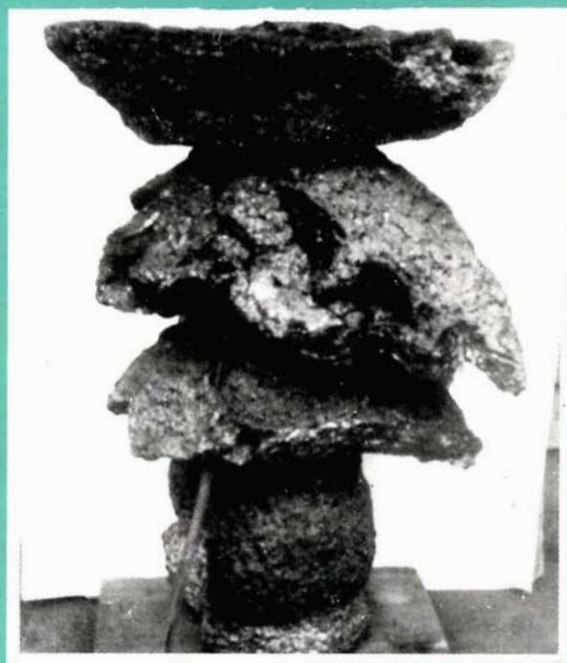




OKIKE

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



42

OKIKE

An African Journal of New Writing

NUMBER 42, JUNE 1999

13

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"One of the most difficult aspects of publishing long established journals, literary or otherwise, is improving on or maintaining the standard set by its founder. While some have fallen by the wayside, others have simply refused to take root, and yet a few have blossomed as a result of the managerial skill and intellectual savvy invested in such ventures. To this last group belongs *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing* established in 1971 to, among other things, "discover new writers, publish them, and to set a new school of thought for the critical standards of African literature" - *The Post Express*.

EBELE OSEYE

*Amadou (for Amadou Diallo, killed by
New York City police , 4 February 1999)*

The Bullet is not bigger than the man
41 bullets cannot stop a life
Larger than moral life
Larger than the slaver's ships
Larger than the holocaust police
The murderous elite
Who shot Grandmother Eleanor
Murdered in her home
Shot 10 year old Clifford Glover
Shot in the back
Abner Louima
Brutalized and raped
My classmate's son,
Shot and killed
Rodney King, bludgeoned
Young men protesting for Rodney King
Shot and killed
(What are their names
What were their ages?)
Aswon Keyshawn Watson
Sitting in his car
Shot 23 times
Tyisha Miller
Sitting in her car
Shot 24 times
Amadou

The shout raised at the moment you fell
Rattled ancestral bones strewn across the ocean floor
Rattled the chains of Jasper that dragged James Byrd Junior to his
death.

A cosmic cry ricocheted across the mountains of Guinea
Reverberated in the neighborhoods of the world

We came running
Looked into your face
And saw our face
Our selves.

Growing up distracted, separated from history
Swallowing fast food, viewing our lives in video
Riddled with self-hate.

41 bullets shattered illusions,
Lay bare
Tender feelings for Africa
Buried deep in bewildering grief.

The lust for Africa's blood flows unabated
Old violence escalated
New violence legislated
Racists restore death penalties.
They are still ironing their sheets
Pointing their hats
Gentrifying Jim Crow
Building new jails
Designing "better" bullets.

Twelve slaving presidents
Founded this republic.
Barricaded behind concrete blocks
The paranoid
The demented politician, Hitler's first of kin
And his Apartheid press
Rummage through their sordid arsenal of atrocities in search of

diminishing words
Peddler. Immigrant.
Small photo placed at the bottom of the page
Africa effaced.

Amadou
Son and brother,
Rangel Dinkins Sharpton Meeks
Booker Perkins Lopez
Leaders in long woolen coats,
Handcuffed,
Aged lions
Roar!
Ministers chained and manacled,
Council members
Seventy in support
Marched to the coast.
Your mother covers her head in white.
Your father, close by, covers his heart.

Amadou
Your name
Calls us to unknot the lynchers' rope.
Justice for Eleanor Bumpers
Justice for Clifford Glover
Justice for Abner Louima
Justice for Aswon Keyshawn Watson
Justice for Tyisha Miller
Justice for my friend's 15 year old son!
Justice for the young men who died for justice!

Your life sacrificed
As February celebrations begin.
Pulls us to both shores of the Atlantic
To see ourselves

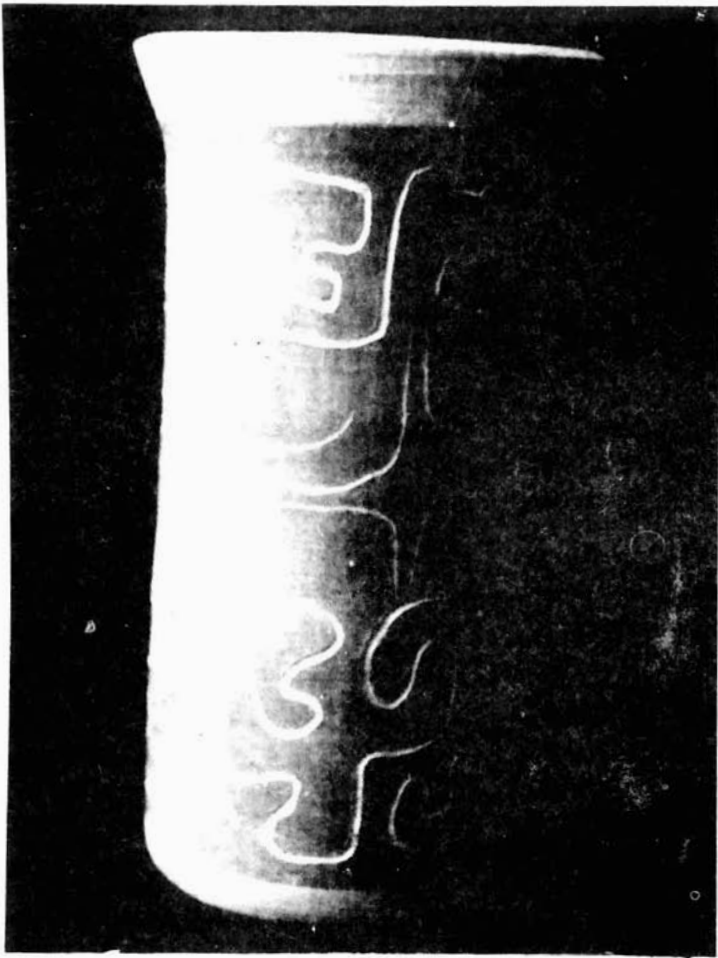
Resembling
Battered, divisive,
Short-sighted, struggling.
How did we survive the double death, colonization,
American enslavement?

I was at prayers for Amadou,
A student from Bangladesh said,
Arriving late for class.
He knows the distance
From death to freedom,
Brought to America
Worked 7 days a week
18 hours a day
2 dollars an hour wage.
2 years
A slave.
He takes a front seat
Listen to lessons you would have heard.

Amadou,
Shake 19 bullets from your flesh
Take back your birth and breath
Reset the clock
When you were first born, your uncle predicted
international fame
He said the whole world would know your name.

Amadou Diallo
Your death is the Muezzin's call
At the dawn of a new millennium.
A call to prayer
A call to war
We are the drums of Guinea
The collective

Drums of Africa,
Water
And talking drums,
The drums of Baraka
The drums of Kemet
Pounding.



Journey to the centre of the earth (Terracotta)



IGBO

the earth
vanished into a pin-hole
I am soaked with songs...

my ancestry's
sharp beauty baptized me
at the forest's nipple

- a pilgrim of delicious peace.

Igbo

space-shuttle and speech
your civilisation flowers
in every face of earth

yet your off-springs
hide in the toilets
of foreign tongues

your off springs
bury your sharp beauty
with the inferiority of mad English

mystic damsel
I shiver
in your tabernacle's splendor
beyond Bill Gates and microchips,
you fathered super computer's Emeagwali

- a vapour in the ocean
of your maltreated genius.

mystery's powdered face
succumbs to insight

we must rescue
our lone baby from oblivion's fire

we must re-plant
our finger print
against the monologue of English,

resurrection
awaits us
who drink from our roots
not our suicidal love of *foreign gods*

SOWER: *For Chinua Achebe*

Whoever waits
for the sky's countenance
shall starve.

As infant
you planted philosophy

for escaping
the corrosive fate of whirlwinds

by banking
our anthems in ant-hills...

Institutions blossom
after our Columbus

Okike, ANA, Uwa Ndi Igbo, Heinemann and Co

in a luminous fraternity
of joy.

in the politics
of tongues and skin tone

We swap parity
with foreign gods

- Mee n'agbajiro anyi, Ka Ofu mkpulu aziza.

A selfish Abraham
would have swallowed
the spot-light

-dancing alone
the honey sonata
of first borns.

But you conquered
bigotry

with proofs that
fertility
reigns on our mindscapes:

Knitting words into
the birth canal of
cultures.

We reap
SIGNIFICANCE
from the foresight
of Patriarchs.

-wherever civilizations gather
our logic
is now delicious
in the universal feast.

UBO: for BEN OBUMSELU

The violin's eloquence
is earned.

he who devours
our foibles and day dreams

sacrificed his flesh
to the furnace
for soaring beyond
the death-sentence of our father-land.
we drink rhetorics,
chew syllogisms
and our weary stomachs cry at night

poems - have fetched me no food
and no cloths
nor is my shelter sure.

Yet

he whose solemnity
rains majesty and myths

whose lucidity
inspires the arithmetic of dance

Ubo

whose trance-like tunes
of seven strings astride the half moon
transport us to the Four winds

my mind is a lullaby
and paradise of peace...

we are slaves
to the ears
that most caress our songs.

*DAVID ODINAKA NWAMADI**Zemark, the Sly One***I**

Zemark, this fatty meat of a smear keeps
The log-fire of doubts around you aglow:

You talked the world into believing
In your ability to climb an iroko-

Even when you knew you lacked
The strength to climb an orange tree.

You donated a fowl for our feast
And took away our cow as your reward.

You fed our troupes on a diet of cants
And grandiloquence, and called us out

To dare the ever-hungry jaw
Of war with bare hands. We suffered

The stupefying surprise of watching
A commander that claimed the stature

Of Aoun, Aidid and Garang wielding
A rusty dane gun, while our opponents

Rolled our tanks; deployed assault
Rifles, scud and tomahawk missiles.

II

There could be no greater licence than a face
That finds shame very companionable. Pretences
Lubricate the wheels of your life. You went too far
In expecting men of brains and breeding to honour
An invitation to celebrate your bumbling ineptitude.

He that is saddled with a puny ego feels
Constrained to massage it every so often -
Little wonder why the snake continues
To boast of having travelled far and wide
Even with the utter crudity of its movement.

Commenting on the profligacy and other indignities
Which a neighbouring organ is prone to,
The anus once remarked that he would never
Have acceded to their being neighbours
If he knew of these rank failings.

The poet that called for the abolition of laughter
Spoke my mind: I've found that every smile of yours
Is a veritable trap. I saw you on our podium
Looking like a penis that must always be held
And guided with a hand in the urination process.

The boastful chant of a hunter whose quarry escaped
Between his legs translates into self-mockery. We didn't
Need to have read Sun Zi's *The Art of War* to be able
To avert the mistake of not choosing as a leader, a man
So dull, so effete that birds perch at the tip of his arrow.

Some men speculate on the prospects of their mother's
Nakedness translating into money in the movie industries.
When you turned your mind into a turbine for generating
Lies, did you reckon with the fact that events would
Be flushing them out of your mouth uncontrollably?

The mould is set; and getting you to straighten
Is as difficult as taking a whore out of her fanciful
Belief that she harbours a universal highway **between**
Her legs. There is no stopping the swift-footed **flood**
From embracing the crippling ambience of the pit.

These doomed doings of a desperado dwarf you **the more!**
For you are now like an aged prostitute boosting
Her sagged breasts with balls of rags.
The twilight can hardly be of much help to one
Whose washings could not dry in the mid-day sun.

The Anatomy of Coyness

School was like a lollipop licked for certificates.
And with those teachers for whom the bodies of female
Students constitute the greatest tomes for textual
Explication, she had her way. Hence her curious convictions:

A man is like a raging phallus that will always
Be routed by the liquid magic of its target; and
The surface-to-air missile of a woman's body suffices
To shoot down the plane of a man's feelings.

She deploys her head like a precision scale
For weighing shady deals; and treads very
Softly, like one out to enunciate the right
Of the ants not to be trampled upon.
But thanks to a rewarding study of the anatomy
Of lives stepped in coyness, I know that she
That nibbles in the open can swallow a lump
As big as a puppy's head behind closed doors.
Save for the enriching role of experience,
Who would believe that the drugged look

Of a resting bat could give away to space
Acrobatics studded with fine aerodynamic lessons?

Many are the rivers whose calm faces lure
Men into losing their boats and their paddles.
Many are the wayfarers that perish in
The beautiful and ornate house of the spider.

Softening like a jelly suits the purpose
Of many a woman as she fights her way
To the altar. Thereafter she hardens like a stone.
Then does the muddy water crystallise.

The python, versed in the ferocious vocation
Of Mangling, recognises the fact that wearing
A sleepy aura till it is time to strike
Enhances the ability to surprise a target.

The flourishing business of maidenish trickery
Which many a woman takes to, collapses
In the event of an accidental excavation
Of some brimful septic tanks of her past.

A foolproof formula for arranging a basket
Of roses eludes even the greatest of liars.
In consistent actions come in wraps of cocoyam leaves
That are bound to tear and reveal their contents.

The Portrait of a Big Man as a Congenital Buffoon

I

The sands and grasses never saw
His wrestling feet at the village square.
A soft boy at school, he fell under
The unqualified influence of cane-wielding
Teachers paid to teach and think for him.
A shallow, untalented and plastic character,
It was rammed down his throat that moving
With the crowd, fawning, canting
And mumbling of platitudes hold
The key to steady rise in the society.

When Biafra beckoned on her youths to gather
Together in her name, he scampered away
Into the remote woods where he was shielded
By women, while his mates and juniors wore
The red badge of courage, the ultimate
Measure of bravery then.

Thereafter the wind

Of luck blew a plum job into his hands, and
Like an incompetent goal-keeper, he fumbled
And caught the ball, holding it to the point
Of squeezing, for few are the balls
He had ever caught in his life. Yet his face
Now bubbles with the fungi of indignation
Over what he sees as our gracelessness
In delaying his proclamation as a hero of our time.

II

Many school graduands are mere balloons
 Released by teachers to begin
 Their uncharted career in the air.
 They superficially drank from the stream
 Of knowledge, and quitted
 At the sterile stage of certification.
 Much of the fibrous roots of their learning
 Stay above soil level. They are cut off
 From the folk spring of wisdom. And not
 Having seen fit to stake the tendrils
 Of their learning at cultural poles,
 They look like rain-soaked stragglers
 Shivering and tottering towards the ever
 Retreating fire-sides of the white world.

Good books dredge the river of the mind
 For the vessels of thought to cruise.
 The undredged rivers grow marshy and silted,
 And scum builds its untrammelled kingdom.

In his untrammelled kingdom of scum,
 Our man wears the attitudes
 Of a big man like an over-size coat.
 the rain-clouds of stale news hang
 Pendantly in his house as he dazzles
 His illiterate kinsmen with cheap gin.
 Blessed are those that can roll their tongues
 To accentuate the loops of gossips,
 For theirs is a direct entry admission
 Into a famed House of Rumour.

He feels that as mats for his privileged
 Feet, his people should learn to say: "We thank
 Your majesty for stepping on us".
 He dreams of a day when bucketfuls

Of his expensive shit would adorn
The cheap heads of his people, to enable
Them tread their tortuous paths of lowliness,
And build for themselves that veritable
Hovel of inferiority he has been
Envisaging for them. One booming enterprise
In this untrammelled kingdom of scum
Is the art of enshrouding insolence
On one's people in saccharine manners.

III

The danger in staying near an over-fed man
Is that you may come under the cross-fire
Of his farting, belching and hicoughing.
Immersion even in the mere shallow waters
Of fortune renders a weak head dizzy.
Pity this overfed fish cast adrift
On the shore by the swinging tide
Of things, for he is no longer with us
That avidly contemplate tomorrow's sun.
The alluvia of dross has blinded him.

No dream of good timber can ever be realized
From a stunted iroko riddled with holes and stumps.
Being a cast-iron pot maker, my trade
Is superior to the treachery of termites.
It's not for the vulture to teach
A fledgling eagle the business of flying.
The gazelle is the roving ambassador of the forests:
Having sucked the breasts of mountains and untied
The loin-cloths of the valleys, he cares no fig
For the toad's claims as a racing instructor.

None can talk the sun into being discriminatory
In the distribution of her therapeutic rays.
When the stars appear in their dazzling
Glory, the fire-flies will give up

Their pretentious claims to luminosity.
I rejoice that the moon in wooded places
Emerges as a surrealist painter, weaving
Her masterly brush through leaves and branches
To give us haunting sketches
Which no late developing potentate can erase.

IV

We do no wrong who piece out the story
Of a would-be god, for it is fitting that potential
Worshippers should peruse and check-out
The credentials of the gods they choose to worship.

The gods made of mud must of necessity
Invest much energy in fostering
Darkness, for light exposes and
Leaves them bereft of worshippers.

I know only one God whose name is an evergreen
Forest of superlative praise-names. Though each day
Harvests a basket load of stories, who has ever
Heard that his great grand-father is God's made?

No degree of culinary art can make the anus
Of the baboon a fit and proper dish
For my table. And chefs that boost it
Will find me on my high horse.

Shrouding the face with smiles may serve
The duplicitous designs of dark minds
Who embraced the school of kissing
Instituted by Judas at Gethsemane.

But children of sunrise unflinchingly tapping
The beam of day radiate a genuine
And vitalizing aura that spices
And tones up the human condition.

V

His ego withers as the lanes
Of aspirations grow resonant
With our invading footfalls.

The darkly ambience of unreality
Dissipates as he watches the capsizing
'Boat of his vision of things.
No gain ever attends his ingrained habit
Of viewing life with wrong binoculars,
Other than a bumper harvest of warped impressions.

He may choose to work out his own salvation:
Walking with palled visage boasts no solution.
Gripped by an instant desire to shape up
After a close shave with death in a stampede,
A fatish dame shook her head and swore that her
Over-blown rump was confoundedly inconvenient.

O may that ailment
From which a man will get well be graceful,
And save him the indignity of shitting on his body.

The Song of Lazarus

Help !
Stranger.
Do not pass in haste. I am not a madman
as you think me to be.
Mine is a cloak of poverty.
I still feel the pain of this stabbing Sun

Help !

Wipe my tears
if you ever hungered for food.

My barn is as dry as my wife's cooking pot.

This morning,
my wife's tongue lashed me out of bed,
to meet the sunken eyes of three infants
being claimed by hunger,
scratching their bodies like one
who embraced agbala¹ in the farm.

¹*Agbala, botanically known as mucuna bean, causes irritation when come in contact with.*

With heart dark as night,
I lifted my frame,
light as dry leaf blown about by harmattan wind,
and wandered into the parish house,
but the man of God unleashed his dogs on me,
as one who offers defaced coin in church.

Help !

I squeak here since morning
like a mouse in a trap,
for hell gnaws at my hut.
Can't you see my legs buckle under their weight?

Bright eyes deep with mercy,
do not allow me return home empty-handed.
Help a child of woman like you dying.

He - e - elp !

At A Cycle's end

Here it is sprawled in time
the twentieth century-
Here, the witness that I might have been the
silent exile sullen in anguish.
The stars, the flute, the strange music;
The empty roads without joy or hate
Here it is, the incomprehensible thing,
The sunset calm atop marble ruins
The footfalls, the thud of rain upon the corpses:
There is tenderness where the child lay,
wreathed in plantain leaves;
to the dust...to the dust...to the feast of fireflies-
Here it is, the shadow of eternity,
destinies weighed in the sober scale, full
like a measure of wheat:
And I go, carrying into the dark dwellings,
the burden of the ages,
the sublime infirmity of being unborn;
until struggling through ancient remorseless nights
through the cycle of timeless space; arrived,
and heard the music of noon:
the wind came flapping her wings, belching
as the rain lurched against the wall-
The rest is fragmental; the groping with sodden paws
The glint of candles on white faces,
The far-gathering, the brazier alive with flame
like the inward survival of an infant's memory-

(2)

Here it is, the bleached rain,
The floating of amber light-
The world stirred like the beast,
claws and fangs and an iron beak
The world stirred like the beast...
Until the unendurable hour struck the moment
of the future, limping in the horizon, of these things
unsolved and unsolvable
a petard of meaning, the act of dreaming
among the frayed places...
I am but a child.
Shuddering at the evil things that grip me,
The calm boots marching through the gates
clothed in darkness-
Spilling warm blood on the face of the moon.
I am but a child...
I am the night with a gust of wind preying the balcony
the scarlet shadow shuddering through a deeper gloom,
I carry the weight of the world sculpted inside me
inverted, mute, unchanging. This is drought!
The yearning after the uncertain safety
of cornfields;
It is April, the eyes of the earth still glisten with tears
We await the miracle of everything:
To shift the frontiers in the brave new world;
to create man anew, to close the boundaries-
to make purer mysteries out of the still mysterious.

Seduced by Light

Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee. My heart panted, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me.

Ps 38:9-10.

Very early every morning, she rises from the flower garden at Saint John's Park. From a water can, she washes her body; confident that nobody, except the pigeons in the park, is watching. Clean, she would then bow her head and pray to a God she knew watches over her. Always, it is the same prayer: a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of provision, a prayer of guidance.

The woman has no religion, nor a friend or even a family to show her the ways of this world. The loneliness had been too many, like the dew drops every aurora; the past too blurred for her to recall. She remembered hearing her mother's friendly voice. Then one day, even that voice ceased to be. Why? She could not explain. All that remained were harsh voices: she fled from them, wandering from place to place like a Bohemian. She had found this park four years ago. It had been friendly. The passers-by have also been kind to her, they gave her alms even when she didn't beg for it, some even brought her food, and clothing; kind people.

The park has become her only home; she had marked it by planting a mango seed. For four years she had watched it grow like a child, and its first fruit gave her the joy of being.

The woman rose after her prayers; plate and stick in one hand. Tucking her small straw mat under her left armpit, she groped towards her perching site - some distance away from the park - unaware of an admirer's eyes.

The man always watches the blind woman walk out of the park from his window. Out of curiosity, he had scrutinised the park

one day, while strolling past. If not for the tall trees that hid her shelter from his window - particularly the small protective mango tree in front of her shack - he knew he would have got a better view of her.

She is different; this blind beggar, somewhat sweet, clean, and mannered, the man had thought, the day he first came across her. He still remembered how he had thrown a crumpled five naira towards her plate. She wasn't begging; she was cutting her fingers effortlessly with a blade, minding her own business. It was the way she minded her own business that made him wish to give her money: he hates giving money to beggars. The wind had hindered the crumpled five naira from falling into her plate. Instinctively, he bent, reaching for the money: something he would never have done. His hand was on her soft unblemished hand, as she had reached for the money too. He quickly withdrew his own hand; feeling shy for no reason - that was how it had started, he and this blind beggar woman.

The next day he saw her, she was crossing the road to the other side, heading for the buka where she always took her meals - he noticed the way people treated her cordially. He couldn't help it; his eyes trailed her bodily form lustfully. It was so shapely, trim, and very feminine. He even loved her carriage. Something inside him began to yearn for the blind beggar woman. He began to feel her in his own loneliness, wanting her inside the protection of his arms. If only she wasn't a beggar, he would have taken her home, but if he did - as it was - people would say, he had seduced the helpless night.

Bakayoko lived alone inside the one room apartment his late wife had left behind for him. He is a lonely man at forty; no kids, no friends, no family members to comfort him. Apart from his security work at the Zambian embassy, he is alone in this world. After his wife's untimely death, ten years ago, he had left his homeland Senegal, for good, to settle in Nigeria. The pain of his wife's death had helped him stay away from women, but things were beginning to change all of a sudden. Emotions were beginning to swell up inside him; his loneliness is beginning to crave the warmth of the blind woman.

Returning from work one evening - he was walking very fast

- he knew the blind woman would soon retire into the seclusion of the small park. His infatuation for the blind woman was beginning to worry him, but it was like he had no will to resist it. He is drifting on her very strong current like a canoe without a rower, just drifting along.

"Martha," he called her name after bending to drop ten naira inside her plate. He had asked her name earlier on, and she had told him her name was Martha, "I brought you some bean cakes," he said, handing the hot bean cake wrapped in a brown cement paper. She was smiling, thanking him, and he wondered if she knew it was him Bakayoko, although he had not told her his name.

That day, he had told her goodnight and walked away, living the apparition of her sweet face inside his mind's eye. He would have stayed with her longer, but for fear of being gossiped about.

At home on his bed, she would tarry on his mind, finding expressions, sane expressions, for he intended making her a true woman beside him. If not for what people would say, he would have done it decently with her, but people would surely say, he had seduced the helpless night.

Martha, in all her thirty-five years of living, had never felt the love of a man, not even the friendly touch of a man's hand. Long ago, somebody had tried to abuse her body. She could still remember the screaming voice inside her head as she drove a sharp object into the intruder's body. After that, she had been safe to this day. Though she had kept the sharp object inside a small leather pouch always fastened to her right thigh, she knew it was God that had kept her safe, this long.

Under the makeshift tent she had constructed for a home, she sat and ate the bean cakes the stranger had given to her. It had gotten cold by the dusky breeze, but the warmth from the stranger made it warm inside her mouth and heart. She recognised his voice. It was the same stranger that had brought her a dress, that fitted her body perfectly: he had told her so the next day he walked past, noticing the dress on her body.

He was kind, the stranger. His hands always rubbed against hers with tenderness. His voice spoke kindly to her heart; she is beginning to think much about him: his is closer to her heart than any voice she had ever heard, even those that are cordial with her.

She is blind but her mind had never failed her, it is through the windows of her mind that she views the world around her. It made her know people's thought, their emotions, fears - her mind was telling her that the stranger loved her, needed her. But for the first time in her life, she has refused to believe her mind. It would be too good for it to be true, a man, a kind responsible man, needing her.

Bakayoko was absent minded all through his work; most times the honking from a car at the embassy gate would bring him out of his reverie. Yesterday, he had even been listening to his bosses' instruction without understanding what he was saying. His boss even noticed. It is the blind woman, Martha, that was possessing his soul. She had come from nowhere and took control of his thoughts, his emotions. She had crept alongside his loneliness, steering it up with her whole being: Martha!

He planned to tell her how much he felt for her, but he couldn't. The other day, he had almost said it, "I care for you Martha." Instead he dropped the bananas he had bought for her and walked away, soliloquising: "*Martha, I care for you; I wish to care for you. I long to hold you; I am a lonely man with lots of love for the giving, I long to be your man...*" All these things he intended telling her, instead he told the air, as if the air would go and tell her on his behalf, wooing her for him.

As he walked home hurriedly, he soliloquised. He had always walked home hurriedly, soliloquising, since the day he asked her name. He stopped by the fried food sellers like he always did since he met Martha. He bought her some fried yams, dodo and fish. He had resolved his mind to voice his heart out to her, and he was rehearsing what he was going to say to her as he walked: "*Martha, I care for you, I know no other woman but you. I wish to give you love. Even though this world will be against us, I still wish to give you love, understand my shame and pardon me, but still let me give you love... Martha, you know I care for you...*" He was going on and on like that, not feeling the heat of the hot fried yam, dodo and fish on his palm. He only slowed down his pace as he sighted her, his heartbeat taking over his rehearsal.

She said thank you as usual, smiling that peculiar way that always made his soul tingle with sweet sensation. "*Martha,*" he

stammered, his eyes flicking from side to side like ears were close by, listening to him, "*Martha, I wish to come to you this night.*"

It came out of his mouth and he walked away - shamefaced - before she could muster words from her dumb mouth. She wanted to say he could come to her tent, but it refused to come out of her mouth, only her heart was screaming it, and it echoed all over her body.

She had discouraged the stranger, if she had responded surely he would have come to her, now he is gone, maybe she would never see him again. If fate ever brought him across her path again, she would tell him; she would say, "*I wanted you to come, but I couldn't say it, I just couldn't say it, please forgive me.*" She knew he would forgive her, and he would come to her as he wished. These thoughts disturbed her mind. She rose, picking up her things, and walked sluggishly with a sullen heart into the park, to her tent.

When she settled inside her makeshift tent, she realised she had left the fried food the stranger had bought her. She could not rise again to fetch it because her heart was really heavy, the only man that had shown her emotional kindness from a true heart, she had hurt. She had treated him unkindly, after all, what he wanted was to come to her. As if her own longing for a man's touch, a man's body, a man's soul, a man's strength had not been aroused, yet she had treated him badly.

As the night grew dark, her longing for the stranger refused to depart. She realised she is a virgin who needed to be loved, especially, by the stranger who had shown her more love than any other that had crossed her path. You knew he is a kind and loving man. At least he asked her; he did not intend to creep in on her like the other man had done. All these thoughts kept her awake into the night, while stray dogs found the wrapped, fried yam, dodo and fish becoming judges over it.

Bakayoko was ashamed of himself; he blamed the way he had acted. The words he had spoken out of his mouth, treating her like a street side prostitute. He feared she would never talk to him again. His heart told him to go and apologise to her immediately, but he feared she would think he had kept to his words if he showed up in the dark. What was he going to do? Restless, he walked his room to and fro like an oscillating pendulum bulb.

It was past midnight when the man found himself outside; the darkness and cold air visiting him, asking him what he was doing outside by this time of night. He did not answer; he was scared his answer would make him go back into his house. He just kept walking, keeping his mind blank, not letting thoughts have being inside it.

The street was empty, not a person in sight, just barking dogs. From a distance he could hear their howling cries. Maybe they have sighted the apparition of a ghost; maybe they are sending love messages to their lovers far, far away, calling them to come back home. Whichever, it did not trouble him. He just kept walking, hiding himself from the street lamps that still glowed dimly, showing signs that they too would soon go to the land of dead bulbs.

Martha was wide awake, she couldn't sleep either, even though she belonged to the class of people that easily go to sleep just lying down and closing their eyes. Today, her mind was open, peering into the dark, groping for a lost love, trying to bring it back, trying to reconcile with its apparition.

She was in this mood when her ears picked the sound of footfalls: the footfalls of a lone being, trespassing into her territory. Instinctively, her right hand reached her thigh, feeling for the sharp object inside the leather pouch. Satisfied, she closed her eyes controlling her breathing rhyme, waiting for the intruder as he drew closer every passing moment. The footsteps suddenly stopped outside her tent. She imagined the silhouette of the intruder upon her. Her breathing seized. Not because of fear: fear had no part in her being: instead it was that of a prey ready to inflict a painful blow on its predator.

Just as she was waiting for that moment of truth, the footsteps retreated, distancing itself from her with every step it took. Immediately she knew it was the kind stranger, he had come to her like he said he would.

"Please don't go! I'm awake." The words came out of her mouth like a desperate animal, wishing to be devoured by its predator.

Shocked! The man stopped dead on his tracks. Regaining the aura that had evaporated from his being, he turned, walking back towards the blind woman who was standing in front of her

tent like a goddess of love, dressed in transparent white robe caressed and blown backwards by the wind, showing the front contours of her firm body.

As he accosted, awed, she stepped back into the small confine of the tent. They became puppets in the hand of the dolphin goddess, *Aphrodisias*. Holding, trembling, they stood like dumb statues for a while, comprehending in the silence of the night, their affections for each other. Together, they slowly reached for the straw mat on the floor. Kneeling at first, offering their mouths like wooing doves, their nudity found each other in passionate union.

Their secret night meetings continued in the confines of the park, away from human eyes. Only the pigeon's in the park saw all that happened as they roost, but to them it was a normal union: the union of a man and a woman. It wasn't every night they met, that they made love. Sometimes they would just snuggle in each other arm, looking at the moon, the stars, and the night, where its hosts fail to visit. Their conversations were little when they spoke; often the man would talk about his dead wife repeatedly like she was all he could remember in his lifetime. He never told her anything else, his name or his family, or where he came from. She on the other hand had nothing worthwhile to tell of her bleak past. She preferred the long silence between them - for they seem to understand each perfectly well.

During daytime, Bakayoko unconsciously became more friendly with the blind woman. He would tarry with her longer; sometimes his hand would caress her in public while they engage in conversation. But it soon came to an end one day, when a neighbour asked Bakayoko if he had anything going with the blind beggar by the park. He denied having anything personal with her. He said he was generally friendly with destitutes, and the way he treated the blind woman was the same way he treats other destitutes that cross his path. After that day, Bakayoko became conscious that people were becoming curious with his relationship with the blind woman. He started avoiding her by day, but still paid his frequent visits to the park at night, making her believe that his work was taking more of his time than usual. At night, he came along with whatsoever he had bought her: his alms were given in

the dark of the night.

The blind woman wasn't worried; she suspected nothing, though she eagerly waited his night visits. His love grew inside her heart, brought a new meaning into her blind world: a man to offer the warmth of her bosom to, a man to share the beauty of sex with her. A sweet experience she never knew existed inside her. She never knew her body possessed a fruit that could please a man so.

Her blindness wasn't only a sight, now she had discovered that life had more than the stomach's hunger - to appease - it had other senses too. They were beginning to flower inside her.

Their romance lengthened from days to weeks, and crept into months. She began feeling funny suddenly. Her inside was acting strange. She was becoming a glutton; craving food like a grub, spitting frequently, generally feeling nauseated. She thought she had a fever that would leave as it came, and never bothered telling the stranger who took no notice of her condition at night. Then, one day she noticed that her belly had grown in size; it then dawned on her that she was carrying a baby.

Bakayoko was quick to notice that the blind woman's belly had grown in size. Fear sized him, so did shame: they came together haunting him. What would people say if they discover that the blind woman was pregnant? They would know that light had seduced the night. They would know that Bakayoko was the light that seduced the night, and they would say he had exploited a helpless and poor blind beggar.

Shame and guilt took over his soul; he became burdened by his thoughts.

"I would have treated her in the proper way, but people would definitely say, I would have taken her for a wife, given her the comfort of my bed, but people would say... I love her, God knows I love my Martha. I have no choice now..." Bakayoko soliloquised, pacing about in his room.

He waited impatiently for the night, resolved that he would beg the blind woman to abort the pregnancy. He would give her money and direct her to a hospital by the street - the doctors would gladly do it for her, he was positive.

When it finally grew dark, he walked into the night, deep in thought.

The woman waited for her lover; she saw him approaching sullenly. She rose to meet him in the dark - the moon didn't come out that night. Embracing him, she soothed him like a troubled wife, asking him what was wrong. He didn't answer at first; he slipped away from her embrace and walked past her, standing by the entrance of the tent, brooding. Confused by his mood, she walked up to him, forgetting the good news she had prepared to tell him. He was the one that broke that same news. Absent minded, he said "We have to get rid of the belly. I can't stand the shame when people find out I am responsible." His eyes fixed on the floor, ashamed to look at her. The blind woman shocked by what she heard, stood agape, her hands holding her belly protectively. "The doctors in the hospital will do it for you, they would be happy to help you," Bakayoko continued, "I love you, Martha... I'm sorry, but you have to get rid of the belly. If you don't, people would start asking questions, and I can't stand the shame thinking I did this terrible thing to you. You have to remove the belly, you..." He was becoming hysteric.

"I can't! I've never hurt anybody in my life, and I can't hurt the child that grows inside me. I won't tell anybody, I swear. You can go and never come back again." The blind woman was hurt, she never knew the man was so ashamed of her, that he hated the union she thought was pure. All along she was still the dirty rag on the street; she was beginning to feel different, feel wanted by the world, by the man she loved so much. She felt betrayed learning that the stranger hated her so much that he couldn't stand the fruit of their union. Instead he wanted to kill the gift of love God in his mercy had given to her.

Bakayoko's hands hanged loosely by his side, his eyes looking into the dark, his mouth moving in delirium: "They would find out, I know they would find. They would make you tell the truth, they would see the child's face, they would know I was responsible. You have to leave; you have to go far away so nobody would know. I love you, Martha, God knows I love you, but people won't understand, the world never understand; you don't know a thing about this world, they would never understand..." He was going on and on, suddenly becoming aware that the blind woman had parked her few belongings and was leaving. Digging his hand into his pocket he brought out the money he had intended giving

her for an abortion, and tried putting it inside her clenched palm.

The blind woman refused the money and walked out of the park sadly, into the night, leaving the light that had seduced the night to brood in delirium. Bakayoko started pacing, talking to himself: *"But I love Martha, you know how much I care for her. It is the shame in my heart, the shame of what people would say. You have to understand, Martha, you have to understand this shame haunting me, it is the world that have put it there... O! God. But why? You know I love the woman. You see my heart, you know I still want her. I wish to treat her the proper way, I wish to make her my wife, but you know what people would say... why would they say? What right have they to say, is it not me that love the woman? Is it not my arms that would hold her?..."*

Suddenly, Bakayoko walked fast into the night. He walked like he used to when he hurried from work to see the blind woman before she retires into the park. He had resolved his troubled mind, he knew what was right and he was going to do it: *"let them say, let the world say what they please."*

Bakayoko walked the street like a stray dog searching for food, his head turning from one corner to the other, but his Martha was nowhere. Tears rolled down his eyes as he stopped by the street corner and wept? *"O! God. What have I done? Who's going to put back the pieces of my broken heart. It is the end; my teardrops start, it will never dry up, they would go on through my lonely heartaches and pain. I have lost her forever, my Martha, my sweet Martha..."*

The woman heard footsteps and ducked by the corner. The footsteps came to a halt, then she heard the tears of the stranger. Her heart became heavy; tears flowed down her eyes uncontrollably. She started weeping, feeling strong pity mixed with love for the stranger. He had come back for her, even though his shame was heavy; even though the world would laugh at him for seducing the night. It is love, what the stranger had done, so she loved him with her tears.

Bakayoko had given up, his tears abating, but his sorrow getting heavier, choking the life out of him. He felt like death should visit him that moment - snuff him out of this life like the street bulbs. Turning to go back home he heard the lachrymose: it was coming from the corner close to where he stood. It was his sweet Martha; he knew it was her.

His arms wrapped around the woman, he soothed her tears holding her unto him so close, like she would disappear again if he didn't.

"I am sorry, my sweet Martha. Forgive me for what I have done, the shame in my heart made me crazy. Come home with me, Martha. I care for you very much, Martha. I want to care for you properly, to hold you in my arms properly, to be the man around you, Martha, I want to marry you; come with me to my home, it is big enough for two. I have a big bed, a very soft bed, it is big enough for two. When the baby comes we would make a space for him, it is big enough for three of us. If you want, we can go away, far away, where people won't make us feel shame. Even, we can go to Dakar, I come from Dakar, Senegal... There are many things I have not told you, there are many things I will tell you. Let me take you to my home, Martha..."

Bakayoko took the woman to his home. He soothed her, wiped her tears and lay her on his soft bed. He covered her with his blanket, soothing her till she fell asleep. He looked at the sleeping woman proudly thankful that things had gone the way they did. What would he have done if he had lost the only woman he had truly loved because of what people would say. Now he had not only found the woman he loved, but God had given him a child in his barrenness. Bakayoko closed his eyes and prayed for mercy; he prayed for strength and grace to face another day. As he prayed, the blind woman dreamt... *She saw a great light seducing the night, it embraced the night like a lover, enveloping it until it disappeared: all that remained is light, it was aurora.*

OKELEKE, J. IFE O.

More Hideous Than Evil

Igwe Udensi	<i>Deceased King of Umuida</i>
AkaaEze:	<i>Wife to the late king</i>
Ichie Chikadibia	}
Ichie Ugwuonah	} <i>Elders of Umuida</i>
Ichie Ogbukaiyi	}
Otigba:	<i>A medicineman</i>
Ulianyasi:	<i>Nwereazu's sister</i>
Nwereazu:	<i>The twin sister of Ulianyasi</i>
Rev. Whiteforest	
Jonah	
Villagers	
Christians	
Acolytes of Nwere	

MOVEMENT ONE

(The palace of Igwe Udensi). The walls are decorated in native motifs. An empty throne placed on a platform majestically bestrides the palace. It is flanked on both sides by two rows of benches. The palace has three exits. The main exit is situated down-stage right, the second exit to the court is placed upstage left, and finally a spooky door downstage left, whose entrance is draped with palm fronds and the heart of a lizard. On top this door leads to the oba - Eze where Nwereazu and her acolytes are kept

The scene opens with Ichie Chikadibia seated on the left bench ... Rev. Whiteforest and Jonah have just arrived.)

Chikadibia: Our problem in this land has been our late king Igwe Udensi who brutalized our lives while he was alive. Today, his wife Akaeze has been terrorising the village with the evil Nwere whom she harbours in that room. So my son, tell your master that we want him to destroy the evil spirit of Nwereazu for us.

Siya Biko Nwam Anyi na Ayo ya.

- Jonah: Master, the man is saying that he wants you to help them destroy the spirit way dey inside that room.
- Whiteforest: Very well Jonah, tell him that we would like to extend our hand of fellowship to them.
- Jonah: Osi m gwa gi na ya nwere nmasi oma ya na ndi obodo a ino Na ogwuchala na ya choro inye unu aka aturu (*the hand of fellowship*).
- Chikadibia: Tufia! we do not want the hand of a sheep. Tell your master that we do not want his religion. All I have asked him to do is to help us destroy Nwerezazu's shrine inside that room.
- Jonah: Why Una no fit destroy the evil spirit unaselves.
- Chikadibia: No son of Umida can do that and live. The roaming spirit of Udensi would strike the man who dares to touch Nwerezazu and her evil acolytes Nwerezazu poor girl.
- Whiteforest: Jonah, Why?, he keeps saying this Nwere, who or what is it?
- Jonah: Beke si mu juo gi na gini bu Nwerezazu a I na akpo mgbe nile?
- Chikadibia: Nwerezazu is the twin sister of Ulianyasi. They were born twins an abomination in Umuida. Consequently, they were thrown away into ekorima the evil forest. But Udensi seized Nwere and consecrated her to the evil god of thunder and lighting.
- Jonah: Master the man say Nwere na the sister of uli, I mean Ester, Ester ...

(A frightening scream startles the three men and a native bursts into the palace).

- Girl: Ewo Ewo Ewo
(The girl falls down at the foot of the throne panting and gasping for breath).
- Chikadibia: What is it?
- Girl: It is him.
- Chikadibia: Who?
- Girl: The dead king.
- Chikadibia: Igwe Udensi?
- Girl: Yes.
- Chikadibia: Where did you see him?
- Girl: Near Ngene river as I was going to fetch water.
- Chikadibia: Didn't I tell you?
- Girl: His eyes were bloodshot. He was wearing the regalia he was buried with.
- Chikadibia: The Okpu-Eze?
- Girl: Yes Nnayi.
And he was moving as if he was floating in the air. I was able to escape because I saw him first. My waterpot crashed to the ground. As I stumbled, he turned and saw me. As he opened his mouth, fire and blood gushed out.
- Chikadibia: O gini bu Ife ndia?
Do you see what I was telling you did you hear

it.... it is real, an evil which has brought shame and agony to our community. (*A ghastly sound reverberates.*)

Whiteforest: That sound Jonah, it's like thunder. Who was that howling outside?

Jonah: Master I don't know ... eh make we begin go now as we don message them.

Whiteforest: No Jonah, I would like to get to the root of these happenings I think it is getting quite interesting. Tell him that I want to hear the whole story of the late Igwe Udensi.

Jonah: Beke si gi koro ya, ihe nile gbasara Igwe unu a, nwuru anwu.

Chikadibia: Tell him my son that it all started six months ago, when the great Udensi joined his ancestors. During his reign he was a very bad king who ruled us with an iron hand. Udensi tormented the people with the evil spirit in that room. The people decided to unseat him. We forced him to see the eggs of the sacred parrot and according to our tradition, any king that sees the sacred eggs must commit suicide.

Jonah: Shurup. Ifukwa ka imi na onu di gi. Obu unu gburu Nwokea. No wonder oji akpaghari. Ingredient stripidcality. Adjective without no grammatical thinking. Master I think they killed their king, that is why he has been disturbing them.

Chikadibia: We did not kill Udensi. He hung himself on a tree. His body was discovered by some hunters in Ekperima forest. But when we went back to bring it down, it has disappeared. Who took it, we know not, and that is problem now.

- Whiteforest: I think the solution to these problems Jonah is to let them find a new king.
- Jonah: Osi, Ole ihe mere unu achotabeghi onye eze ozo?
- Chikadibia: It is not easy to get a new king.
- Jonah: Why?
- Chikadibia: The oracle has rejected Udensi's son and has chosen a woman to be the new Igwe ... something that has never happened before. Tufia.
- Whiteforest: What is it Jonah?
- Jonah: Master the man say their oracle don chose woman make become their new king.
- Whiteforest: And what's wrong with that? In my country we have a great queen, very powerful God bless the queen.
- Chikadibia: Because of his father's evil deeds, the oracle has chosen Ulianyi to ascend the throne of Umuida.
- Jonah: Master e say their oracle don chose Uli ... I mean Esther to be their new king.
- Whiteforest: Oh Esther, my Esther, the child after my own heart. Then they should go ahead and crown her.
- Jonah: Osi unu chie ya.
- Chikadibia: Akaeze has refused like I told you, she still harbours the dreaded Nwere in his palace ... Anyone that sits on that throne will never see a new day.
- Whiteforest: I might be forced, chief, to invite an expeditionary force into this village, if your masquerades in the

guise of ghosts persist in terrorising Christians going to church. (*The ghostly sound accompanied with laughter is heard again*).

- Chikadibia: He is going back to the plains (*an exhausted Ichie Ugwuonah stumbles into the palace*). Ichie Ugwonah?
- Ugwuonah: Ichie Chikadibia we are now hostages in our own land.
- Chikadibia: You have seen him also?
- Ugwuonah: I have seen him, the bloodhound of evil... what have we done to merit this chastisement?
- Chikadibia: Udensi, we will overcome you and your wife.
- Akaeze: You lie Ichie Chikadibia, I dare you to try and bid the earth a farewell. (*Akaeze enters*)
- Chikadibia: Akaeze do you forget who you are talking to?
- Akaeze: Who are you?
- Chikadibia: I am Ichie Nwachikadibia Onowo and the Custodian of eze ofo of Umuida.
- Akaeze: See you Onowo, you desecrate the palace of the great Udensi by bringing this peak-nosed stranger here.
- Chikadibia: He is here because of your abomination. You defy the gods Akaeze.
- Akaeze: I defy no god ... You use your oracle to kill my husband and deny my son his father's throne.
- Chikadibia: Because the gods have rejected him.
- Whiteforest: What are they talking about, Jonah?

- Jonah: Master I thing they are quarrelling over who will be king.
- Whiteforest: Well, tell her that I am here to help them tackle the problem.
- Jonah: Beke sim gwa unu na ihe ya ji bia ebea bu I gwuputa akware osisi nile di na obi eze a.
- Akaeze: Si onyeocha, na mu bu Akaeze si na kitikpa lacha anya, lacha nne ya, lacha nna ya, lacha nnenne ya, lacha nnennaya.
- Jonah: Master E say make kitikpa lick you papa him eye, lick dem mama mama and them papa papa, eye.
- Whiteforest: This is getting out of hand. Tell her that I have been made to understand that she harbors some evil spirits in that room which she uses in terrorising Christians.
- Jonah: Nwayi, beke si ya nuru na enwere ajo mmuo bi na ulo a?
- Akaeze: Mechie onu gi?.
- Jonah: Idiomatic microphones
- Akaeze: Asi m gi mechie onu He is a stranger here. Since he has the audacity to confront Akaeze with such insulting questions, let him go and find out for himself... it is there ... The door with the palm fronds.
- Jonah: Master the woman say the room na that one . (*Jonah points to the door*).
- Whiteforest: Very well, Jonah ... oh could you please go and check it out?

- Jonah: Master I thing they are quarrelling over who will be king.
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- Jonah: Master the woman say the room na that one . (*Jonah points to the door*).
- Whiteforest: Very well, Jonah ... oh could you please go and check it out?

- Jonah: Chei! Beke choro Igbum egbu. Master, this people are very dangerous and that room has many devils inside.
- Whiteforest: Jonah, as a Christian, you should have outgrown these superstitious beliefs. Well, if you do not want to enter, I have to personally go in and disabuse your minds about the existence of such things as spirits.
- Jonah: Master, for your worship, sir, I beg no go.
- Whiteforest: Nonsense I shall enter.
- Akaeze: Go, white faced stranger and satisfy your curiosity with blood and evil.
- Ugwuonah: Whiteman, Ichie Chikadibia, I am going. Whatever you people see you take.
- Chikadibia: Akaeze you have to stop him. If anything happens to him, his people will come here and ransack the village.
- Akaeze: Let him see it.
- Whiteforest: Bloody Africans, primitive and uncivilized (*With confident strides, Whiteforest matches to the door, opens it and peeps, then emboldened, he enters. Chikadibia and Jonah flee,.... just then Whiteforest lets out an agonising cry and a shattering sound is heard inside the odious room The door bursts open and a badly shaken Whiteforest rushes out and without wasting a second flees from the palace*).
Jonah get me out of this place..
- Akaeze: The child who desires to speak his father's idioms should also be able to pay his father's debts. If a slave is not told that he has been sold, when his kinsmen are set to depart, he seeks to follow them.

It is only a deaf grasshopper that falls prey to the buzzard. I am Akaaeze (*lights fade to darkness*)

MOVEMENT TWO

(*The palace of Igwe Udensi. Akaaeze has just entered. the Ichie Ugwuonah.*)

Akaaeze: Here they come, hawkers of titles and peddlers of crown.

Ugwuonah: Calm calm Akaaeze ... I have come with a clean heart.

Akaaeze: Was that not what you used to tell my husband. Those were the very parables you used to shower on Igwe Udensi that led him to an early grave.

Ugwuonah: My lord, the Igwe, killed himself, Akaaeze that we all know.

Akaaeze: (*Akaaeze mimics Ugwuonah*) You were the one that brought the eyes out of the sacred parrot.

Ugwuonah: That was the custom Akaaeze, that the Igwe who is forced by his subjects to see the eggs of the sacred parrot must join his ancestors.

Akaaeze: The sacred parrot ... that sacred parrot. It was you elders that cajoled the people to kill my husband. I will never submit to your greedy intentions. You will never find the body of Udensi.

Ugwuonah: It does nobody any good if we allow the spirit of the great Udensi to roam about terrorising the people. We have to do something.

Akaaeze: You disappoint me. You disappoint me, Ichie Ugwuonah. The man my late husband gave his ozo should be among those who have conspired to deny

my son the throne ... What is his birthright, you have given to a woman, a woman; an outcast ever heard of such an abomination before?

- Ugwuonah:** I have never been in support of giving the crown to that girl Ulianyasi, but Chikadibia and the others say that it is the wish of the oracle.
- Akaeze:** Ichie Ugwuonah, you should indeed be ashamed of yourself, that a man who outwitted you and took the eze-ofo which rightly belongs to you should be the one whom you dance to.
- Ugwuonah:** I have never danced to the dictates of Ichie Chikadibia, woman.
- Akaeze:** Then say no to their evil machinations. Why must you support Chikadibia and the other elders ... This is your chance Ichie. Support my son and I will personally make sure you get back the eze-ofo of Umuida. Think of it, Ichie Ugwuonah, think of it .. you will be next to my son.
- Ugwuonah:** And what happens to Ichie Chikadibia?
- Akaeze:** He will be banished to the great plains.
- Ugwuonah:** It is not as easy as you think Akaeze.
- Akaeze:** It is easy ... look at your wives and children, don't you see Ichie Chikadibia's wives and children, they grow fat from the people's toil because he holds the eze-ofo and is next in rank to the king, don't you want to be like him?...
- Ugwuonah:** It is really
- Akaeze:** It is nothing..... the ofo, Ichie Chikadibia holds,

belongs to you ... It is yours Ichie Ugwuonah. Your father held it last.

Ugwuonah: But the eze-ofo is not hereditary, it is given to a man who the king thinks has achieved much.

Akaeze: And you think you have not achieved anything as a man?

Ugwuonah: Who says I have not achieved something as a man? What has Ichie Chikadibia got that I don't have?

Akaeze: The eze-ofo of Umuida ... this is your chance to get it Ichie Ugwuonah. Support me. Once my son becomes king he banishes Chikadibia.

Ugwuonah: What reason are you going to give for his banishment?

Akaeze: Blasphemy ... abomination ... he says that a woman, an outcast, shall occupy the throne of the great Udensi.

Ugwuonah: If your course will bring back my father's eze-ofo to me, then I will be with you Akaeze ... In fact, this is the opportunity I have been waiting for.

Akaeze: Thank you Ichie Ugwuonah ... with an ally like you, I can now destroy my greatest rival and enemy.

Ugwuonah: Who is that?

Akaeze: Otigba. That wizened medicine man. He stands between me and my ambition.

Ugwuonah: Then go ahead and deal with him.

Akaeze: That is where I will need your help.

Ugwuonah: How do I come in?

- Akaeze: Look at this (*Akaeze produces the Otumokpo*) ... You would tie it around your waist.
- Ugwuonah: Why?
- Akaeze: I know you elders meet with Otigba for consultations.
- Ugwuonah: Yes.
- Akaeze: Go to the meeting with the Otumokpo strapped around waist.
- Ugwuonah: I don't understand, Akaeze.
- Akaeze: Otigba has a very powerful medicine which renders him invincible to the mighty powers of Nwerezazu ... that is why I have been unable to get him.
- Ugwuonah: Is there nothing that can be done?
- Akaeze: None because if Otigba succeeds in bringing the great *dibia* of Umuanyanwu into the village before the new moon, their combined power can defeat Nwerezazu.
- Ugwuonah: But why should I be the one to wear it, why can't you give it to another person ... another elder. Why must it be me Akaeze.?
- Akaa: Because you want back your father's eze-*ofo*.
- Ugwuonah: Yes I want it back.
- Akaa: Then you must wear the Otumokpo.
- Ugwuonah: If wearing the Otumokpo will restore my eze-*ofo* back to me, I will do it ... As our people say, it is

only a fool who leaves where kings are crowned to dwell among village idiots.

Akaa: Thank you Ichie Ugwuonah, I know I can count on your support ... Yes lest I forget, there is something I have been keeping for you all this while (*Akaeze exits and returns with a small bottle*). I have been waiting for an opportunity to give this gift to you.

Ugwuonah: What is it?

Akaa: A royal snuff made from the very hands of our great men.

Ugwuonah: (*Ugwuonah: accepts the snuff box from Akaeze ...*) I am greatly overwhelmed Akaeze ... (*He takes a pinch... and lets out a sneeze*).

Akaa: I know you would like it ... (*The entrance of Chikadibia cuts Akaeze midstream*).

Chikadibia: Is that not Ichie Ugwuonah?

Ugwuonah: Ichie Chikadibia you are welcome (*they greet each other with their horse tails*) Infact, I am just arriving.

Chikadibia: How has the boa been basking in the sun?

Ugwuonah: Cautiously, Ichie, very cautiously. Our people say he who seeks to buy a seat for the toad, should rather find one for himself, when he visits the toad.

Chikadibia: Akaeze haven't you seen me? Am I not entitled to a welcome in the palace of my lord Udensi?

Akaa: Whose son you want to deny the crown due to him.

Ugwuonah: Oh yes Ichie ... I have given a deep thought over the happenings these past weeks. I am yet to see in our

neighbourhood where a woman is made to ascend the throne.

Chikadibia: Are you the one saying this Ichie Ugwuonah? If it were not morning, I would have said you've had a strong drink.

Ogbukaiyi: (*entering*) or probably it could be the snuff he has in his hand.

Chikadibia: Ichie Ogbukaiyi ...

Ogbukaiyi: I heard what he said ... Were you not there at Ekperima when the oracle decreed that Ulianyasi shall be the next king of Umuida Ichie Ugwuonah? Were you not there when Arugu rejected Akaeze's son?

Akaeze: The oracle did not reject my son. You just want to reap where you did not sow.

Chikadibia: O gini bu ife ndia?

Ogbukaiyi: Ichie Ugwuonah, why do you complicate matters?

Ugwuonah: I complicate nothing; can we not entreat the oracle further?

Ogbukaiyi: And allow them to continue with their father's evil? It is either we do something or Udensi's spirit will keep on roaming our farmlands.

Ugwuonah: I still don't support it.

Chikadibia: Why do you talk like this, Ugwuonah?

Ugwuonah: Because some people are in possession of the ofo that does not belong to their family (*An allusion to Chikadibia just then Jonah enters*).

- Jonah: I greet you all, Ichie.
- Chikadibia: Ah Jonah I hope all is well?
- Jonah: All is not well Ichie.
- Ogbukaiyi: What is it?
- Jonah: It is the white master.
- Chikadibia: Beke?
- Jonah: Yes.
- Ogbukaiyi: I heard that Akaaeze gave him some doses of her evil locked up in that room.
- Jonah: Yes Ichie, and for that he has sent me to tell you people that if the bad woman no destroy all the juju way dey inside the room, the whiteman will send his soldiers to burn and destroy the village.
- Ugwuonah: Tufia? *(Akaaeze enters)*
- Akaaeze: He cannot do it you slave tell your master that he cannot match Nwereazu and her acolytes. Tell him that he cannot face Akaaeze.
- Jonah: Madam for your own safety and protection, I dey advise you to trowey the juju, because you don't joke with these white men.
- Akaaeze: Go and tell him that Akaaeze says that a child famed in wresting is only among his agemates.
- Jonah: I don tell you o...
- Voice: *(The ghostly voice rattles the scene)*

- Akaeze: Now depart ... I say depart (*Jonah flees and Akaeze exits*)
- Chikadibia: O gini bu ife ndia? Ichie Ogbukaiyi ...?
- Ogbukaiyi: Ichie Chikadibia
- Chikadibia: We must send an emissary to the whiteman immediately or our village will be sacked by his toeless soldiers. You heard what happened in Arochukwu and Umunoha, how these white strangers destroyed and desecrated the great oracles there We must not allow that to happen to us.
- Ogbukaiyi: All because of this evil woman
- Ugwuonah: Indeed, we shall send someone to the whiteman without delay... and whoever that is chosen must be brave and patriotic enough to go.
- Chikadibia: Who then shall we send?
- Ogbukaiyi: Let us send Ichie Ugwuonah.
- Ugwuonah: Eh! Ichie Ogbukaiyi, is that the type of thought you harbour for me in your heart ... No I am not going.
- Ogbukaiyi: Why?
- Ugwuonah: You want the white devils to capture me and throw me to their dogs or send me to Igwenga. No I am not going.
- Ogbukaiyi: Why?
- Chikadibia: Then who are we going to send?
- Ugwuonah: Why don't we send Ogbukaiyi since it was his bright idea.

Ogbukaiyi: I cannot go, I look after the young men.

Chikadibia: We cannot keep on rigmarolling like this. We shall bring the matter before the village this evening at the village square (*Light fade to darkness*).

MOVEMENT THREE

(The scene opens in the village shrine ... Otigba the medicine man is seated with the other elders, excluding Ugwuonah. The setting is very solemn.... Otigba begins to divine....)

Otigba: We can get at Akaaeze through Ugwuonah. My oracle tells me that Akaaeze has given Ugwuonah a charm strapped around his waist. He thinks Akaaeze likes him... he does not know that the evil woman wants to use him and then eliminate him.

Ogbukaiyi: So what do we do great dibia?

Otigba: We shall use Ugwuonah to fight Akaaeze. The otumokpo charm she gave Ugwuonah belongs to the evil Nwereazu. We shall send some men to steal it, and return it to Akaaeze's house. In that way Nwereazu will not find Ugwuonah when Akaaeze sends her to kill him, because the otumokpo acts as a beackon to it's would be victim. It will turn back and return to Akaaeze's house .. And kill whoever it finds there.

Ogbukaiyi: Yes.....
This is interesting ... I suggest we begin immediately.. Let us get some youths to pay a visit to Ugwuonah's house ... (*General acquiesance... lights fade to darkness*)

MOVEMENT FOUR

The palace of Igwe Udensi ... Like a colossus, Akaaeze bestrides the arena with her medicine pot and a white fowl... She voices coarse invectives ...

Akaaeze: He who gathers termite infested firewood invites the siege of lizards on his house. The child who desires to speak his father's idioms should also be ready to pay his father's debts ... Behold the housefly has perched on the broom brought to kill it ... Today I shall finish all of those cheats.. and I shall start with that fool, that coward Ichie Ugwuonah... (*Whiteforest and Jonah enter*).

Whiteforest: Well well ... What have we here? Is this not our demented and irrational old queen.

Akaaeze: So, you have the guts to come back here you white dog... Today I shall destroy all my enemies.

Whiteforest: Tell her, Jonah, that if she does not destroy the devils in that room by evening, today, I shall have to invite her majesty's forces to destroy it.

Jonah: Beke sim gwa gi na oburu na I itufusighi ajo mmuo ndi ahu no na ulo a, ya ga eku ndi agha wagide gi.

Akaaeze: Tell him that he cannot do it. If they dare set foot on Umuida, I shall let loose the windows of destruction... The skies shall fight for Akaaeze. Yes the firmament shall campaign for her ... Whiteforest, my husband brought you to this village ... You have forgotten. Okuko echefuola onye foro ya odu na udu mmiri.

Jonah: Master e say you be chicken way no sabi again the person we comot the feather wey dey him nyash for rain season.

Whiteforest: What, calling me, a British citizen, a chicken...

Imagine this illiterate ... this uncivilized primitive African ... this mother fucking ass-hole ... Oh! Jonah my boy ... God forgive me for those obscene words... but this woman really irritates me. *(There is sudden sound inside the Oba)*

Jonah: Master I think I hear a sound from the evil room.

Whiteforest: Very well we shall visit her with total destruction. We shall give her a dose of her own medicine.

Akaaeze: You can do nothing, you white beast. You and your black slave ... you are strangers in Umuida and this raging storm will eat your heads... You will also go the way of those foolish ichies before tomorrow evening when the new moon shall appear. I Akaaeze have said it ... I will deal with the two of you like swishing of the tail of a cow to drive away a fly. *(Her countenance changes instantaneously ... venom and hatred clearly written on her face)*. I am Akaa... the time has come ... this is the moment. A time to deal with my enemies and restore my son... this is the moment.... I invoke the restless spirit of Udensi, I summon the potent spirit of the whirlwind, of thunder and lighting of death and destruction ... I evoke you Nwereazu. Go and accomplish. Follow the North wind and leave death and utter desolation in your path.. Go... Go first to that fool Ugwuonah... Ugwuonah ... go Nwere and strike him dead ... *(There is a deafening sound of rushing wind and thunder, like a shuttle Nwereazu burst out from the oba and with lightening speed goes up the middle aisle. The three acolytes appear)*.

Akaaeze: Go.... Go

Voice: *(The ghostly voice and laughter thunders)*

Whiteforest: Jonah, don't you think that this woman is mad?

Jonah: No I don't think so, master.

Whiteforest: Then she is possessed Jonah.

Jonah: Master make we leave this place.

Whiteforest: Wait Jonah, I would love to see the end of this ritual
(as the sound of the wind and thunder subsides Akaaeze's face wears a worried mask).

Akkaeze: Strange ... odd... weired ... unbelievable. Nwereazu my Nwere ... where is the spirit of thunder and lightening that dwells in you?... Why do you hesitate to kill?... kill... kill... I say kill, strike! No ... no it can't be .. That you can't find Ugwuonah ... that is impossible ... Where can he be found? The impudent coward Otigba, has succeeded, my enemies have succeeded, my enemies have succeeded *(Akkaeze becomes very agitated)* No, no I implore you, I plead with you to spare me. Nwereazu, please, spare me... I did it for my son... *(The sound of the thunder and lightening increases now accompanied with a ghostly laughter)...* I will tell you where Udensi is buried... it's in the barn .. inside the Oba.. spare me... *(At this instance the three acolytes of Nwereazu who have all the while couched on the ground like mushroom now begin to recoil slowly as they make for Akkaeze with their claws and fangs ready for the kill).*

Akkaeze: No... no.. Please don't come near me.. don't you evil things, don't. Please, father, whiteman, save me *(As Akkaeze tries to escape, the acolytes block all exits).*

Jonah: Master e be like say the Otumokpo don hook am.

Akkaeze: Keep them away from me ... If they touch me they will die *(Whiteforest make to move to Akkaeze).*

Jonah: Master... make you no go near him ... If the thing touch you too, you go die. *(A wail pierces the place and*

the acolytes pounce on Akaeze... simultaneously she and the three acolytes give up the ghost .. From the middle aisle appears a refreshed and beautiful Nwereazu the twin sister of Uli... She has now metamorphosed from the white chalked faced and ugly looking Nwereazu in whose body inhabited the evil spirit of thunder and lightening into a very beautiful woman, she is still sobbing and bewildered as she gets to the stage.)

Jonah: Nwereazu! Nwere!

Whiteforest: Who is she Jonah?

Jonah: Master this is the girl wey the bad woman imprison, put bad spirit for him body... E be like say the bad spirit don comoc for him body.

Whiteforest: Yes, she is well again I can see ... a very beautiful thing.... Cry no more child.

Nwereazu: Oh stranger, here am I? I want my sister. Where is Uli.... Uli ... I want to go home.

Jonah: Cry no more she go soon be with you.

Whiteforest: What did you say her name was? Jonah

Jonah: Nwereazu.....

Whiteforest: Nwereazu... that means she was not a Christian before these bad spirits possessed her. Thank God. My dear Nwereazu, you will from today cease to be called by that name. From this day onwards you shall be known as Mary Magdalene.

Jonah: Alelu Aleluyah. *(With Jonah scarcely finishing the last syllable of that line, the vibrant Ugbo Obidike rendered by ecstatic youths of Umuida explodes in the auditorium.... at the middle aisle.. The song is led by a young man welding a glinting matchet. As they get on stage lights fade to darkness)*

HENRY KAH JICK

***“Francis B. Nyamnjoh: Searching
for an Art of Fiction”***

Contemporary African Literature is literature in full motion, a literature that is still being born and enriched by the discovery of new writers and new talents. It is literature in movement - not just movement in one direction but in many directions at once.

Charles Nnolim

"The Critic of African Literature: The Challenge of the 80's" in (Emenyonu, 1986:20).

Literature offers a reconstruction of a people's collective experiences expressed in carefully selected words so as to entertain, instruct, and move its readers. The novel, a genre of literature, offers such a reconstruction through a story with human characters by means of incidents, setting, and dialogue. Francis Nyamnjoh emerged early in the nineteen nineties as a significant Cameroonian writer of prose fiction. His works, *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African* under reference in this paper, redirect our attention to basic question regarding the genre of the novel, namely as to whether or not there is the art of fiction.

In his *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster rejects the notion of the art of fiction: "there is no art of the novel, only the art which a writer requires for the particular work he is engaged on" (1974:186). Most people are sympathetic to the widespread view that at least in one obvious sense, literature is not life - even if these people would also warmly respond to the observation by Leslie Stephen in his *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* that:

If...we wish to discover the secret of the great ecclesiastical and political struggles of the day, we should turn, not to the men in whose minds beliefs lie inert and instinctive...but to the great poet, who shows how they were associated with the strongest passions and the most vehement convictions (1965:7-8).

This conviction recognises the existence of art and stresses the significance that literature (poetry) as referred in this passage has for a people at a particular time in history. On his part, Arnold Kettle in his *An Introduction to the English Novel* Vol. I, submits that a just balance of "life" and "pattern" (to be construed as morality) is the one basic ingredient to producing a novel which is a successful work of art (1967:12-24). Kettle equally contends that in assessing any novel, "we must see... its value as the quality of its contribution to man's freedom". Chinweizu et al. in their *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* feel that for art and especially literature to be successful, the artist has a "professional responsibility to make his work relevant and intelligible to his society and its concerns" (1980: 252). This paper strongly recognises the existence of the art of fiction as well as the social relevance of literature.

It is the contention of this critic that Francis Nyamnjoh is a communicator par excellence. After all, art is a kind of intellectual and imaginative communication. In order to be spared the charge of art for art's sake, Nyamnjoh pursues his themes and social interests more plainly. This paper is going to use some corroborative evidence from *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African* to demonstrate that Francis Nyamnjoh believes that art, in spite of being intellectual, should move closer to what Charles Nnolim calls in his already quoted article, "social art". That is, art that contemplates society. This paper equally submits that Francis Nyamnjoh is an ideologue, championing a socio-political viewpoint but who seems to fail to realise that the novel is not the same thing as a political pamphlet or a social treatise. This conviction is informed by the fact that the author has not, to a large extent effectively utilised most of the literary finesse that would have qualified his fiction as high art.

In Nyamnjoh's *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African*, society looms large. The society portrayed in *Mind Searching* is one of political and economic inequalities; the rich inhabit the opulence of Bastos while the poor - the "wretched of the earth" seem grateful for the stinking squalor of Briqueterie. Contrast is effectively used in this work to highlight the compartmentalization of the city-society in general. Nyamnjoh observes this in the novel:

Bastos has virtually nothing in common with Briqueterie. Even their physical locations emphasized their differences. Bastos is located on a hill at the foot of which is Briqueterie. Seen in terms of Jacob's Ladder, Bastos would be on the topmost rung far up in the skies close to Heaven... (44).

This passage aptly depicts the two main classes that form the poles of Nyamnjuh's setting.

In spite of the fact that the political setting of the novel is the Ahidjo era, the work, nevertheless, is a general comment on present-day societal ills such as corruption, exploitation of women, prostitution, unemployment, opulence of the rich, poverty, callousness, and inefficiency of government institutions etc. Nyamnjuh's main concern in *Mind Searching* is the condition of the Cameroonian society in general. His protagonist, Fanda, from the beginning of the novel, serves mostly to point up the depressing moral and political realities, situating them in the capitalist soul of the nation. He repeatedly criticises the corruption in the society and is himself worried over why he should continue to do this:

O! God, damn this restless spirit of mine, which like Hamlet's father's would stop at nothing! What a terribly inquisitive spirit I have! Until I am panged one of these days for undue intrusion, I will not know how advantageous it is to be blind to certain glaring absurdities (108).

In the course of the novel, Fanda, the social critic, abandons the lot of the depressed "God's bits of wood" to a comfortably well off private secretary to a vice minister. When he criticised the society, one had seen him to be morally superior to the other characters who have accepted corruption as "normal". But as soon as he is appointed to the position of secretary, Fanda goes on to tumble from his moral heights. He is now a civil servant and part and parcel of the dirty system he used to laugh at. He seems to be virtually happy in his new discovery as he himself observes:

For three years I've seen what it means to be a top civil servant... And as proof of all these changes, those who knew me when misery was my closest companion have had to revise their mental representations of me. Instead of the dull-faced young man flat

as a thin leaf, I am now a bustling epicurean with a large stomach that reminds me of good living. I love it! (146).

The dominant theme treated in *The Disillusioned African* (1995) is that of illusion versus reality. Through Charles Keba's letters from England, the reader is exposed to the social and political realities of present-day Cameroon in particular and Africa in general.

Plotting is rather uncertain in *Mind Searching* and very thin in *The Disillusioned African*. In each novel, the primary scheme clearly is to show the protagonists as growing from ignorance into knowledge through experience. This, however, is not what is actually achieved. In *Mind Searching*, Fanda is first a young man of innocence and idealism, shocked at the level of corruption and inequality in the society. In the course of time, however, he is virtually swallowed up in the corrupt system and behaves almost like the corrupt people he had criticised earlier. He observes, "Even my sleeping times are regulated by theirs" (153). Fanda acknowledges that he has become "an integral part of the system. "And I don't see how I can possibly cease to belong to it" (146). In the end, the novel, in fact, subverts the moral values with which it opens since Fanda finally succumbs to his worst material appetites and quickly concludes:

To hell with those so-called intellectuals who try to look beyond their noses! Or who are always weeping more than the owners of a corpse! Who tells them that the masses' are so desperate that they want help from them? (153).

From the beginning of the novel, one is tempted to think that Fanda is being presented as a Marxist crusader, who stands for the down-trodden masses in the society, but with this new realistic position, the novel, *Mind Searching*, fails to uplift the spirits of the reader (masses); at best, it can be regarded as a warning against the corrupting influence of money and political power over socialist ideals.

Charles Keba is similarly meant to be seen in *The Disillusioned African* as a character who grows from idealism into realism. To achieve this growth, Keba is made to acquire the means and desire to go for further studies in order to come back and assist his poor and exploited countrymen. To grow further and reach a larger view

and ideological perspective (which of course is Nyamnjoh's real interest), Charles Keba has to undertake a journey from Cameroon to England and eventually to Zaire and then back to Cameroon. While in England, his ideas are clarified and he laughs at the problems that plague the African continent. While criticising the African leaders and intellectuals, he equally laughs at the British "Queendom". It is also in this "Queendom" that he rebukes himself for having left African philosophy in England. His conclusion, therefore, is to return to Africa for his studies. Unfortunately for Keba, the unstable political atmosphere in Africa causes him to lose an arm while in Zaire. He finally returns to the Cameroons but loses the other arm when he involves himself in the launching of the S.D.F. political party in Bamenda on the 26th May, 1990. He finally becomes disillusioned after the 1992 legislative elections and decides to return to his native Menchum Division, with the aim of helping awaken the consciousness of the poor survivors of the 1986 lake Nyos disaster.

The personality of the writer filters out of his narrative to a great extent. It is possible for instance, to guess the age, academic training, and social milieu of the writer from the way he renders his stories. Nyamnjoh squirts sociology, journalism, and philosophy into his fiction. The author does everything - unconventional to put his message across. By so doing, he super imposes his intention on the traditional form of the novel. The result is that Nyamnjoh's fiction is permeated with his awareness of his purpose. In *The Disillusioned African*, there is a surrogate of a mind overburdened with innumerable ills that plague and rob Africa of her true self. Some of these ills include: bad politics, religion, poverty, unemployment, exploitation, tribalism, coup d'état, colonialism, dictatorship etc. These ills - the author's themes are often forced and illogical. One easily finds many digressions that are not integral to the main narrations - most of the digressions are, indeed, a conglomeration of episodes brought together to enable Nyamnjoh make his statement or deliver his message on the societal ills that he criticizes. As you read *The Disillusioned African*, you discover that the author moves from one ill to another and can, therefore be seen in this paper as a nationalist, sociologist, social critic, and above all a champion of Africa. However, one must quickly make bold to observe here that Nyamnjoh does not

sufficiently play all these roles in his art. Consequently, virtually all of the themes mentioned in his two novels are not treated in detail.

That is why one may contend in this essay that the author does not seem to remain a well-unified character in his art of fiction. In *The Disillusioned African*, the author could be said to be concerned with too many issues at the same time and virtually in all of Africa's so-called independent nations. His vision in this novel is, therefore, multi-focal and this makes his criticisms oblique.

Mind Searching, like *The Disillusioned African*, is evidently a novel of ideas. In both novels, the interior monologue is effectively employed (to different degrees) to present the ideas even as they are forming in the minds of the protagonists. This method has obvious advantages; it presents Fanda and Keba both internally and externally; it plays down the lack of other characters in the novels and thereby focuses more steadily on the central issues. And because the reader has observed the ideas taking shape in the protagonists' minds, he may very well make allowances for the inwardness of most of the thinking and take less exception to the novels as propaganda. This is, indeed, a credit to Nyamnjoh.

Realism is a very important tool that Francis Nyamnjoh utilises with great impact in his fiction. With this device, the author examines the whole breadth of society as his subject matter and demonstrates how conventions, social and political institutions inter-relate. This kind of realism is what Gakwandi refers to as "social realism" (1977: 126). According to Marx and Engels, "The accurate depiction of reality is the most crucial aspect of a work of art" (qtd. in Ngara, 1985: 13-14). Engels contends in one of his letters to Margaret Harkness, still in Emmanuel Ngara, that realism implies "...besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical conditions" (1985: 14). Therefore, realism is closely related to characterisation and the descriptive ability of any author in the art of fiction. In his *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*, Shatto Gakwandi opines that the concept of "realism" in prose fiction refers to those novels which, through their selection of facts and details from ordinary life, produce the illusion of reality by creating a picture of a world that closely resembles our own (1977: 126).

"Facts" as used in this passage, will refer in this paper, to literal truth rooted in actual historical happenings selected from the

Cameroonian and African societies and the "details" will imply the presentation of the reality of human experience according to the law of probability governing human nature and aimed at using images of general truth.

Reality, therefore, is a factor of the quality of the inter-relationship between observable realities in Cameroon and Africa and Francis Nyamnjoh's imaginations. Of course, literature is not life in a naive or simplistic sense; this paper does not suggest in any way that the Cameroonian or African realities as portrayed by Francis Nyamnjoh in his fiction correspond exactly to the observable realities during the time of his writings. The author definitely has his personal inclinations which are likely to influence his presentation of the societies under reference. However, this essay maintains that Nyamnjoh seems to be very conscious of the fact that in the realist tradition, the highest premium goes to accuracy of observation in terms of known facts. One must praise Nyamnjoh for this.

This critic has observed elsewhere (1997) that realism and socialism in their essential features and aspirations compliment each other and as a result, they are, naturally combined. Consequently, the realistic art of Africa, conveys the socialist message or performs the socialist function of awakening the down-trodden masses to unite in one effort to transform their environment. In essence, this is what socialism proposes. Any writer, according to this paper, may be considered as a realist when he or she writes about not only what is, but what should or should not be. Any successful art of fiction should not just state the obvious or the status quo.

Mindful of the fact that Francis Nyamnjoh is out to criticise some ills in his society - Cameroon and Africa in general - his physical worlds are not imaginary ones but the Cameroon and African societies. This is why the author has used facts selected from actual historical happenings. In *Mind Searching*, one can venture to think that Dr. B. of the Department of Sociology at the University of Ngoa is Dr. Bernard Fonlon. There is enough corroborative evidence in the text to substantiate this submission in spite of the fact that Dr. Fonlon was not of the Department of Sociology. 'Ngoa', where the University of Yaounde is situated, is in effect, the name of the quarter - 'Ngoa - Ekelle', written in full.

Facts as the April 6th attempted coup d'etat in 1984 is evoked in the novel. Fanda equally refers to the "Nkoulou Affairs" where a Bishop is sympathetic with a so-called terrorist leader. Because of this "The President... asked to be brought Bishop Nkoulou's head on a silver platter" (41). One quickly calls to mind Bishop Albert Ndongmo's problems with the Ahidjo regime during the post-independence struggle by the UPC political party which sought to overthrow the callous and rapacious regime of Ahidjo.

In *The Disillusioned Africa*, Nyamnjoh uses historical facts as fiction. In spite of the fact that Nyamnjoh stretches his criticism to cover the whole of Africa, Cameroon is considered in the novel as a case study. Names of people like Emperor Haile Selassie, Kamuzu Banda, Mandela, and those of countries like Cameroon, Ethiopia, Malawi are not fictionalised. Names of towns in Cameroon like Douala, Yaounde, Bamenda are equally not given fictional tags. Actual dates and events are also given without fear. The date of the launching of the Social Democratic Front political party is just as naked as the Lake Nyos disaster of 1986. In an essay such as this, one cannot give an exhaustive list of all the historical facts stated in the novels under reference. This is because the *raison d'être* of this paper is not to study the realistic presentation of Nyamnjoh's novels per se.

There are, however, weaknesses in Nyamnjoh's realism as a narrative tool especially when one looks at his setting, characterisation, and plot. Ernst Fischer submits in *Emmanuel Ngara's Art and Ideology in the African Novel: A Study of the Influence of Marxism on African Writing* that socialist art cannot "content itself with blurred visions. Its task is rather, to depict the birth of tomorrow out of today" (1985 78). This is not the case with Nyamnjoh's works. His novels do not end on a positive note - 'depicting the birth of tomorrow'. The author's commitment in his fiction ends at a mere identification of the societal problems. He demonstrates that the system he is criticising does not sympathise with the exploited majority of the down-trodden masses. He simply portrays himself as an expert in diagnosing the Cameroonian/African problems but a failure in the treatment of these problems. In effect, our novelist under reference in this paper, does not suggest or propose solutions which hopefully may recreate the societies under reference and free man from all the ills

so far identified. Whether the solutions are valid or not remains the society's problem. After all, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o contends in his *Homecoming* that:

It is not enough for the African artist, standing aloof, to view society and highlight its weaknesses. He must try to go beyond this, to seek out the sources, the causes and the trends of a revolutionary struggle (1972:65-66).

Mind Searching and *The Disillusioned African* both end on a negative note. Since this paper considers his fiction to be socialist art as it expresses the thoughts, feelings, moods, and points of view of the Cameroonian/African masses, one strongly feels that this is a weakness in Nyamnjoh's fiction.

Mind Searching and *The Disillusioned African* are plotted along a linear stroke with many digressions to support or corroborate Nyamnjoh criticism. With the use of many digressions, the novelist's works do not emerge with an overall consistency and order of plot and structure. He uses most of the digressions to either expose the plight of the 'wretched of the earth' or the dilemma of the Africans or to illustrate the Marxist thesis which submits that the dominant view in any society is that of the ruling class.

Mind Searching and *The Disillusioned Africa* are not about one or two main characters. They are about whole communities the down-trodden masses. This idea of dealing with the masses or the majority of the sea of the population does not only tally with the idea of African communalism that Nyamnjoh seems to support, but it also reflects the author's socialist ideology which focuses on people rather than individuals. And as Emmanuel Ngara observes about *God's Bits of Wood*, a people must have leaders and "a struggle must have its ideologists" - hence the importance of Bakayoko and the other leaders (1985:72). One can equally say here that there is Fanda in *Mind Searching* and Charles Keba in *The Disillusioned African*.

Unlike Sembene Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood*, Nyamnjoh presents only his main characters to his readers. Even the main characters are simply 'types' or flat characters. When he focuses on his main characters rather than on the majority of the masses, whose cause he seems to lead, one may argue that it is because the novelist attempts to pay more attention to socio-political issues.

Nevertheless, this does not justify presenting single characters in his novels under reference. It is a weakness that reduces his merits as a writer of fiction who can effectively construct his work on facts. By merely giving real as well as easily identifiable characters in *The Disillusioned African* and only titles or letters for characters in *Mind Searching*, without equally describing them or letting them participate actively in the events of the story, Nyamnjoh reduces the interest of his readers. For those who are not acquainted with the Cameroonian history and do not know these characters will not have a picture of who they are and what role they play or have played in the novelistic world of *Mind Searching* or the Cameroonian Society. One may, however, argue that this is as a result of the fact that Nyamnjoh's fiction is based on facts as he himself argues in his interview with Odera Outa, published in *The East African* newspaper:

I can say that my works are not exactly fictional; although I rely on that medium. They tend to be very factual and almost exactly based on what I have observed and studied as a sociologist (1996:11 part 2).

In spite of the above submission, Nyamnjoh restricts his works to Cameroon, therefore, he suffers the same limitations that Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel prize winning novelist expresses about Soviet writers. In a letter to the congress of Soviet writers in 1967 he complains that:

To the entire world the literary life of our country now appears as something infinitely poor, flatter, and lower than it actually is, than it would appear if it were not restricted, hemmed in. The losers are both our country in world public opinion, and World Literature itself (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1975: 312).

If one's contention that literature should transcend the narrow concerns and obsessions of one nation is meaningful, then, one would equally be right to think that by giving real names and letters to represent characters with no descriptions in Nyamnjoh's novels, he reduces the universality of his works.

Francis Nyamnjoh's works under reference in this paper, are void of dialogue, an important ingredient in the art of fiction. This is informed by the fact that the author does not allow his characters

to interact since his monologue/letter forms of novels, make dialogue very impossible. This is, indeed, a great deficiency since these approaches reduce the interest of the readers and also deprives his works of one of the fundamental elements of prose fiction. Good literature strives always to be universal. The more a work of art can "live" beyond the interests of a few readers, the better the work. However, this does not mean either that everyone will like the works of Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Moliere, Homer, Dickens, Beti, and Achebe. It rather means that their works have touched an ever-increasing number of people, that they have universal appeal.

Language is another narrative instrument that Nyamnjoh employs with outstanding impact to add reality to his fiction. *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African* can be read with ease and interest by both children and adults. He makes use of simple but persuasive language. Simple but descriptive language is a hall mark of great novelists like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Thomas Hardy, Mongo Beti, and William Golding, just to name a few. Consequently, when Nyamnjoh uses some French expressions and words without translating them for his purely English reader, one sees this as a weakness in his fiction. Not all of Nyamnjoh's readers come from bilingual societies or backgrounds like Cameroon. The author also uses his poetic license to coin his own words as well as distorts the English Language to achieve his purpose. See "P-Civilisation" (64), "Ngomna" (18) "King-size-Friend-of-The-Dismembered" etc.

Nyamnjoh's language is equally characterised by the use of exaggerations and humour. Exaggeration in the use of language in his novels depends on whether the exaggerated object or event is being loathed or loved. In suggesting in *Mind Searching* that Cameroon (*French Africa*) is yet to be weaned from the breast of France, a fact that Nyamnjoh laughs at, he expresses his love for France as far as choosing governments through 'coups' is concerned:

I happen to love the French people with all my soul, despite all. Most people in French Africa love France. Paris is like home to most of us who can venture out there... I've heard so many sad stories about the futile missions of the French Intelligence Service in the rest of the world....Perhaps those who accuse the French

Intelligence Service of failures are hardly aware of its numerous successes in the continent of Africa. Who would deny that almost every coup d'état the French have organised in Africa has been totally successful?... My beloved France excels in the domain of coup d'état (109).

The author equally criticises the exploitative nature of the French in a very humorous manner. In spite of the fact that this is something shameful to the French and the so-called African leaders, one cannot help but laugh at the manner in which Nyamnjoh puts it:

In as much as I appreciate France's strategic importance to the wellbeing of Christians here in Cameroon, I wonder why the French aren't selling us enough wheat. I don't want to be told that this church of ours is feeling the financial pinch already. Who is the Christian' that likes to share his little piece of The-Body-of-Christ with others? Perhaps the clerics don't know that some of us live by this bread alone? (13).

In *The Disillusioned African*, Nyamnjoh also uses ironies and humour. When an English man asks:

*"In Africa, you live on tree tops, don't you?" he replies:
"Yes, and the British Embassy is on the tree next door" (80).*

The meaning one attaches to a novel, depends largely on how one conceives of it as a work of art. If the novel works only at the literal level, then it is of very little literary worth. But where it works at both the literal and symbolic levels, the work is more aesthetically satisfying. For example, one cannot hope to derive much meaning from Mongo Beti's *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness* or Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born*, without necessarily paying attention to the use of symbolism. In essence, one contends that no thoughtful literary comment on these novels can be made without emphasizing the symbolic themes in them. Language and theme, therefore, are very important in the determination of meaning in any work of fiction. Consequently, it would be unjust to refer to *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African* as works of art if one were to opine that they are completely void of symbolic significance. Though Nyamnjoh

sparingly employs symbols, he, however, gives a symbolic significance to Keba's journey in *The Disillusioned African*. The way he presents Charles Keba is interesting and relevant to the author's educative role. He presents Keba and Fanda as growing from ignorance and naivety into knowledge and maturity. Nyamnjoh, therefore, creates them to be more real in life and be seen as people of flesh and blood. The author intends to portray the two main characters as people growing from idealism into realism.

Keba's journey to England for studies is one of exposure and discovery. Most important, Keba's unsuccessful quest for knowledge in England, is in essence, the African's unsuccessful reliance for freedom, democracy, development and you name the rest from the West. Africa's problems, Nyamnjoh seems to say, can be solved only in Africa and by Africans. The major themes of *The Disillusioned African*: illusion versus reality, is well-illustrated when one looks at the symbolic aspects brought out by Nyamnjoh. The African seems to believe that white is superior to black. Nyamnjoh's works portray this to be a big fallacy. For instance, it is interesting to know that although the whites brought Christianity to Africa, they don't even go to church in England. "The church is very scarce, our Papa and Roma being an unknown quantity in this Queendom" (75) and "only the unemployed or those unconcerned with active production, go to church on Sunday" (77). The whites strongly condemned superstition in Africa but are engaged in an advanced level of superstition in England. That is why "people not only believe in astrologers and palmists, but are served their horoscopes by TV and popular papers first thing every morning" (86). Nyamnjoh seems to be asking why we, Africans, still think that the whites can pull us out of our present political and economic impasses. In general, therefore, the failure of Keba in England represents the failure of Africa relying totally on the West in the political, social, and economic spheres. When Francis Nyamnjoh uses symbols and humour, he easily brings out the socio-political ills that he criticises. This approach is also effective in that it blurs the political messages that he communicates to a less perceptive reader. By so doing, the writer easily escapes the wrath of the oppressors in society.

Before bringing out the salient points raised in this essay, it is important to reiterate this critic's position on certain issues. This

paper is not in anyway suggesting that the African novel should have the same type of characterisation, setting, plotting, language, logic, structure etc, that one finds in the typical European novel.

This will be tantamount to saying that, both of us, African writers and critics have not been weaned from the literacy breast of our former colonial masters - hence, the importance and recognition of the passage that serves as the epigraph to this essay. This paper did not set out to treat *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African* in greater details, a task, preserved for another paper.

As part of the conclusion of this essay, one should underscore the following points: First, when Nyamnjoh allows his main character, Charles Keba, in *The Disillusioned African*, to return to his Menchum Division of origin with amputated arms, the author fails to uplift the spirits of the readers or at best, only warns against the corrupting power of the whites and the African leaders over socialist ideals. Since this paper considers the author as a socialist ideologue whose works should seek to alter social values one would have expected a successful and strong Keba back home with a view to awakening the consciousness of the majority of Nyamnjoh's 'wretched of the earth'.

Second, the oppressed and exploited masses that Nyamnjoh sets out to educate and revolutionize are not even presented to us, neither are their conditions sufficiently exposed. It is more of the city and England that we see than the slums and 'hell' of the poor. These oppressed masses that the novelist seems to sympathize with are not optimistic at the end about the cause that Nyamnjoh wants them to take since Fanda in *Mind Searching* changes camps - to the capitalist class and Keba in *The Disillusioned African* does not achieve the goal of his journey to England - Zaire and has to return to his village even without his arms to assist in toiling and 'scratching his fingers' for survival.

Third, Inih Akpan Ebong argues that by the very nature of his calling, the writer is primarily a revolutionary. His principal objective is not so much to inform, educate and entertain, as it is to change the society (*Emenyonu*, 1986:72). As a consequence, this paper submits that Nyamnjoh's sketchy treatment of the major themes of his works is probably as a result of his argument in his quoted interview that he does not want to attract public attention or better still, the wrath of those in authority. But like Festus Iyayi

in his 1989 interview with G.G. Darah and Kunle Ajibade, published in the *Annual Journal of the Association of Nigerian Authors* Vol. 4, No. 6 (31-32), this critic believes that any writer who is committed to the liberation of a people from oppression and exploitation in his art of fiction, must necessarily be politically active. Therefore, the writer must go beyond the art of writing to the question of radical involvement in the struggle for a progressive and in fact, meaningful change in his society, without the least fear of being picked up. See the likes of such great writers as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Mongo Beti, Es'kia Mphahlele, Alex-la Guma, Denis Brutus, Festus Iyayi etc.

Fourth, Ernst Fischer in his *The Necessity of Art*, contends that "art is necessary in order that man should be able to change the world. But art is also necessary by virtue of the magic inherent in it" (1963:14). By "inherent magic", Fischer is referring to the second function of art - its aesthetic value. But while this second function may inhere in every work of art, it definitely does not constitute the most important element in all art. It is also in line with Fischer's argument that T.S. Eliot quoted in Wilbur Scott, approves Virgil's opinion that the "greatness" of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards, though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards (1962:43). Drawing inspiration and fortitude from these convictions, one strongly believes that in spite of the artistic weaknesses identified in Nyamnjoh's works, his novels are still very important and great.

In conclusion, therefore, one may make bold to contend that Francis B. Nyamnjoh is a fine documentor of some historical facts in Cameroon/Africa. He did not, however, probably realise that the transformation of fact into fiction required authorial self-effacement and aesthetic withdrawal. Indeed, *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African* can be of very good historical interest in discussions of the Cameroonian novel of the English expression. As a beginning, Francis Nyamnjoh's works may be said to be fairly successful experiments as he still searches for an art of fiction.

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TONYE AFEJUKU

The Love Poems of Sam Ukala

Not many readers know Sam Chinedu Ukala as a poet even though he has been writing serious poetry for upwards of twenty years now. This inadequate knowledge of him as a poet can be attributed to his special love for drama and the theatre, areas in which he is making his mark as a playwright, producer, director, critic, and theorist. A second - and perhaps more important - reason is the fact that though he has several published plays to his name and credit, up to my moment of writing, Sam Ukala is yet to have a "published" volume of poetry to bear his name or imprint - although he has published several poems in reputable journals and books of poetry. But whether or not he has a volume of poetry to his name, it is difficult to separate the playwright and dramatist from the poet since drama and poetry are two facts of Ukala's artistic nature, two aspects of the same inclination and experience. His poetry is the key to his drama and his poetry is an extension and fulfillment of his aesthetic doctrine - in several respects.

In this essay, however, I am focussing on Ukala's poems as contained in his remarkable unpublished but privately circulated volume, "In My Hermitage", which contains several of his poems published in journals and magazines.¹ Very specifically, I am focussing on Ukala's love poems on account of their curious and intriguing nature and unconventional appeal.

The love poems constitute the third section entitled "Love and Fetters" of "In My Hermitage", a volume of diverse themes. "In the Labyrinth", the first of the love poems, sets the thematic and artistic attitude of the poet towards his subject. The poet is seen not merely as a romantic inspired by his instinct and personal emotions, but as a translator of his experience into sounds, rhythms, and images, all of which are peculiarly his. But the problem with Ukala is that the reader cannot with certainty pigeon-

hole the poet's attitude to love. Does he see love as something homely or as something divine? Or are the love poems supposedly love poems?

"In the Labyrinth", though apparently simple and straightforward on the surface, is a paradoxical poem. The basic metaphor which underlies it is a paradox. The mysterious "nomad", the mysterious famished bug, that is, which roams the strands of the hair of the woman in the poem, in search of her heart, is difficult to place. Is the famished nomad-bug a sincere and deserving lover or a mere lustful and murderous one?

the bug roams
the bug roams

let it pass
let it pass
through the synthetic

let it have a nip of your scalp
let it pass, let it have a nip
let it suck out the louse in your heart
and plant itself there

let it

for if you let the louse
why not the bug?

What we see in the above lines is not the earnest plea of a serious lover who is famishing for true love or desirous of the love of his beloved, but the subtle threat as well as cajole of an angler, of a lover who by all means wants a bite, in his words, a "nip", of the woman's heart. And he is desperate to have this "nip" not necessarily because he loves her but because a "louse", inferior to the angling bug-lover, is already staying in the unidentified woman's heart. In other words, if the woman would open her heart (or thighs?) to the "louse" (who is equally unidentified), why not to the "bug" who must (if rejected as is surely the case in the poem) force his way in, sucks out the louse and stays put there against the

woman's wish? But by sucking out the louse from the woman's heart the angling bug-lover might be committing murder - killing the louse and, by extension, the woman who apparently might not be able to do without the louse with whom she has fused, going by the mingling of their blood. The-lover, however, is not aware of this as he willy-nilly itches to replace his rival, the louse-lover who already has the woman's heart. But who is the woman that the bug famishes for? Anything divine or saintly about her that makes the bug-lover so desperate to have her and plant himself in her heart and be part of her as the louse-lover he wants to supplant already is? Or is the woman a harlot whom the famished bug merely wants to have a bite of in the manner the louse has had a bite of her? Is the poem about divine love or about profane lover that borders on lust and mere sexuality?

The questions are not easy to answer. Only the poet, writing from his secluded hermitage, can provide accurate answers.

But the point is this: either Ukala (who in the poem recalls, for instance, the metaphysical John Donne) does not take love seriously - he is merely writing wittily and intellectually about disgusting love by way of deploying metaphors that are peculiar to him; or Ukala takes love too seriously - he is so self-conscious about love that he does not tolerate a rival as the raving bug is not prepared to stand the sight of the louse consuming his beloved. Again he is intellectual about this and his peculiar metaphors attest to this.

Thus in the poem the poet is indirectly or metaphysically focussing on jealousy, infidelity, violence, murder, etc. that love can and does often generate. And like the typical John Donne love poem - "The Flea" is a good example - which it seems to be unintentionally fashioned after, "In the Labyrinth" is intellectual, argumentative, and witty.

If "In the Labyrinth" can be said to treat love seriously "Mermaids in the Lift" can be said to focus on sociological and economic love and its dissembling nature that lures and snares the unwary one to an untoward end. In this poem Ukala is not merely sounding witty and intellectual; neither is he seen to be writing merely as a romantic poet inspired by his instinct and personal emotions. Instead he is seen (as in several poems) as a translator of his experience into sounds, rhythms, and images - all of which are personal to him but are meant, however, as warning signs to

the unwary "lover" cruising on the alluring traffic of love in a foreign clime:

*Lifting down with me
to the tavern of the tiny-eyed
to dinner of creatures and chapman
taken with chopsticks and pipes
cherub faces
alluring eyes, fierce
enmeshing smiles
a mermaid's breast on my flank
like the pillowy press of the fruit
on adam's shivery lips ...*

*little little fly
watch the web
the web
you tread the spider's trench*

"Mermaids in the Lift" is a poem of direct personal experience in which the poet-persona warns against temptations from women especially those of easy virtue. The "mermaids" in the poem are women who are not at all known to the poet. They are of varied places, climes, and nationalities (although a description of their cherubic faces and chopsticks suggest that they are Asians).

The foreigner-poet who happens to be in their midst, either in the lift or in the tavern where he goes for some social delights, is the one whom the spider-mermaids want to lure to their trench with their "cherub faces," alluring eyes" and "fierce/enmeshing smiles."

But the poet-persona cautions and advises himself against being their fly. I propose that this is a poem about a woman-chaser and lover who knows his limitations, who is experienced enough to know and see danger from the opposite sex, and cautions himself; and similarly wants other woman-chasers and lovers to take a cue from him and be wise enough not to fall into a spider's trench. Subtly the poem dwells on the theme, the well known theme of 'all that glitters is not gold', or of love and its fetters; and it is in this regard, it can be said, we see its social morality. Noticed in the poem is the strain of vivid actualism, the record of an actual, immediate experience. There is no lofty idealism here. The poem is homely, earthly, realistic. Yet Ukala also reveals in it that he is an

erudite and witty poet:

*little little fly
watch the web
and pray
that tomorrow be cancelled
due to circumstances
beyond God's control.*

Italicizing these lines is meant to show how seriously the poet wants the reader and listener to take this caution and prayer. The accent is audible, the wit earnest, and uncynical.

"Burn the Mask" is a passionate, romantic, and metaphysical poem all in one. It tends to justify love as a natural passion in the human heart, the meaning and end of which is the perpetual fusion of two contented souls. In a way; it recalls "In the Labyrinth", at least on account of its paradox:

*my mind says
it is a smile of raw love
my mask says
it depicts the purity of a dove.*

The clearer, intellectual mind of the poet is in entire agreement with its disguise, its mask, regarding the unrefined, pure and innocent state of love of the unidentified maiden in the poem. The eyes of the first admire the maiden passionately, romantically and genuinely:

*how your eyes look like a dream of romance!
how they sing silent symphony of secret
love dance!*

But the eyes of the second, of the mask, are lustful; the glances are those of a depraved devourer who wants to pluck and consume the maiden's virginity:

*i want to leap
and gently reap
your ebony ripeness ..*

The only snag - a disturbing and disappointing one at that - is "this bloodless/mask i wear ..." And this is the crux of this poem. What is the mask? Unravelling it provides the key and meaning to this poem. Is this a "religious" poem? Is the mask wearer a (hypocritical) priest whose priestly vow is the mask that cloaks his erotic and sensual desire? Is the poet writing about a priest who feels the power and greatness of love, sensuous love, that his vow is masquerading? Or is the poet telling us that the sweetness and power of love are such that can make even a man of piety break his forced vow and make him live and love as his creator designed him to be? If the last two then the poem must be read as a moral satire directed at the clergy who must learn that life without love is empty.

The poem ends on a metaphysical note:

*there! come on, faster here!
cause an exothermic collision
that'll burn off this mask I wear
and fuse us with passion's explosion!*

Pure, undiluted is the love that opened the sealed wells of the masquerader's heart and he wants his passion and that of the maiden to be fused perpetually. In the fusion, we must believe, their bodies will disappear from sight in the chemical (and hence intellectual) and spiritual passion which they have enflamed.

The poem, "Ceramic Cup" is another variation on the theme of love and the poet's attitude to it. The ceramic cup itself is meant to be a symbol of lasting love. But the love, paradoxically, is unwholesome, for the giver and presenter of the ceramic cup is a cheat, an adulteress who disobeys the commandment "thou shall not... [commit adultery]" but instead

*"fart[s]
on all
the courts without.*

Her ceramic cup, "souvenir of unwholesome bond/that will not break," no matter how hard her lover prays for this to happen even at Gathsemane, the garden of betrayal and termination of love, eventually breaks while the male-lover, in one of his night

rituals of mouth-brushing, tries to wash the female-lover's "passioned", that is, flirtatious breathe off his mouth. The ceramic cup is not Keats' Grecian urn, the symbol of Truth and Beauty that are permanent. It is a sign of impurity and futility. So

*tonight the ceramic falls
loses lip not life to sink.*

Even though it still has life, yet that it is not disfigured through a loss of its lip (meaning, symbolically, the termination of the lovers' kissing acts) is a perpetual reminder to the male-lover of their failed, futile, impure, and adulterous love and relationship. The ceramic cup is not a well wrought one, for their love is not a wholesome one. The ceramic cup is a memorial to this reality which the poet-persona is paradoxically happy about. The ceramic cup, now disfigured, is a kind of phoenix from which the ashes of the lovers' love will never rise. And the poet-persona is happy about this. This poem is remarkable for its directness as well as for its apt symbolism and telling metaphor - an intriguing paradox.

Ukala's two other love poems, "I go" and "A Green Laden Fly" focus on the pain of love and tend, more or less, to stress aspects of its profanity. The former, to my mind, is particularly puzzling. I will keep it at abeyance.

The latter, with its fly image, subtly recalls "Mermaids in the Lift". Here, however, the fly is not a man but a burdened girl who comes to the male-speaker in the poem with a problem in the hope that he will solve this problem for her. This "green laden fly", however, ends up being trapped in the male-speaker's "soup" of erotic love. As the poem progresses it becomes clear though that it is the male-speaker and profane lover who is paradoxically trapped in his own "stream of [love] salt:"

*the stream became a calf
mooring a moo yet unheard...*

The suggestion in the above lines is that the "stream of [love] salt" is producing a child, an unwanted baby, from the inexperienced (hence "green") "laden fly" whom the male-speaker is merely taking advantage of and devouring in a moment of philandering and profane pleasure! And because the pregnancy is unexpected and unwanted, it must be aborted, as the following lines suggest:

*to slaughter lane
to slaughter lane
get stainless barren scalpels!
nip the moo
in the bud
nip...*

The disgust of the philanderer is graphically conveyed in his negative references to the unfortunate and abused girl and her "baby", the result of their illicit love, as "mother calf" and "calf:"

*a mound of sighs
a mound of moans
from mother calf...*

And the doctor who aborted the "calf", as "mother calf" "sighs" and "moans", is also referred to negatively as a "rat" that "cuts a wreath/from my pocket", presumably on account of the doctor's exorbitant professional charge for the abortion performed. But the philanderer reluctantly accepts that as his lot for his profane act (of indiscretion):

*lay it on, rat
lay it on
it's my homage to the rude
calf buried
in sterile lint.*

Though the philanderer is unhappy that the doctor has charged him so much for the abortion, he is paradoxically happy to utter the above as an "epitaph" to the memory of the "rude calf buried"! Of course, the foetal calf is "rude" because its coming as well as getting rid of it has been an unpleasant and unwelcome experience.

Generally, in this poem, Ukala's attitude to love - and by this is meant philandering and profane love - is rightly one of utter disgust which he writes about in his peculiarly ironic, round-about, witty, and paradoxical style.

In "I go" we have a real puzzle, as I suggested earlier, and I dare say that this poem seems to be Ukala's most obscure love poem:

*I go
to the blissful bondage
of twins separately fathered
I go ...*

These opening lines are difficult to fathom and appropriately react to within the overall context of the poem which seems to be about a yearning for a child by presumably a childless husband who is anxious to be a father in a childless marriage. The speaker, after all else has failed in the hope of fathering a child, goes to the den of prostitutes, "the blissful bondage" where "twins are separately fathered." He decides to go on the visit after fruitless visits to white garment churches - "stalls of sweeping robes" - where necessary rituals have been performed without results. We are also told that he has married and divorced several times in the (vain?) hope of becoming a father:

*I've been
to repositories of evidence
to oath-houses*

*to smithies of finger-cuffs.
they are
the terminus of my toil
I, the five-fingered fork
that have toiled to dispossess
chiming china of its beaten egg.*

Because he has failed in all his "genuine" efforts to be a father, this desperate lover who has presumably loved and married five times - "I, the five-fingered fork" - at last decides, as has been suggested, to go "to the blissful bondage/of twins separately fathered." By going there he hopes to father a child from a prostitute even though he may not be the biological father! And the reader cannot but wonder if all is well with him sexually or medically. Is he sexually potent, virile, and fertile enough to be a biological father? There is no positive clue to this question in the poem.

There is something elegiac and existentialist about this poem, especially if read side-by-side "A Green Laden Fly" that immediately comes after it. While the male-speaker in "A Green Laden Fly" is able, in circumstances that are not satisfactory, to father a child which he does not want, the male-speaker in "I go" who desperately wants to be a father is denied this wish. How circumstances of men differ!

"I go" is, I am sure, intended by Ukala to be a deeply philosophical poem, and this perspective as well as its full meaning and import comes to the fore only if it is read and interpreted side-by-side "A Green Lady Fly" as I am suggesting. From the perspective I am offering here, each of the two poems aptly contrasts one another and offers useful insight into the nature of existence and God's ways. But if "I go" is read from the perspective of African tradition and culture, a marriage that fails to produce an issue is a doomed one, a tragedy. The source of the elegy in the poem derives from this. It is a great tragedy for an African not to have a child, especially a male child, to bear a man's name and further the lineage of his forefathers. Although Ukala does not obviously state it - in line with his indirect style - childlessness in marriage, especially an African one, is a grave matter and one of the "fetters" of love and matrimony. We can say that the poem says as much in its indirect and subtle style.

To conclude this essay, it is clear from all that has been said above that Ukala is not an easily fathomable poet. Generally, his attitude to love is ambiguous and ambivalent, even multivalent. It is hard to say what his exact attitude to love is. He can be sensuous, romantic, metaphysical, abstract, complex, paradoxical, puzzling, and even cynical in the ways he sees and talks about love.

All these attitudes are more or less seen in his other poems and plays where he adopts different perspectives about diverse issues and themes. To understand Ukala's oeuvre one must read his love poems and pay meticulous attention to them. That way, his appreciation as an enduring and "round" artist will be better appreciated.

But like the paradoxical poet that he is, this essay must end on a paradoxical note. Ukala is not "necessarily a good model for poetry," to borrow Ken Godwin's words which he made in respect of Christopher Okigbo (46). To prove this observation wrong Ukala, perhaps in his next poetry volume must solve the "intellectual problems" as contained at least in his love (or supposedly love) poems "In My Hermitage" or the "problems of poetry-making" generally, again to borrow Godwin's words (46).

NOTES

¹ Journals and books in which Ukala's poems have appeared include *The Muse*, *New Nigerian Verse*, *Voices From the Fringe: An ANA Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry* and *Fate of Vultures: New Poetry of Africa*.

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Coiled flower vase (Glazed stoneware)

CHINYERE NGONEBU

"A Celebration of a Master Craftsman"

- TITLE:** *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*
- AUTHOR:** Ezenwa - Ohaeto
- PUBLISHER:** James Currey, Oxford and Indiana University Press, Indianapolis; 1997.
- PAGES:** 326.

In a 326 paged painstakingly researched work, Ezenwa-Ohaeto presents the first ever biography of Chinua Achebe - Africa's leading novelist, who Jerome Brooks describes as "a necessary angel who has restored for us something that slavery took from us" (p. 281), and Margret Artwood as "a magical writer - one of the greatest of the twentieth century" (p. 283).

A markedly enormous text, containing a detailed index and an extensive bibliography of all of Achebe's publications including essays, talks, interviews, miscellaneous works, and secondary sources, the biography provides invaluable addition to the rich stock of Achebe literature. But unlike other works on Achebe all of which deal on a particular aspect of his life and art, the biography is an exhaustive documentation of Achebe's life in its entirety - as a student, a broadcaster, a novelist, short story writer, poet, art and social critic, teacher, innovator/motivator, and, of course, a husband, and a father.

In this way, the book is not only a preservation of the Achebe legacy but also an integration of Chinua Achebe's experiences, interests, philosophy, intellectual, and political vision. The work brings together, for the first time, the various dimensions of the master craftsman, transversing the depths of his feelings, revealing original inspirations to his works, exploring the motivations, social, political, and cultural influences on his art and

pronouncements. These bare to us, the diverse segments of Achebe's history which he brings to bear on his creative and critical responses, and which Ohaeto says invariably, "leads to his maturation as a writer and editor" (p. 46). For instance, what moves Achebe into writing literature books for children is his discovery that his daughter who was attending a nursery school at that time "was developing very strange notions about race and colour" (p. 105). Upon close scrutiny, Achebe finds out that the books were all "written with a built-in social prejudice" which his little girl absorbed. And so, Achebe looks for books with African orientation to buy for his daughter only to discover, again, the paucity of such books for children in Nigeria. Similarly, the masquerades clearly portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, the letter to Hitler by a boy at Obi Okonkwo's school in *No Longer At Ease*, and the exchange between the missionaries and the villagers concerning whether God had a wife who gave birth to a son Jesus Christ in *Things Fall Apart*, are a few instances of those seeds of curiosity and doubts from Achebe's early life which germinated into passages of literary tension.

These experiences for Achebe are significant because as he asserts in another context - *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* B. Lindfors ed., 1997 - art and the individual exist in an interactive relationship and there is no subordination of one to the other. "Everybody", Achebe asserts, "has art in themselves" (Lindfors, 1997 : 166) and if the artist "is a special kind of person" it is because he is the one who glimpses this interactive relation, who can cause this relation to appear, who can let it to be seen... (Akwanaya, 1997 : 97). How this "interactive relation" combines in the creation of a distinguished writer is the approach the biographer uses to mould the portrait of this internationally acclaimed subject.

Divided into eighteen chapters, the biography spans notable details in Achebe's life starting from his days as a child at Ogidi, the days of "missionaries and masquerades" as the first chapter title indicates. At the University of Ibadan, Achebe's talent as a writer begins to emerge. His earliest surviving work published in the first issue of the *University Herald* is a limerick:

*There was a young man in our Hall
who said that because he was small
His fees should be less*

*Because he ate less
 Than anyone else in the Hall (p. 46).*

The limerick, Ohaeto writes, catches the attention of a visiting English man, Sir Eugene Millington - Drake, who reads it at a poetry session in the university, and, for several months later, on the Radio Brazzaville in Central Africa (p. 46 - 7). From then, Achebe has continued to soar into greater heights of literary creativity.

To a large extent, the biography lends itself to the burning issues that Achebe faces not only in the literary world but also in Nigeria at various times in the nation's turbulent history. There has been trying periods for Achebe, for instance when he had to define his role as a writer - and a pioneer African writer at that - as well as clarify issues on the controversy over appropriate language and subject for African literature. One such controversy led Achebe into making one of his most memorable statements:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding (p.101).

An interesting development in the biography is that it eventually culminates in a celebration of Achebe's accomplishments. One such celebration, a birthday symposium entitled "Eagle on Iroko: Achebe at 60", was organized by the University of Nigeria, during which over a hundred and fifty papers were delivered on this single writer by scholars from all parts of the world (p. 266). In 1993, Achebe is hailed a "living classic" (p. 285) by Colgate University when the institution confers on him his twenty-second honorary degree.

Heinemann Educational Books celebrating thirty years of literary excellence in 1992 declares that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Set the standard for the past three decades and has gone on to become the masterpiece of African literature (p. 283).

For Heinemann Publishers, Achebe occupies primary places in their successes, as he is the motive in the development of African Writers

Series in 1962, and in the discovery of new African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Flora Nwapa, John Munonye, among many others.

Alan Hill of Heinemann confirms this:

Not only did Achebe read every MS, in some cases undertaking editorial work, but he would identify good new authors for the series. His presence was a magnet for would-be writers during the ten years of his editorship (p. 92)... and his critical judgement was the decisive factor in what we published (p. 93).

Hill further acknowledges that "the fantastic sales of Achebe's books, selling by the million, provided the economic basis for the rest of the series" (p. 94).

Flora Nwapa, an author who benefited from Achebe, has this to say:

I started to write Efurú in 1962, completed it that year, sent it to Chinua Achebe who liked it and sent it to Heinemann.... I felt encouraged to go on writing because as soon as I knew it had been accepted for publication I started thinking about my second novel which was Idu and I had even started writing it before Efurú was published. I can say that I was lucky in that I knew Chinua Achebe who read my manuscript in three weeks, even gave it a title and sent it to Heinemann and the next thing that I heard was that it had been accepted (p. 93 - 94).

It is equally in this role as a literary frontiersman that Achebe establishes the literary journal *Okike* in April 1971 to provide "a voice for the African writer" (p. 160),

as an attempt to make sure our case is heard, to make plain that this is a culture with something to offer the world. There are other offerings, other attitudes, other ways of looking at the world; but this is the one we have and we have an obligation to present it for what it is worth (p. 159).

Before this, Achebe had established a publishing house in war-torn Nigeria. Achebe has also shown through his teachings the place of African culture in the world order, and the need to restore dignity to African art - and people generally.

These - and a lot more - are what Chinua Achebe

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have had time to dash to the Hotel toilet and fortify herself with some tissue paper. If the setting had been a market place with no nearby toilet, the scenario could have been plausible. Also, anybody who has ever had to make a getaway knows milling crowd provides the perfect decoy. No woman in her right mind would have acted like Lara, a sitting duck for ridicule. For fiction that purports to be realism, the plot contradicts itself from the very first sentence.

Obaro Ikime's 'Uleniwoman' depicts the life style of the typical un-lettered Nigerian woman slaving from dawn to dusk. She is the woman that confronts us every morning, selling oranges, peppers, or roasting corn to surmount the yawning financial lack in her life. She is a footnote, doormat, slave to a husband's whim. The uncluttered, simple narrative device of this story aptly portrays her life, unedited. Ike Oguine's "Triangle" psychologically explores a human triangle of misery. A weak, alcoholic accountant, victim of his own undecidedness vents his frustrations on his wife and a lady food-contractor. In fluid prose, we encounter a man, who having broken his wife's will, is attracted to an independent, confident woman he can never possess. In frustration, he sadistically sullies her reputation in her neighbourhood.

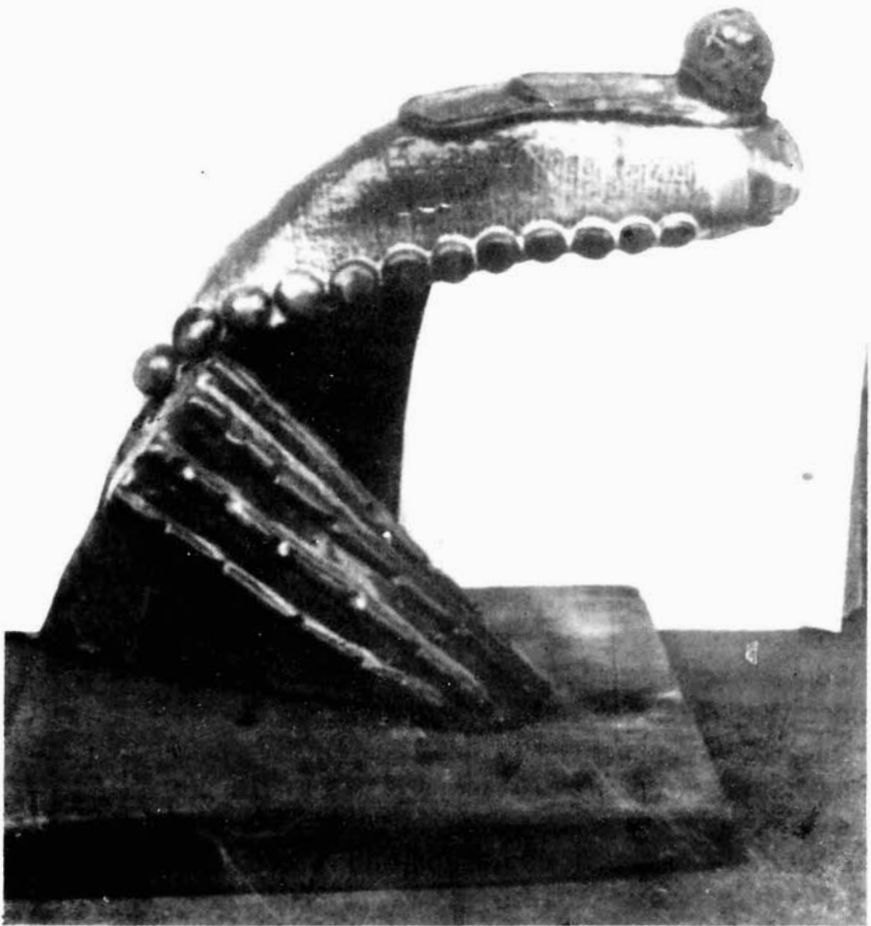
Dan Eferemo's "For Girls Like Me" is a compelling story. The heroine Farida is a little radical feminist born before her time. This first person narrative is set in the north of Nigeria. Like the heroines of Mariama Ba and Nawal El-Sadaawi, Farida seizes her destiny in her own hands and murders the husband forced on her by her father's will. The penis here is an instrument of brutality in the rape of a child. Boye Adefila's "Six inches of Fate" is stylistically ambitious with metaphoric and imageistic sub-titles. However, one wonders why the writer dates a key excerpt February 13, 2012 Ad, 3.00 a.m. when there is nothing futuristic about the plot. The characters and events fit squarely in the present. A nail-in-the-head baby is no future phenomenon. The story is written like a dance of death, the key characters dancing to the raised baton of sub-titles. E.C Osondu's rather marquisan story, 'The Garden of Memory'

celebrates the astounding men who had the privilege of consorting with the spectacular grandmother Janet. Men fell like paper tissues into her trash can.

The second section of the anthology - "Fireballs" - contains stories largely dominated by images of sex and decadence. Their language bubbles with the social life of down-town streets peopled with bars, hip swinging prostitutes, and captive, hollow men. Their main arena is the smoky, the tense, and the riotous. The fact that condoms are not used or mentioned in these sex stories by Maik Nwosu, Dave Njoku, E.C Osondu, Chuks Okei Ohai, Dan Eferemo, and Nduka Otiono is indeed frightening. It raises the issue of the efficacy of the current Aids information campaign in Nigeria. Frank Uche Mowah's "The chewing stick" and Dave Njoku's "Selling Triangles" are outstanding in "Fireballs". Nduka Otiono's "Wings of Rebellion," a story replete with double standards draws the curtain on *We-men*. Adultery is considered a male prerogative while society binds women to faithfulness by traditions like the *iwu* meal - a sanction that forever curses a woman who dares to rebel against her husband sexually.

We-men is clearly worthwhile reading despite its poor proof reading. Sadly, *We-men* still parades the stereotypes typical of Nigerian male writing - the prostitute, the bitch, the sweet mother, and the "mere voiceless appendage to a patriachal culture". But the real cause for worry is the portrayal of Nigerian men by the male writers in *we-men*. Nigerian men are characterised as women beaters, would-be rapists, frequenter of prostitutes, irresponsible fathers, wicked husbands, and inept lovers enslaved by their balls. Since *We-men* claims to be "shorn of pretences and the usual privileging of feminist texts", this scenario is scary. Where is the compassionate, sensitive, responsive Nigerian male worthy of partnering today's Nigerian woman? *We-men* appears to advocate the re-writing of the ancient dictum - "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach" - to read "the way to a man's heart (in Nigeria) is through his genitals". Sex is what's on a man's mind.

A comparative study of *Breaking The Silence*, the anthology of Nigeria women's writing, (precursor of *we-men*) and *we-men* should yield rich rewards.



The king's drummer (Glazed stoneware)

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