. Allow up to three minutes of chewing for each bite. Allow up to three hours for each item to complete its private tour of the digestive track. Allow up to fifteen or twenty hours for a five course meal. For an eight course feast, it is advised that you budget at least twenty-four hours. Otherwise, digestion will be accompanied by putrefaction, and could result in constipation, gastritis, burping, farting, diarrhoea or some other unhealthy, not to say un-gourmet-like, disorders which could lead to a socially undesirable resort, while still at table, to alka seltzer, ostrich feathers, emetics, anal pumping, or even gasterectomy - each an avoidable *faux pas* by which one's stock in the gourmet community falls, never again to rise.

5. If you adhere to this ancient recipe (gleaned from a most secret book of wisdom from the East, and now happily verified by the most modern science of the West), you should have no trouble avoiding the onset of putrefaction in the digestive track, with all its embarrassing consequences, not even the putrefaction which comes with death. For should death be rude enough to intrude at your last supper, and catch up with your tired, old, starved body before you spoon up your dessert; should that most unlikely mishap occur, then rest assured that putrefaction will not set in, your digestive track will stay intact, fresh and clean, and could go straight to the paradise museum of good eating, there to be displayed for ever and ever without benefit of even one drop of monosodium glutamate, embalming fluid, or any other artificial preservative.

Lament of a Ruined Chair

Hey! Hey! Wait a minute!
What are you trying to do?
Yank off my beautiful leg
To stoke your harmattan fire?
Scavenger, have you no heart?
Have you no eye for beauty?
No respect for the exquisite?
Or for the ex-exquisite?

I admit I'm a bit house worn.
And my paint has started to peel;
But not very long ago,
I was as beautiful as a damsel
On the morning of her bloom.
I was admired from every angle,
Paid for most handsomely,
And taken to lend grace
To a millionaire's fine home.

But then, I fell on hard days,
And got carted from house to house,
Each less sumptuous than the last.
At last I found myself
In rowdy bars, in greasy dining rooms,
In flea bag hotels
Down by the street of derelicts.

What have I seen in my career?
What have I not seen

From my arse-up view of the world!

I have carried in dignified silence
The overflowing bottom of a cash madam
Whose arms and thighs were encased
In armorplate of gold and lace.
If airlines charged by body-weight,
So much per kilogram-mile,
As they do for excess baggage,
One flight by that woman mountain
Would bankrupt ten millionaires!
If they did, if only they did,
She wouldn't have spent her life up in the air
Commuting between airports,
Between here and everywhere,
Chasing rainbows above the clouds.

And I have carried without complaining
The bulk of a pregnant man
Who had ten gallons of stale beer
Sloshing about in his belly balloon
Like oil in a listing tanker
Heaving about in a sea storm.
He drank to drown his worries
And stank so bad the bedbugs all ran away.

I have carried with great irritation
A deodorized lap-dog
Who constantly anointed me with acid farts
That corroded the catgut threads
Which held my innards together.
Whatever it was that that dog used to eat
Fizzed out as smelly acid gas.

I have suffered in terminal silence
Some merciless pounding from children's feet
As they turned me into a trampoline
And fatigued all my springs.

Hey! Hey! What are you doing?
Have you no heart at all?
After hearing my hard-luck story?
Why do you hammer me so hard?
Why have you torn off my backside?
Why have you flung my arm away?
Have I survived all I've survived
Just to be cannibalized in the end
To stoke some derelict's fire?
Scavenger of the rubbish mountain,
The Judge of Recycling sentenced me
To hold some rubbish and earth in place
In some landfill somewhere.
I was not condemned to be hanged, drawn,
Quartered and scattered in bits and pieces,
For some scavenger's pleasure.
Why don't you just leave me alone
To rot slowly in the sun and rain?

NORBERT OYIBO EZE

The Quintessence of Dramatic Form: A Review Essay on *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*

AUTHOR: Onuora Ossie Enekwe

PUBLISHER: Nigeria Magazine, Lagos, 1987.

PAGES: 164

In "On Heroes and Songs: An Introduction to a commemorative exhibition on Ossie Onuora Enekwe", Krydz Ikwuemesi opines that a "hero is part of the fabric of the collective myth of the people" and that a "discerning society holds him in high esteem, aware that he can be a guardian and defender of its values, its mores, its cosmos" (1998: 8). It seems to me that it is this functional quality of a hero that typifies the spirit behind this magnum opus - *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*.

A model work on African traditional theatre, and the theories of dramatic criticism, *Igbo Masks* does not only aptly defend the authenticity of the varied masquerading activities in Igboland as vibrant theatre, but also sufficiently, through instances drawn from the various forms of Oriental theatre, show us the other side of the theatre other than the Western type. In doing this, Enekwe attempts to clarify the nature of dramatic theatre, by distinguishing between the qualities that are of essence to dramatic form, from those that are merely employed to embellish

it, thereby countering some erroneous Eurocentric notions about the nature of dramatic art.

In discussing the nature of dramatic theatre, the author of *Igbo Masks* agrees with Sprinchorn that "the apparatus of the theatre can be put in different ways" (1965: 10), because as Edith Hamilton opines, "the way a nation goes, whether that of the mind or that of the spirit, is decisive in its effect upon art" (1963: 35), hence Enekwe's argument that "society and history determine the shape that drama takes at any time and place" (1987:11). This must be so and cannot be otherwise because theatre, as shown by history, has continued to serve as a recorder of sensibilities, value judgements and rhythms of life. We know that the above cultural qualities differ from place to place, and, even within the same place, change from time to time. Writing in the same year of the publication of the *Igbo Masks*, Julian Hilton argues that this "cultural dynamism is fundamental to the relativity of theatre" (1987: 35). Illustrating this argument, Enekwe feels that the Greeks' abnegation of the spirit to the supremacy of the intellect was fundamental to the logical nature of their dramatic action, and as Hamilton writes, the Greeks being men of "pure reason view with condescension, if not with contempt, conclusions reached in any way except that of the mind" (1963:31). She further opines that they engage in logic and debate in order to "search for causes, and to bring to light evidences of meaning" (1963: 31). Hence, the logical nature of cause-to-effect progression of the Greek plot and dramatic action, Enekwe argues, merely serve to validate this sensibility dramatically.

On the contrary, the author argues in *Igbo Masks* that in the Oriental and traditional African theatres, where metaphysical awareness is sought after, the sense of logic disappears because dramatic theatre as practised in these areas "[is] not interested in the unfolding of human actions" (Enekwe, 1987: 13). In the oriental theatre where iconic fidelity is not aspired to, but everyday reality is translated into theatrical key, understanding of

theatrical meaning depends largely on the mastery of this theatrical key. In Ching Hsi, a popular Chinese traditional theatre, one needs to know for example that "horse back riding is symbolized by an actor carrying a whip" (Pronko, 1974: 44). Similarly, Enekwe feels that the *Igbo Mask* theatre is highly episodic because, as Obiechina argues", the Igbo peoples' sensibilities are trained to absorb diffused ritual and symbolic significance of actions" (1974: 393).

Conceptualizing a theatre that is fundamentally different from the Aristotelian type, Enekwe, in *Igbo Masks*, attempts to "redefine the meaning of dramatic theatre by drawing insight from Bernard Beckerman's *Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis*, which looks at drama, not as narrative, but as an activity" (1987: 10). Beckerman feels that "theatre occurs when one or more human beings isolated in time and/or space, present themselves to another or others in an imagined act" (1970: 146). Enekwe, drawing from this definition, feels that drama is an activity involving the interaction of the audience and the performers in a public place" (1987: 15), thereby typifying the actor, space and the audience as the quintessential infrastructure of drama.

Regarding the Eurocentric view that plot and dialogue are of essence to drama, Enekwe feels that drama does occur without them. He cites instances with pantomime and dance drama. He in fact agrees with Millet and Bentley that "drama, may and usually does, involve the technical elements of plot, character, setting dialogue, but even when these elements are reduced to a minimum, we still have drama, provided that the elements of representation, impersonation and action are present" (1935:4). Talking further on dialogue in a recent interview, Enekwe feels that "dialogue is not really of essence; not that it is not good, but that dramas like mime and pantomime can exist without it" (Gbenoba, 1998:15).

Another theoretical issue explicated in *Igbo Masks*, which

makes it a must read book on theatre, is the position of its author on the ritual - theatre relationship. Some theatre critics who find religious feelings inimical to dramatic creativity consider ritual and theatre exclusive categories. However, the author of *Igbo Masks* feels that ritual and theatre are inseparable, because in Africa and oriental world, public rituals are performed as theatre. He feels that in the third world, theatre depends significantly on ritual for the evocation of poetic images and meaning. In a recent interview, he reiterates that:

> Further research has shown that in many places, public rituals are not possible without art. To perform public rituals, we need drama, so the question of trying to separate drama and ritual is trying to do what is impossible (Gbenoba, 1998: 15).

Similarly, Enekwe uses *Igbo Masks* to prove the relationship between efficacy and entertainment, the factors upon which those who find ritual antipodal to theatre rest their argument. He argues that, apart from entertainment, theatre has it form of efficacy, as 'it is also the goal of those who organize theatre to change or influence things" (Enekwe, 1987: 26). He cited a lot of instances to support his position, but of note is Amiri Baraka's view of the goal of the Black Theatre. Declaring the goal of the Black Theatre, Amiri Baraka asserts:

> Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims if they are blood brothers. And what we show will cause blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the street in agony. If it means some souls will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be.

A re-direction of this concept of dramatic theatre, *Igbo Masks:*

The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre, is a book that should be on the book shelf of every serious-minded theatre scholar.

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CHUKWUEMEKA AGBAYI

Book Review: In a Vortex of Light

TITLE: *A Feast of Fools*; 273pp.

AUTHOR: Ebele Oseye (Ellease Southerland)

PUBLISHERS: Africana Legacy Press, New York, 1998.

Packed within some 277 pages is the story of a large African family - their trials, failures and triumphs, spanning over two generations. It is the pathetic story of Daniel Torch Senior, his touching struggle to cater for his family, his high-spirited, positively motivated but overbearing attempt to impose a wholesome discipline on his children, his intense preoccupation with the destination of their souls, his overwhelmingly simple - albeit not simplistic - love for his family and the little almost insignificant ways in which he demonstrates this love with such candor and vigour as to draw tears from the soul. But it is not his story alone - although Oseye's book would still have qualified as a celebration of life for that.

A Feast of Fools is also the story of Abeba, wife of Daniel Torch Senior, mother of Ada, Dorothea, Askia, Osei, Juma, and others, her sacrifice of the longest stretch of her life for the love of man and family. It is the story of her robust contentment with the simple pleasures of life.

It is the story of a native world of heroes and villains: there is Uncle Matt, the rabbit killer, whom Dorothea - sharp wit at one - tells "We don't kill our friends", and Nelson Jones, the

seductionist with his unnerving "harmless presence", and Dorothea herself, "primed and programmed for pain", totally unequipped for life without a mother's love.

It is the story of discoveries and betrayals: discoveries of love and life by Ada Kora Torch and Daniel Torch Junior, among others; the betrayal by Nelson Jones and Ibe Ikenna, the African polygamist. And the story of homecoming, of roots regained and earth reclaimed. However, unlike the persona in Okigbo's 'Heavensgate' whose prodigality is self-inflicted, Ada's estrangement with Africa is truly beyond her control, having been enacted at least a hundred years before her birth. In both instances of homecoming, though, the sheer enthusiasm for life resonate at identical frequencies.

The book seems to offer that life when lived with a great enthusiasm is a wonderful thing, and can only be qualified as a party by revellers, a feast of fools, fools, in this instance, implying not stupidity or some such negativity but naivety, trueness to oneself, altruistic motivations, fresh daffodils and jacarandas, and innocence - an innocence which is simultaneously disgusting and alluring, and all the more exciting for its potential as an exploitable quantity.

The range and spread of the novel reminds one of Yambo Ouloguem's *God's Bits of Wood* - devoid of its political concerns, Fred D'aguair's *Dear Future* and M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*. The shimmering light and burning love, the intense engagement with life remind one of the lives of such men as Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Fela Anikulakpo Kuti and Mahatma Ghandi - men who lived passionately, lived out to the best of their abilities their individual dreams and ideals. The novel is a celebration of life as *Is* - life unqualified, pure event.

Reading *A Feast of Fools* is like being caught up in a vortex of light. Soon, the swirling induces a welcome light-headedness. There is so much light, love and life, it is so permeating, so

pervasive, so profuse. Ada's - through whom a large part of the story unfolds - is a light-filled consciousness and only such can generate a passage of miracle and wonder as this:

> And yet I have seen my mother marvel at each new birth as though it were the world's first. The tiny grip of a new born exhausted by the great cosmic trip gave new light to her eyes and placed fresh music in her laugh. I have been caught up in her maternal magic, watched her create a block of colour on the bleakest days. She paints with water and oil and plays nocturnes, sonatas and cavorts, finds time to sit with us at the piano patiently pointing out the notes. She wore her velvet hat when visiting my first grade class. Teachers stammer when she speaks her girls High English, her smile so pretty and bright. Her posture so nice. When students see her and whisper whose mother is that, I can hardly sit still. My mother, I say with the pretty brown eyes, wide nose and such smile. In mid-morning mother-daughter chatter, she filled the world with beauty (p. 6).

Only such a light-filled consciousness can project this delicate sensitivity:

> The next day Daniel gave Juma a little basket with three ripe red mangoes, the last of the summer season, and an envelope containing five dollars. Juma accepted the wordless apology with such gallantry and good grace that I went into the bathroom and cried (p. 139).

Ebele Oseye's descriptive ardor makes intangibles and nebulous emotions come alive. Like a master painter, she creates atmosphere with powerful and masterful brush strokes, deftly laying the canvas of the novel with deep warmth and fill, with colour and clarity - emanations from the canvas of her inner-scape. Interestingly then, Ada, one of the major characters in the book, demonstrating a voracious appetite for experience, an openness for life, a keen alertness, describes a snowy New York day thus:

> But the world was beautiful. Clouds floated like clumps of lightweight

> snow. Snow magic sparkled in a hundred trees along the expressway. Traffic lights bloomed sharp blue green. Birds flew about, children and dogs frolicked along side streets. Cars whined and whistled, slipping on ice. Young boys ran to push them out. Young boys strained and shoved, sometimes falling on their faces when the car gripped and pulled away, the driver waving thanks, or pausing to pay (pp84-85).

And a few paragraphs later, with only the quick dash of a sentence, she once again invokes the snow to vivid clarity:

> With the February sky stretching overhead, the bursts of wind like wintry flutes blowing sprays of snow from surrounding roofs, weaving our way round high snow piles that narrowed the streets, partially blocking the walk, we went into and out of stores and finally stopped for a bite to eat (p. 85).

Oseye's *A Feast of Fools* demonstrates a penetrating and intense insight into human psychology, especially into the peculiar psychology of motivations and subliminal drives and desires. Thus, her characterization often runs deep as in the case of three- and five-year-old Osei and Juma, whose dream symbols are broken bridges and leaking roofs - dream world equivalences of the unevenness of their lives following their mother's death. Or Daniel Torch Senior and his morbid 4.00 am prayer for his wife's life almost two years after her death. Or Dorothea, the little girl with a lot of "empty places in her eyes", who is psychologically etched as harbouring considerable girlhood pains, as one of those who are not calm but are not screaming either.

One of the more exciting developments in the story-line is Ada's trip to Africa, to Nigeria. Through her, Africa and her peoples, her cultures, her contemporaneity, are examined with detachment, with passionate objectivity; Africa is observed , not judged: Ibe Ikenna's (Ada's host in Nigeria) inevitable polygamous existence is matched against Western monogamy,

amongst other issues. And the nostalgia for Africa, the regret over the incidence of slave trade, are not left out: "I could feel the day rapidly getting warmer, the Nigerian days and soft red soil I would have seen when I first opened my eyes in this world. If the ships hadn't sailed".

With so many colourful stories woven together into one beautiful piece of *akwete,* woven with such intense warmth and lightness and love, Ebele Oseye's second novel, *A Feast of Fools* - her first is *Let the Lion Eat Straw* - is an engaging delight.

Notes on Contributors

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Ebele OSEYE (Ellease Southerland) has just published her second novel, *A Feast of Fools*.

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