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O K I K E

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DON BURNESS

Lament for Innocent Obidiegwu

In Obodoukwu, in the yard of flame of the forest, not far from the tennis courts, bee-eater perches, looking around -

Where is Inno *Oyim*?

In the hills above Onitsha, within sight of the great river at the Ikenga Hotel, friends gather, looking around -

Where is Inno *Oyim*?

At the tennis club, where iroko servers and volleyers stood tall in Nigerian tennis, where Inno and his sons, Joseph and George, played, the players, looking around -

Where is Inno *Oyim*?

In city and village, from Awka to Akokwa, fellow traders speaking of Inno and his *chi* of honour and decency, his chi that refused to bow to the new gods that have ravaged the soul of Nigeria. This is what our village taught us - to be worthy of ancestors. Ordinary people, looking around -

Where is Inno *Oyim*?

Far from Nigeria, Inno's American friend, *onye ocha*, who walked amidst flame of the forest and bee-eater, who played

tennis in Obodoukwu and Onitsha, remembering conversations where masqueraders of memory, where *uli* artists of Nri and Ugonabo wrestled with the old and the new, where language paraded, *onye ocha* laments -

Where is Inno *Oyim*?

OZIOMA IZUORA

Evidence

My friends call me Evi. I am Evi Okoye, a final year medical student. Everybody says I have a lovely name, albeit, unusual, for the part of Nigeria I come from. Funnily, hardly any of them bothers to ask what my full name is.

Evi is short for Evidence. Yes, my parents, my father, to be exact, named me Evidence. I am the evidence of all sorts of contradictory attributes. Of faithfulness and faithlessness. Of love and hatred. Of passion and cold bloodedness. A lot more I could name, if I cared to.

But I'll answer your question, my sweetheart, since you cared to ask. Not like many a village woman who got their answer without asking questions; or many a neighbour who generated a story that satisfied the curiosity of those who looked up to them to know about my origin.

You know my brothers and you're right to wonder how I fit in with them. They are dark, really dark. The richness of their mahogany contrasts sharply with my paleness. The darkness of their eyes, a thousand miles from my blue. So you wonder.

I am the last of a family that has five children in it. I could pass to the uninitiated eye as white. Yet, my mother was a full-blooded Nigerian. Oh, she was fair and pretty. So fair you'd almost think she was an albino. But she could never make a blue-eyed baby with my father, a man of such intolerably possessive dark genes.

That's how I came to be called Evidence.

My mother had won an award sponsored by the British

Council, to do a diploma in epidermiology. She was a nurse at the Teaching Hospital at the time.

The council had a policy against giving awards to single ladies. Many a lady had either absconded on setting foot on the British soil or got married to anyone who had a right of stay, and never came home to be useful to the government for whom the council had undertaken the burden of training them.

Married women were preferred, especially if their husbands had engaging means of livelihood or ones so lucrative it would be unprofitable to abandon altogether. The council could never be sure with the men. With women, they always knew they were taking chances. The deciding factor in each case was whether the benefitting country realized just how much they were indebted to the British Council for. If the Nigerian government begged for it long enough, the council would count that as one more feather to its cap and send off one more lucky devil.

Now, my mother had four sons. Any married woman who could boast of a son was sure to come back. Her place in her husband's family was fairly stable. With four sons, the likes of my mother were prize cows. She was sure to come back! All the council had to worry about was whether or not she was pregnant at the time of departure. The British government was getting damned tired of acquiring citizens by default. They'd even started to snigger about the American government that claimed as citizens, even children born in their air space of some undesirable "barbarian" parents!

There was no doubt in the council official's mind after persistent questioning, that my mother was, indeed, sure of her last menstrual date and could not be unknowingly pregnant. Satisfied, they'd given her clearance to collect a visa off the British High Commission. Never mind that she couldn't pick an airline of her choice. It was clearly B-Cal. She had to be grateful, after all, she would still have chosen it if it came down to a choice between Nigerian Airways and B-Cal. Patriotism was for the comfortable. For those, also, whose governments had

welfare policies. A government that only begged from other governments would be asking for too much if it so much as muted the idea of patriotism.

My mother was billed for a one-year diploma. She went for it. She behaved herself and came back exactly on schedule, one year later. She was a dream British Council fellow. While there, she mixed so well, so eager was she to drink in all of the tenets of the glorified British heritage. She came back, in some aspects, much more conservative than your average Briton. Even her tutors had not intended for her to have taken them quite as seriously as she had. But my mother was an exemplary student, so in all things, she practised what she preached and what she was taught to preach.

Her stiff upper lip, for instance, was so unbending that it took little for me to start an unending spate of chain reactions.

So you ask, how did I come about?

My mother's class was a balance of all self-respecting and contributing member countries of the British Commonwealth. As expected, various shades of both colours and opinions came into play. As these ambassadors had not gone all that way for a purely Commonwealth conference, a handful of the promising generation of Britons were occasionally thrown in to rub minds with the aided countries. Hopefully, they would help to bend the minds of these "rustics" towards the more desirable pear shape.

Excellent students immediately caught on. My mother did. There was Tony Mathews. He, with his girlfriend, Fiona, sought to immerse my mother into the mainstream of British upper class respectability. Mother attended cocktails and dinners in fine restaurants. Or visited families. And paid heavily to visit interesting countryside. Not for my mother all those second-hand clothes and shoes that fascinated her peers who always checked up the current rate of the naira to the dollar before they spent a pound. If she couldn't name the shop in some elitist conversation - the kind she now delighted in - she was not interested.

My mother was proper. So proper that she had thrown away any item that would have constituted excess luggage when she was returning. She shunned all those shameless Nigerian women whose hand luggage were so enormous they would render flight impossible for the big bird, but for the foresight of aeronautical engineers. When she got down at the International Airport in Nigeria, you could pick out my mother from the furtherest end of the waiting lounge. She stood apart from the rest, her dressing and gait screaming prim and proper!

Her luggage was brief and to the point. Not for my mother, the endless trips to clear goods and bribe a thousand and one officials of the Customs and Excise Department and those of the Immigration. The police and the army too. Then the local security at the ports. Etc, etc. She was not a business woman. Anyone who used their stipend as they should was not expected to be able to afford enough to buy anything that was worth shipping. My mother was not greedy.

This she pointed out to the endless throngs of people who realized then that they were our friends and took out time to come and welcome her back. Many of them had not deemed it necessary to disturb our family unduly in my mother's absence. And anyway, it was necessary to give honour to whom it was due. For this, at least, I praised my mother. She had dealt them a blow I wish I could have dealt them myself.

The endless courtesy call soon ended. Name-calling began. My father was in the middle of all this. He was undecided whether to pitch camp with my mother or to give in to consanguineous sentiments and stay with his relations. Some of my mother's too. Grandma, for one, did not understand why her daughter should visit the very home of 'George' and let her go to her grave in rags! There were also mutual acquaintances of my parents! Mother remained adamant. In the end, my father had to doff his cap to her. But that in itself was belittling: Mother always got her way in everything.

She had had no doubts when this scholarship thing started. The questionnaires sent by the British Council were filled

in by my father. But it was my mother who suggested the words. Well, wasn't my father free to reject suggestions? But he did not. It was not that Mother was bossy. My father would be the first one to tell you she wasn't. She was just lucky father didn't object too much. She merely filled in gaps. Mother was soon bursting out of her clothes, obviously pregnant.

'Ah', people speculated, 'one for the road!'

'A gist from Obodo Oyibo!' How right.

I came right on schedule! Lovely, bubbly-blue-eyed bundle!

'My bundle of joy!', cried my father, really meaning it. 'My lovely daughter. The crown of my life! The evidence of my perpetual torture. No one will deny me the pleasure of the last laugh! I shall name you Evidence!' This was the one evidence my mother could not contest. And finally, my father had his way. My mother lived with her conscience. And her stiff upper lip!

CHUKWUDI NJOKU

The Words of Yesterday

The words of yesterday haunt
Us, their permanence and enduring
Echo make us bite
Our lips, for the words of yesterday
Brought us here

The laughters of yesterday make
Us cringe and cry, and
The cries of yesterday make us
Laugh, laugh at *their*
Recurrent ignorance and
Short sightedness

In today's words
We are laying out the folded
Contours of the laughters of tomorrow
We are shaping the curve of
The cries of tomorrow
The undulating graph of
The frowns of tomorrow

It will be a cry
For *us*
It will be a laughter
To our arrogant foibles

For we are still trading
And bartering
The words of yesterday.

(Leuven, 19 November, 2000).

METAMORPHOSIS

The Power of the Story

The power of the story
Is that
It walks like us
Eats like us
Runs like us
Believes like us
Is betrayed like us
Is deceptive like us
Cries like us
Doubts like us
Dances like us
Dreams like us
Struggles like us
Fears like us
Perspires like us
Laughs like us

The story invades
    Our neighbourhood
The story steals into
    Our locked hearts
The story pries open
    Our tangled minds
And drives courageously through
    the very heart of our mixed motivations
And explores the foundations of our many fences
The story is a snapshot
    Of the intimacy of our bedrooms
An open door revealing the piles of files in our office
    A window peering into

Our study and the ridges of our farms
A keyhole view of our family,
Our country, our school, our teacher, our own father,
Our friends, our myriad enemies
For the story is our photo album
and the diskette copy of our memory
There is me, and there you
Peeping out of every story

The power of the story
Is that
It is us

It is us wearing
A different name
It is us living
In a different place
It is us occupying
A different space
It is us
It is us
It is us

And yet,
And yet, my brothers and sisters
Let us pretend
Yes, we must pretend
It is fiction.

(Leuven, 19 November, 2000.)

The Harmattan is Like Us

The harmattan is on its annual carnival
Visiting every hut
With that broad smile
And those sprightly legs
And, with practised hands, sweeping
The village pathways, soothingly caressing
My hair, peeping through my wrappers
And touching every pore of me
With that tender love unique to this lovely eager
Visitor, blowing
Gently into the glowing fireside and
Roasting my corn and pears, listening
Attentively to our fireside gossip

The children are out on the village
Paths, clad in their nakedness, spreading out
Their hands like the princely eagle gliding through the sky
Eyeing the dry bushes for timid prey
Their eyes shut to a slit, allowing
The harmattan breeze to massage their exposed bodies
Their hearts full of throaty songs

Funny creature, the harmattan is full
Of play like a spoilt child. Sometimes, its temper
Changes swiftly, and its lashes are violent
Like those of our elementary school headmaster
Filled with sharp sand grains ... then, we, children, must
Stand still and be patient with its violent temper
For in a short while it is peaceful again, soothing, loving
Caring, tender, as if asking for our forgiveness

For its short temper
And occasional naughtiness

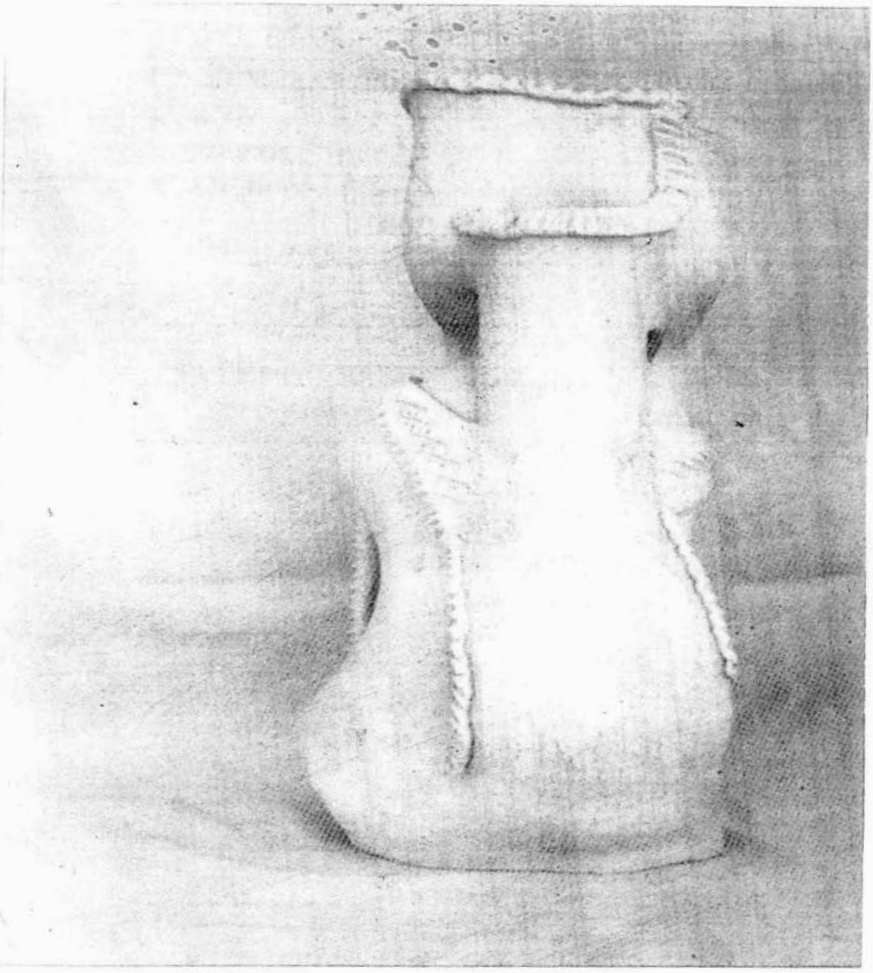
The harmattan understands us
For the harmattan is like us
Full of goodness and full
Of treachery
The harmattan is like us
With sharp eyes and keen ears
With a tender heart and an intelligent
Head
The harmattan is like us
Full of kindness and full of craftiness
The harmattan is like us
Understanding and unpredictable
Plain and mysterious
Coming and going, coming
And going
A member of our community and a member
Of that other community from where it comes
To us and to which it returns after visiting us

Sometimes, I wonder
Does the harmattan have a home?
Is he or she a nomad, roving from place
To place, doing the same things she does here to wherever
She goes
Or does she change her character
According to people she meets?
I never stop wondering, is she or he
Like the masquerades
Appearing in their seasons, colourful, full of life,
Full of song, and when the season is gone, retiring to the land
Of the aged spirits to await
another season of pomp and pageantry?
For the harmattan is always *ukwuoma,* and meets

us when the barns are full, full especially of the delicious corn
for the harmattan dances with gusto
for the harmattan has many songs and tunes
and you can hear the pipes join its song
with their soulful flutes
and you can hear the stately palms
swaying their heavy heads and long hairs gently
in tune with the irresistible rhythm of the cheerful harmattan
and you can hear the birds joining this happy band
weaving in their unending melodious love-songs
and lullabies
for the harmattan seems to urge us all to laugh
and postpone, if we cannot forget, our worries
for even lonely elders have a rich smile creasing their wrinkled
faces when the harmattan blows its horn and roves
our neighbourhood with its measured gaiety
and sometimes, its attractive carelessness ... for the harmattan
has a habit of spreading fire,
for sport or out of treachery, I do not know
all I know is that some people cry out their hearts
in this recklessness and insensitive hobby of the harmattan
the harmattan is like us
going and coming
coming and going
going and coming
is it the same harmattan every year?
I know not
It may be the father this year
And the mother next year
Or one of the sons or daughters in another year
For each harmattan has a different face
And different temperament
But they all resemble
For the harmattan is like us
Coming and going
And, I suspect, the harmattan

Has a soft spot for us
Coming and going
For the harmattan is like us.

(-Leuven, 6 June, 2000.)



UNTITLED

Suicide

Every door
Told his worried steps
"Hang in there!"
And he finally did.

(-Leuven, 1 June, 2001.)

Old Woman

Trembling hands clutching a stick
Trembling with responsibility
Stepping gingerly
On shifting grounds
Bearing the weight of a life time

(-Leuven, 30 December, 2001.)

GEORGE NYAMNDI

Bate Besong's Requiem for the Last Kaiser: A Promethean Reading

I. OF ACADEMIC ESCAPISM

> Literary intellectuals have been able to purchase a relatively untroubled and marginally comfortable life by keeping their mouths shut about politics, by insulating scholarly and critical discussion of literature from any serious connections to the contradictions within the social formation. The academic study of literature has become a discipline, a profession, the condition for the possibility of which is the rigorous exclusion of the non-literary from its discourse.

It is with this observation that Sprinker (*Diacritics*, Fall 1982: 57-58) prefaces his critical assessment of one of America's leading Marxist theoreticians, Fredric Jameson, and of his epochal work *The Political Unconscious*. We observe in Sprinker's statement the literary intellectuals' aversion for attitudes that rock the societal boat. They have earned for themselves by varying artifices, a retreat padded by innocuous cerebral indulgences. About life and the cruel games ordering it, they have but precious little to say. If they must venture out of their sanctimonious towers and risk a statement, then such a statement must settle imperceptibly in the main flow of the tempers of the moment.

It is an interesting detail that Sprinker commences his study of a Marxist, therefore active, thinker with an objurgation of speculative academism. The purpose of this reproof is to

obtain a trading of literary priggishness for some measure of ideological fervour. Sprinker sees the literary critic as a man with a vocation to "identify the active sites of existing political struggle" (71), to ensure precisely that serious connection to the contradictions within the social formation which alone will enable his text "to play its part in political praxis" (Jameson 219). For, as Jameson makes clear, "everything is in the final analysis political" (20).

To the extent, therefore, that everything is political, academic escapism of the kind condemned by Sprinker consorts but poorly with the essence of Marxism. Because Marxist Ideology apprehends the world in conflictual terms, it has very little time for a patience with unfocused speculations, intended solely to gratify the mind. Such speculations rarely enfold the resolve, the exercise of will, which is the hallmark of prometheanism.

One may want to know what an epistemological foray into the American brand of Marxism has to do with African drama and for that matter the drama of a Cameroonian playwright, however much he may be noted as a playwright on the continent.

If, while recognising that literature is "an essential part of the experience of a society-a way of dramatising its myths, ordering its insights and sensibility, celebrating its values" (Bradbury xi), we acknowledge equally "literature's numinous or universalising power, its strange ways of transcending the environment from which it derives" (Bradbury xi), then the community of concern between American Marxism and African theatre, Jameson and Besong shows limpidly through the vast geo-cultural divide. The distance between place and mind becomes crushed out of significance by the fraternity of intention between the two worlds and the two names.

Jameson is a Marxist thinker, Besong a marxist dramatist, one a befitting pathfinder in the other's reach for the sanctuary of Marxist ideology. To situate the ideological matrix underlying Besong's dramatic production is to resolve the fundamental

problem of identity.

In profiling the work of Bate Besong, the Nigerian - based critic Matumamboh says every writer is a writer in politics, but what distinguishes one writer from another is whose side of the political game he belongs to — the oppressor or the oppressed. (*West Africa* 1999:720). Matumamboh then states that "Bate Besong is a writer who unabashedly identifies with the underprivileged of society against the exploiting ruling class" (720) Besong's writings, therefore, emphasize the combative mission of the artist in a situation of unbalanced social co-ordinates. His own particular method consists in x-raying the "phthisic plasma" (Besong, *The Grain* 19) of society, in dismantling, so to speak, the social fabric, in order to locate the disorders in its structure. Besong is an angry playwright. His ire, always intemperate, is fired by social injustice. He refuses to be blinkered or to turn the other cheek. Instead, he lashes out, tirelessly, at those in society who mar rather than make: politicians, the bourgeoisie, administrators and the literati. He castigates their ill-doings so that a transformation can occur.

Our objective in this paper is to review Besong's image as an ideologue and aesthete so that a new status is fashioned for him which is a fitting reflection of his contribution to the drama tradition in Africa. To do this, we will investigate Prometheanism, as both an ideological and an aesthetic argument and see how our finding illumines Besong's art. We will juxtapose Prometheanism and Marxism for greater insights into Besong's world view. Finally, we will posit a view of Besong as a relevant voice in African drama and aesthetics.

ii THE PROMETHEAN PARADIGM

The dialectics of societal transformation returns the analytical discourse resolutely to the realm of Prometheanism.

Prometheus is one of the most academically visited of myths and this is so because of its almost inexhaustible potential for interpretative insights. According to Greek mythology, Prometheus, son of the Titan Iapetus, made mankind out of clay,

taught him many arts, and stole fire for him from heaven. To punish Prometheus, Zeus, king and father of gods and men, chained him to a rock in the Caucasus, where a vulture fed each day on his liver, restored regularly in the night.

The retributive import of this myth is of little moment to us. What we retain as significance is the theft of fire. This act by Prometheus engendered a number of symbols whose ontological powers suffuse creativity in a transcendental way.

Donoghue (1973) seized the occasion of the T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent in October 1972 to essay a typology of the imagination. This was an attempt to describe certain types of imagination active in literature. Among these was one in particular which he called Promethean. To Donoghue, imagination is central to the Promethean design. This is an important premise, because right away, it says something about the source, the mainspring, of the Promethean motivation. This motivation is lodged in the imagination. The Promethean act is not dictated by any external force but is fashioned, hatched and executed from within.

Donoghue sees the myth of Prometheus, in its simplest form, as telling a story to account for the origin of human consciousness. Prometheus stole this consciousness from Zeus and gave it as a gift to men, ostensibly in the form of fire. Since this theft, the Promethean imagination has always been defiant, theft in itself being the prototype act of defiance. This defiance at certain times expresses itself as revolution, as a mode of action which delights in tension and struggle, in the exercise of will. Conformism and immobility are thus loathsome to the Promethean imagination, an imagination which is never completely at home in the orthodoxy of a settled existence but is always restless, always insisting on transfiguring the given world until a new world rises in its place. This Promethean passion for transformation burns persistently and seems insatiable. Donoghue says that the Promethean hero is "one whose desires belong to another world than the one he inhabits, and often that other world is attested to by those desires and by nothing else at

all producible. Every movement the hero makes must first overcome custom and invent a new kind of gesture" (57) A typology of the Promethean imagination would therefore be an explication of the several ways in which men have risen above themselves by the possession of consciousness. This is the quintessence of the Promethean manifesto, the ideological framework which prompts and conditions action.

The ideological framework finds artistic expression in a certain number of aesthetic features which make the Promethean text readily identifiable. One of these aesthetic features has to do with the writer himself. He is generally an artist with a towering personality, and deadly charisma. His names often have more charismatic aura than the sum total of his works. D.H. Lawrence, Milton, Sartre, Soyinka, Ngugi: all these artists dwarf any single product of their genius.

The personality holds a strong sway over the formal nature of the text. Among its most visible influences is the truculence which Donoghue identifies between the writer and experience (20). The archetypal Promethean text is always tense, always more deeply responsive to harsh themes than to genial themes, to the arbitrary than to the reasonable (53). To these writers, writing is a revolutionary act and, one which requires a dynamic syntax, a syntax of process and fulfilment (73). They are ready to take any liberties with the language to conform it to their purpose. We therefore observe in the genuine Promethean an inclination to free his aesthetic register from normative limitations.

iii *REQUIEM FOR THE LAST KAISER*: PROMETHEAN CLAIMS.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser (1991 subsequently *RLK*) enacts the drama of an African republic, Agidigidi, under black rule. H.R.H. Baal Njunghu Akhikirikii, the conceited potentate and his coterie of sycophantic hangers-on keep the masses in a condition of misery through the ruse of demagoguery and repression. The church, the army, the police and white colonialist agents all join

forces with the brutal leadership to frustrate any attempt by the people to attain freedom.

The mounting suffering provokes a groundswell of protest under the brave championship of Woman, the intrepid female revolutionary leader, and progressively the tables are turned. Ahkikikrikii and his accomplices are swept away by a popular uprising and the action ends with the masses celebrating in music the birth of a new dawn. Symbolically, the play starts with Ahkikikrikii in a half-open coffin. The mood at this beginning stage is eerie, dark, violent. This first fragment ends with the coffin closing and entombing the tyrant to the accompaniment of funerary music, total darkness and then a final eclipse.

The rehearsal at the beginning becomes at the end the tragic finale for the regime. Ahkikikrikii blows off his own head after which day breaks and music permeates the air. The action has come full circle: darkness has succumbed to light, tyranny to popular governance. Throughout the struggle, light holds centre stage as the ultimate reward for victory.

Of all Besong's plays, it is in *RLK* that the Promethean temperament is most incisive. For sure, his other plays, notably *Obasinjom Warrior, The Death of the Most Talkative Zombie,* and *The Banquet* all provide stages upon which the playwright equally seeks a Promethean redemption for man. In all these plays, Besong "signals and boldly foregrounds what he considers obnoxious and detestable in human nature, blowing it up out of proportion in order to seize the attention of the public" (Mutamamboh, 720). Besong summons in these different productions a concern for human welfare through an impeachment of destructive forces. But this concern receives added power and immediacy in *RLK,* for it is in this play, more perhaps than in any other, that are dramatized with particular intensity the conflicts of integrity, light and primeval naivety, on the one hand, and on the other, narcissistic colonialism, corruption and the dungeon. A bridge emerges here between the redemptiveness of Prometheanism and the ideological combativeness of Marxism. And consciousness in the mortar of

this bridge, for consciousness is the one trait which the two sides of the bridge share in a fundamental way, the one trait which on either side of the bridge constitutes the launching pad towards a new (in other words, transfigured) society.

iv THE MARXIST STATEMENT

Marxist dialectics is sustained in *RLK* by a triangular construct made of (1) white colonialist agents, (2) their black bourgeois surrogates, and (3) facing the demonic pull of these two forces, the masses.

RLK dramatizes history as the chronicle of cultural aberrations. It returns to and explores that particular moment in a society's experience when European culture arrived, toppled African value systems and, in their place, planted the politics of money. Appropriately, therefore, the agents are incarnated by a French ambassador and a Swiss banker. The French ambassador bodies forth the European causality in the drama of the African situation. More particularly, he emblematizes a specific form of European influence in Africa, here the French. In him are captured the domineering cynicism, the fawning contempt and the sneering disregard that stamped the French colonial mind. To him, Africans, all of them, from the apes at the top to the wretched down below are embarrassments to nature's scheme of things. They are all 'nigger punks" (26), "insane beasts" (28). His anticommunism is as virulent as his contempt for the African native is unremitting. He views Djugashvili Stalin (a thinly-veiled reference to John Fru Ndi of the Social Democratic Front) as the head of an Evil Empire who hates god Francois Mitterand and the French. He must therefore be destroyed, and along with him, all such threats to the status quo as the national conference, "an enemy to be killed on sight' (25). As a vintage product of French capitalism and as its agent in African, the Ambassador does not miss any opportunity of planting the French flag on the slightest area of economic promise. For example, he claims the oil resources tapped by SONARA as the "oil of solidarity between civilization and Agidigidi" (25). The civilization he is referring

to here is western, but more particularly French.

The Swiss Banker, the other agent of western exploitation, is more immediately concerned with money. He shares the French Ambassador's strong hatred for communism: "Only a messiah can save this part of the Kingdom from the epilepsy of Marxist-Leninism and Stalinist catastrophes which work through oppositionist epilepsies" (7). The hatred leads the banker quite naturally to a similar condemnation of all the forms of democratic revolutionism and especially of the national conference, which he sees as a leprosy that has no place in emerging nations, and which tried leaders always avoid (24). The underlying ideological motivation for this statement is revealed by a certain number of contextual determinants. Five such determinants readily come to mind: (1) The particular emerging nation (here Cameroon) in the throes of a popular clamour for a national conference. (2) National conferences have already taken place in other emerging African nations (Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Tchad, Benin) and have demonstrated their ability to reveal malpractices and in certain cases (Congo Brazzaville and Benin) have led to the overthrow of the regime. (3) The speaker (here a Swiss Banker) is a white hawk preying on tender African economies. (4) In Cameroon, the popular call for a national conference had been summarily dismissed by the regime as *sans objet*. (5) As predators come to abuse the naivety of African leaders, European business and financial agents are always minded to confirm these leaders in their absolutist delusions.

But if the two Europeans share the same capitalist belief in matters of money and who should own it, they however show little or no readiness to do business together. In fact, they are highly suspicious of each other and their relationship is always traversed by a strong undercurrent of rivalry and mutual distrust. On balance, though, the Swiss banker appears more realistic than his French rival. He advocates democracy in the developing world as the only way out for the West, a show of pragmatism which unnerves the French Ambassador considerably, causing him to lash back nervously: "I'm not gonna leave my turf and be

jumped by another gang. And get me buster: It's your gang against mine" (27). In this game of gangs, the worsted side is neither the French nor the Swiss but Agidigidi. The masses in *RLK* are ruled by a tyrant who boasts of his godlike attributes. In his frenzied utterances at the play's opening, he says of himself, "I am the consciousness, the Temp and Heart-Throb of Iduote... I am the Universal pedagogue and Pointing Rod... I'm in all places at the same time" (1). This claim of omnipotence is also bulwarked by his associates. The political high priest Atangana considers him as a "divine master who will transfer the United Nations Headquarters to our most blessed paradise" (2).

There is something ludicrous about this portrait which only the conceited potentate himself seems not to apprehend. Even his name, Ahikikikrikii, is a cornerpiece in the entire satirical structure.

The real man is presented by the dramatist himself in a stage comment. "At 61 he is crazy, ruthless and immensely cunning" (22). These are the traits which the French Ambassador salutes in hailing the man as "a distinguished genius of politics"(22). This salute betrays the lopsidedness of the criteria with which the colonialists informed their support for African leaders, and by the same token unbares their causal role in much of Africa's turmoil. A mind that extols ruthlessness and cunning cannot mean well.

The man described by the Ambassador as a distinguished genius of politics is indeed a ruthless tyrant, a thief and murderous robber (70), a dwarfish thief in a messiah's robe (70). He is in the eyes of the Swiss banker, "an impenetrable negro-a drugged fool" (23).

Such a tumoured psyche naturally fathers a hideous monster of a regime. Ahkikikrikii's dispensation is at once a "corrupt and tyrannical kleptocracy" (20), "a government without justice" (70), a "regime made up of th evilest rogues and traitors" (20), "a two-headed monster with four eyes of rigour and moralization" (2). The logical by-product of such a demonic set-up is a hollow propaganda which breeds distrust and is divorced

from the interests of the people, from their daily needs (3). This clique is not sustained by any sense of autonomy. They are not masters of the situation but the visible tools of western colonialist designs, "willing appendages of capitalism" (12). A reckless system such as this one naturally causes society to lose its venerableness. Agidigidi is thus said to be a country "suffering from kwashiokor" (27), "a sad country" (23) in which the passive people (33) "are without food or hope" (5). The state of decrepitude is such that "All the waters in the ocean can never clean the filth in (the) country" (8). Whatever freedom Ahkikikikii's grip spares the besieged people is but "freedom of the cage" (10). The sentinels standing watch over this cage are the church, "the staunchest ally of those who treat our workers the way they treat their exploughs" (13), and the army and the police "which behaves against its own people as if it was an army of occupation" (2).

In the story of *Promeheus Unbound* by Aeschylus, the characters Power and Violence are seen dragging Prometheus. Having been rivetted to a rock by Hephaestus, Prometheus declares solemnly that one cannot fight against the power of necessity. Fire is a necessity in man's life, for it teaches all the crafts necessary for survival. In the troubled universe of *RLK*, power and violence belong on one side, necessity and hope on the other. Over these two camps reigns static tyranny to which the two forces react differently. Whereas the regime and its mentors struggle to protect and strengthen this tyrannical status quo, the people on the other hand struggle to bring it down through a revolt. This revolt in the Promethean sense is the necessary first step in the process of self-consciousness. The masses have been held in the darkness of slavery for too long and now a new need is felt for the overthrow of this slavery.

This new need is incarnated by Woman and the student. Woman emblematizes the Promethean ideal of revolt against tyranny. It is she who provides the basic fillip to the people's cause, for she possesses a strong mind and a will of steel. The climactic exchange with Etat-Major André Abessolo, career toe-

breaker and torturer, crystallizes into focus her stout refusal to let evil have its way:

> Our children won't be hungry anymore. We won't see our old folks all twisted up with the rheumatism of injustice; the water of exploitation running down their faces. We are here to destroy the robbers in paradise! They have created their own Robben Island. Their separate Amenities Acts. But soon all that will be over (21).

The picture here is of Zeus' men before Prometheus's bold stand. Hunger, injustice, and exploitation are the natural fare of a people with neither will nor hope. Like their mythical counterparts, the masses in *RLK* are deficient in combativeness. They sit and suffer. And the grimmer the outrage against them the more resigned seems their acceptance. Dr. Akonchong, one of the unemployed academics, underlines the blend of Orwellian prying and Stalinian brustishness that dogs the lives of the masses when he says it is easier to walk on water than to express one's mind in Agidigidi (37).

Woman is alone, in this atmosphere of hushed surrender, to spark off the revolt susceptible of effecting a salutary mutation in society. She has seen unbridled power and its corollary violence in action. She has observed kleptocrats create for the people a nightmare beyond even their worst dreams (26). This alliance of totalitarian oppression and daylight rape of the land has led to the logical conclusion in her mind that there can be no way for the people outside of revolutionary action (8). The courage, the daring, required to forge ahead with the revolution is fed by the looming threat of perdition. The rulers do not care for the masses. They use brute force to stay in power, with the rest of the population steeped in misery. The people are therefore left with no other option but to take change of their own destiny. This much Woman cautions: "we fool ourselves if we believe that these parasites care for us!" (58).

Picking up and giving meaning to their own lives is one way in which the people attempt to ascertain their own consciousness. Woman's inspiring leadership has caused the scales of ignorance to fall from their eyes. And the ignominies they see have stung them into revolt. They have now found a new voice and they use it to summon a speedy reparation: "Get rid of the robbers! They people must govern now! (58).

In the classical Marxist ideological scenario of *RLK,* this point of popular anagnorisis veers the final resolution into sight. The popular uprising hastens the demise of Ahkikikrikii's fatuous reign. The army, heretofore his main ally, deserts him. Assnought Ngongo, his literary exegete, commits suicide. The French Ambassador Cracker Crooker faints and (apparently) never regains consciousness. The leader's own suicide by a gunshot comes as little surprise. The people win and the Marxist ideal of popular governance is upheld. It is "Poet as Mandela" who writes the epitaph on the tombstone of Ahkikikrikii's convulsive dispensation:

> "Your government has always been above the people. You've reached the pinnacle of slaughter and desolation where you mocked the memory of the slain. The people are above government! Your regime was made up of the vilest rogues and traitors" (70).

RLK celebrates the death of a potentate whose reign negated collective happiness and progress. It condemns the pernicious music of colonialism in Africa's dance of self consumption. The play is clear and conclusive in its indictment of Western materialism as the remote controller of the cataclysms in Africa. This is why it upholds nationalism as a fundamental requirement in Africa's quest for genuine freedom. Leaders of the kind portrayed in the play can only lead their countries further away from freedom because they have no care for the people's interests. Much of the play's overt didacticism is meant

to enforce this point.

> The off-stage voices bring all their choric energy and wisdom to bear with insistence on the virtues of leadership:
>
> A leader must be honest and a well-meaning nationalist! (64)
> A leader must ensure total and genuine independence for his country!(65).
>
> Leadership means responsibility!(65)

This repeated reference to good leadership underscores the playwright's recognition that the destiny of a people is dependent in the final analysis on the quality of its leaders. African leaders must be able to protect African countries from the destruction of Western materialism in very much the same way as Prometheus protected men from Zeus's rage. Like Prometheus, once again, these African leaders must steel themselves in courage, selflessness and an inexhausible store of will. This is the final message which Woman articulates in RLK.

The fact that Ahkikikrikii shoots himself is symbolic, as the act augurs a new and transfigured future for Agidigidi. The grounds for optimism are strengthened when Ngongo, one of the pillars of the regime, is remorseful: "We the writers of Agidigidi crucified Truth. We nurtured the tumour that has eaten us"(65).

Although the human conflict is explored and resolved in Marxist terms, the feeling still abides that what is on trial is not so much the principle of capitalist leadership as its mission.

In an authoritative statement on capitalism's new leadership role, Brink Lindsay, while admitting that no social system can guarantee happiness for everybody, nevertheless places capitalism among the right ways forward for humanity. He argues that the great innovators of capitalism possess a species of genius no less real than the genius that animates great works of art, or great discoveries of science, or great acts of

statesmanship. They are persons, he says, whose vision carried them beyond the range of familiar beacons and into new worlds of their own making (Topic, 202). Lindsey identifies the motive force behind this vision to be ambition, defined by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* as "thymos, or the desire for recognition" (Topic 202). Fukuyama bases his philosophy of history on a version of the state of nature in which people battle, not for simple self-preservation but to have their dignity as human beings recognised by others (Topic, 202). The recognition of this dignity can be gained through self-actualization, a concept used by psychologist Abraham Maslow to refer to "the basic need of human beings to realize their potential — to develop talents and abilities and then use them (Topic, 202).

Dignity and self-actualization are the aims and goals, of 20th century capitalism. From a mythological perspective, they derive their original impetus from Prometheus's salutary act without which man could never have attained consciousness, the first step to self-actualization. RLK's basic argument adheres to this same ordering, for it places consciousness at the centre of any attempt at self-actualization. This argument is grounded in a well-wrought complex of ideological and aesthetic interactions. From an aesthetic standpoint, the universe of RLK is formless. The play knows neither neatness nor order. It does not adhere to the classical pattern of acts and scenes. Instead, it is a free mélange of fragments of scenes, initiations, flashbacks and movements. This is as it should be, for where the Marxist is concerned, form is ideologically suspect. Terry Eagleton (1997:96) says that one of the aims of Marxists is to liberate criticism from the magic spell of that liberal dogma which sees art as organising the chaos of reality, as imposing form on the formless, order on the amorphous. For all that, *RLK* is not a contrived "chaosmos", to use Joyce's famous word (*Finnegan's Wake*, 81). The play's very formlessness is in itself form. To cite George Boas, "the formless is usually that form for which we have no name" (281).

We may not have any unifying name for the formlessness of *RLK* but it is possible to conjecture for it a series of metaphorical promptings, especially within the Marxist logic of class struggle. Basic among these promptings are: despotism, tyranny, embezzlement, mass elimination, economic butchery, political prestidigitation. These are definitely not the ingredients of any relieving order. Mouse Peckham (1965:46) says that all good art is basically disturbing. It is so, we think, because such art sets out, in the manner of a typical Flaubert novel, "to disorder our expectations of coherence" (Ruthven, 7).

The underlying temper of formlessness is restlessness. Restlessness is a fundamental Promethean trait; it is also a basic feature of Besong's art. Sesan Ajayi on the dust cover of *RLK* says "Besong is a restless artist in search of new forms to depict the extremes of physical incarceration and the menace of time's gadflies". The play's Orphic appeal lies precisely in this power it has to confront us with its sheer presence, a presence constitutive of the principal metaphor in which are locked the social disorders of an age and a place.

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Terry Eagleton remarks that the history of European philosophy since the Enlightenment has paid great attention to aesthetic questions. He argues that the category of the aesthetic assumes the importance it does in modern Europe because in speaking of art it also speaks of such other matters as freedom and legality, self-determination, autonomy, particularity and universality, which are at the heart of the middle class's struggle for political hegemony (3). He founds his governing hypothesis on the belief that an enquiry into aesthetics can yield a deeper understanding of the mechanism by which political hegemony is currently maintained and this as a necessary prerequisite for effective political action (12). This statement underscores the link between aesthetics and ideology. *RLK* makes no secret of its revolutionary ambitions. It is a dramatized allegory of the condition of Cameroon under the suffocating grip of an unconscionable regime, and of the need for resistance. There is here a series of motivated similarities

between the world of the text and that of a particular historical period and physical place. The world within the text and that outside it can confront each other without difficulty. For example, Iduote, the capital of Agidigidi, is Etoudi read backwards. Etoudi is home to the presidential palace in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon. There is also reference to Lake Nyos, Sonara, Ngomezap, all real places with dire connotations.

This cultural background of the text confirms the play's mimetic commitments and lends topical relevance to its concerns. The title, already, prepares the reader for a discourse of finality and disposal, for the definitive passing away of a man and his time. Requiem conjures up the death song, society's funeral response to a burnt-out age. More precisely, the song is addressed to a man, a ruler, the last kaiser, that is to say the last of such authoritarian monarchs. To this extent, the title is cathartic in its prognosis for it announces the purging of society of the ills of despotism. We can thus successfully defend the play as an allegorical ideology. Translated into political terms, it is a plea for toleration and liberalism. It demonstrates that totalitarianism inevitably relies on mass murder to impose its rule and therefore can only increase human misery. But more importantly, it stakes the moral claim that the collective good always wins over individual greed. Witness Abessolo's answer to Ahkikikrikii who in his climactic dimentia preaches a scorched earth policy:

> Njunghu, you can't go against the will of the people: the voiceless, the mangled, the wretched and the deceived whose strength lies in their unity.... They are the divined majority, the steel of Revolution! Where should I begin? It is a battle of the entire nation against the dark forces of tyranny, tribalism and greed which we incarnated (69).

This statement makes clear that *RLK* advocates a revolt rather

than a revolution, since it addresses a vigorous exhortation in the direction of the masses to end their oppression. We are here in the mainstream of militant drama, of the drama of conscientization whose tradition in Africa is coterminous with the birth of nationalism and which today devotes its essential energy to investigating the rapport between ideology and class struggle.

These considerations of a doctrinal order are given artistic formulation by Besong's particular aesthetic choices. In the manner of a bona fide Promethean, he causes a severe tension to order the relationship between story and style. One is conscious, all through the play, of a vexed attitude to language and of an incriminatory use of ideolects. Besong causes lexical boundaries to yield under his inquisition and so reveal areas of meaning and metaphorical associations that are as much enrichments of the central concerns of the work. The outcome is what Christopher Butler calls culturally salient lexical structures, a fine example of which occurs on p.1 in H.R.H. Ahkikikrikii's bloated presentation of himself:

> I'll be in politics till I die.... I give small *bonai* power... one small *bonai* power.... shege dan banzaar.... I go come day. Amot, za-a di money. Ma-a ding Sonara money.... oweh, money mbeng, Wa ding money? Bebele zamba-a!... La tricherie, la demagogie, (sic) la traquerie.... all mixed together.... le vandalisme.... cooked together, then you know me! Essamba! Essamba! Essamba!

To the reader unfamiliar with present-day Cameroonian reality, this may well sound like the precursory jabber of madness. But the informed mind soon identifies the codes on which the text is built, and which are at once linguistic and contextual. Linguistically, the codes derive their essence from standard English (I'll be in politics till I die), Hausa (Shege dan banzaar), pidgin English (I go come dey), Beti (ma'a ding Sonara

money), and French (La triecherie, la demagogie, la traquerie). Contextually, the codes refer to present-day Cameroon, a country rife with ethnicity, greed, falsehood and inter-tribal hatred. Reference to oil money is made in Beti and reference to cheating, demagogy and harassment is made in French. These two languages and the different peoples they represent — in the case of French, both the colonialist and Cameroonians of French expression — are made to shoulder responsibility for the ills they articulate. And so we can infer that the Betis know where the country's oil revenue is, while the French and Francophone Cameroonians are to be held responsible for the overall decay of morals in society.... The content of the English expression shows that Anglophone Cameroonians whom these expressions represent are hazy presences on the horizon of Cameroonian reality: in fine, expendable adjuncts. No clear-cut goal seems to be fixed either by them or for them. They burn away their energies pursuing chimerical political ideals while the substance of political struggle—power—is held in quiet enjoyment by Francophones and metropolitan France.

These issues Besong addresses with comprehensible anger, but he does not for that matter allow his art to be mangled by disillusionment. He is essentially a positive artist, one whose vision of society is too radiant to accommodate the soot of injustice. Radiant, that is to say, like the fire of consciousness which Prometheus gave man to light his way to earthly self-actualization.

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OZIOMA ONUZULIKE

Death of a Refugee Boy

"Sabo-Ajamgbadi-Sabo-ooo", shouted two steel-faced bus conductors in a sing-song manner, as the *molue* bus continued groaning loudly. One of them kept jumping about like a traffic warden in a busy junction, sweating profusely under the mid-day sun. He was half-naked, displaying a bushy beard, or *biabia*. "Sabo-Ajamgbadi-Sabo-oo! Sabo-Ajamgbadi-Sabo-ooooo!" he shouted.

Madam soon made up her mind to enter this one, clutching strongly at the base of her purse. The *molue* bus was like all of its kind in Lagos. It looked like a mobile coffin with extended metal sheets seeking a cloth to tear or human flesh to slice through. Madam looked around and located a vacant seat in the back row. Then, she surveyed the bus casually, deliberately avoiding the faces of fellow passengers. She was tired and scared of seeing the troubled faces of people at the crossroads. Soon, her attention was caught by a graffiti on the roof of the bus. There were diverse scribbles in white chalk. Several parts were missing. But she could still read some words and lines written in clear hand-writing: " Please ... deaf and dumb ... semester ... need ... finish school ... any ... money ... God ... you ... Amen".

Hmm. This was obviously written by a desperate beggar, she pondered. Who can this writer be? It must have been written this morning while this bus journeyed about? Or yesterday, somewhere?

The sudden jerk of the bus disrupted Madam's thoughts. She shifted her eyes and they caught a blue sticker posted on the lower half of the right window. It read in part: "Health for all by

the year 2000". This reminded Madam. Yes. She had heard the Minister of Health say something like that. The Minister had also talked about family planning. But the man had three wives, uncountable concubines and uncountable children. You see? The Minister of Agriculture, a military officer who was only taught to kill, had also announced a plan to ensure abundant food for all by the year 2000. And, again, she remembered: the military dictator who called himself President had promised qualitative education for all by the year 2000. And so, what will happen to the increasing number of our secondary school leavers, and even university graduates, who now earn a living by hawking water on the streets and at traffic hold-ups? No. No. There would have been employment opportunities for all by the year 2000. No hold-ups even: adequate network of roads would have been constructed. We have the money, after all. No 'molue' buses either? Ehee. That magic year would have replaced them with car buses or solar-driven trains... And what about light? Yes, of course, the magic year can also connect electricity ... functional electricity ... throughout our towns and villages ... Oh yes ... That magic year has the power to defeat the forces of darkness called NEPA...

Madam chuckled at this thought. "We shall see!" she muttered loudly. And then she, instinctively, looked at her neighbour, ashamed that the man may think she was beside herself. However, she noticed that he was only bodily present....

The bus jerked forward again and belched loudly a number of times as if over fed with passengers. Indeed it was, presently. Soon, the bus was ready to move. It began by crawling along like a snail. And then, a small boy of about the age of eight jumped into the departing bus. He did not find it difficult at all squeezing his tiny frame between the standing passengers along the gangway.

The boy looked like a white: but his colour was a little shaded. Madam looked closely at him. He looked back at her. His eyes were sharp and penetrating, a pair meant for a crime detector. He looked quite smart, but obviously tired and hungry.

The boy smiled and turned away with a black polythene' bag dangling in his hand. He had a handsome face, a well chiselled gap stood between his front teeth. Yet, that smile was painful and lingered in Madam's mind. They were the smiles of a singed carcass of a goat.

Madam was worried. Here was one of the refugees from Kano, or so. His hair was straight and had the colour of fresh rust. If he washed properly, they could be brighter, she pondered. The boy's painful smile and frail frame returned to the eyes of Madam's mind and she groaned silently. She was a butter-hearted woman, and soon was mopping up tears off her eyes with the tip of her waist wrapper as if mourning, already, the imminent death of the handsome refugee boy.

"Yees!"

Madam heard the boy's voice from around the centre of the bus. It sounded as sharp as his eyes, yet bore in it the desperation of a drowning boy.

"Una well don-O!"

The voice appeared to be coming towards the back section of the bus where Madam sat.

"Yeeees? yeees!.... If you look my hand now, you go see wetin I hold. Them call this one Canyland Pineapple Sweet!" he announced in his thin voice.

Madam saw his throat expand like a beaten frog's in his effort to talk loudly for all the passengers to hear. And she noticed that the boy was already panting for breath. He was hungry and tired, obviously. In his hand was a packet of sweets.

"Yeeees! the boy resumed quickly, "make una help me buy. Abeg. Now, I don deh sell market. I no deh beg for road again!" He paused and showed round the packet. But nobody appeared to be interested. Still, he quickly resumed: "See am! Na two for five naira. Abeg, make una look me now-w... Abeg help me buy. Before when I deh beg for road, una say make I go begin sell market. Now, na him I deh do. Make una help me buy. Abeg. Them call this one Candyland Pineapple Sweet. Na Oyibo deh make am. But na me, fake Oyibo, deh sell am!..."

The boy looked round the faces of his audience. Nobody laughed. Nobody smiled. Nobody smiled. Nobody regarded him. On a good day, his last remark would have caused the bus to explode with laughter. Presently, it was strangely different. This dampened the boy's spirit, stirring the hunger in his empty stomach. Yet he kept trying, working hard:

"See am! Abeg, make una look me eyes. See am!" the boy said, holding out a pair of sweets with the fingers of his right hand. He showed it round over and over again. He heard a hissing sound at his back and turned round, expecting the first patronage. But he was disappointed; it was not meant for him. He looked round the bus. Still, nobody bought and nobody talked or looked at him. Only silence rewarded his survivalist effort. In his head, he could only hear the deep snorting sound of the bus, making mockery of him and beating a funeral drum for him, when he hadn't yet dropped dead.

Presently, Madam mopped her eyes once more. And they caught the blue sticker again: "Health for all by the year 2,000". She wondered whether that magic year could as well sweep hostilities away from all nations of the earth and rehabilitate all refugees. Can that year fill this boy's hand instead with peace and joy? She pondered. She nearly muttered, "We shall see!" again when the boy's voice rang out, now more forcefully and desperately.

"Abeg, wetin I do now-ww! Abeg make una buy or give me chop money. Abeg... See.. I never chop since today. I swear!" he said, pulling out his brown shirt swiftly. Madam could effortlessly count his ribs. She covered her face, struggling with tears again.

"Abeg, buy now-ww! Two for five naira! Make una buy from me, abeg. Abeg now-ww!" he pleaded again. Then he turned to the lady bearing a head that carried an over-size weave-on. She was the one who had filled the whole bus with the pungent odour of her perfume when she first entered, carrying a complex handbag. With deep imploring eyes, the refugee boy pleaded with her to buy his sweets.

"See dirty beggar weh wan make I lick him sweet", she said, looking the boy from head to toe. "Kai! Commot here, you smelling pig!" she barked, shoving the boy aside.

There was silence again. Only the bus continued to beat its funeral drums while distributing dark exhaust fumes generously along the busy road. Speechless, the refugee boy turned away from the lady. He felt terribly humiliated, lonely unloved and dejected.

Soon, one of the driver's mates began to call bus stops and some passengers started to disembark, lightening the bus load. Madam looked at the boy again. Lonely in the whole wide world, he shock his head in utter despair. His head swelled with brewing tears. And then hot balls of tears began to race down his eyes to the floor in quick succession. The boy sobbed and lowered his right hand completely with the sweets in it.

"Wetin I go do again?" he sobbed bitterly. "This world self. Wetin? If I go meet my Papa with no money at all, my Papa go tie me like goat, beat me well-well say I be lazy pickin. C say I chop the money. See... I don forget how many bus I do enter to sell market today, but nobody dey buy, like say I carr shit... And I never eat anything since morning till now... Dis ki world self..." the boy complained to nobody in particula sobbing silently. Soon, tears flowed freely from his eyes and h body shook terribly with sorrow. He coughed. That was whe his soul departed from his body. And the bus stepped up th beat of its burial drums.

"No mind am O! Na thief. Na so them sabi pretend remarked the smelling lady, who had shoved the boy asid Suddenly, there was a burst of outrage, like the bursting of tensed dam. She was shouted down and abused by th passengers who appeared suddenly pained by their conspiratori wickedness against the refugee boy.

"Call that boy for me!" Madam shouted, unzipping h purse. "Tell him to come with the whole packet of swee please", she added quickly with a voice full of sorrow and gui

The smelling lady, now sober like a repentant prostitu

tapped on the boy's shoulder to draw his attention towards Madam. But the boy was already blind with tears and his legs could no longer carry his empty body. Madam rushed towards him in a sudden stampede like a beaten cow. But it was too late. The refugee boy had already slumped like a lump of slaked clay. His body shuddered with a cold spasm and lay still.

A.N. AKWANYA

Orthodoxy in African Literary Criticism: Need for a New Beginning

African literary criticism may have begun to stir up again at the very close of the twentieth century, judging from the number of calls for papers being put out since then. Good as this may be from every point of view, it nevertheless brings sharply to mind that African criticism was probably in decline during most of the 1990s. But it may be hasty to announce a recovery, until the new journals and anthologies begin to appear.

One reason for the decline may be that the scholars who had given the leadership and charted the course in the late 1960s and throughout the 70s are dropping out of the scene through ageing and death. But if that is all, the question must be, what of the students who studied under them; why have these leaders no successors? A possible explanation is the brain drain of the 1980s and 1990s as it overlaps with the time of the decline. The young and promising 'internationals' had been unable to advance the work of their predecessors or break new ground, since they were obliged in their new environments to follow an agenda set and supervised by someone else whose motivations and interests had nothing in common with the principles underlying their training in the African institutions. What caused the brain drain in the first place was, of course, government policy at home and misdirection of resources, so that for those who remained, private sector jobs held infinitely more attraction than a career in the university. But there may have been failures as well on the part of the old scholars themselves; for instance, in terms of re-producing their kind too perfectly, resulting in sterility, or in terms of giving their profession too uninspiring a

profile. If we review in this paper the past trends and directions of literary scholarship in African, it is mainly in order to see whether new directions are called for.

Almost as African literature was being entered as a course of studies in the developing African universities, a critical debate was also in progress as to how to deal with this literature. The question for many of the critics was whether the stress fell on *African*, so that one is required to look upon this literature as totally different, with a set of rules unique to itself: what then were these rules? Or to use Aristotelian terms, if this literature was quite distinctive, what was the *specific difference*? For others, there was no cause to assume a specific difference. *African* was understood purely as a tag, for purposes of classification, like Elizabethan or nineteenth-century literature in the English tradition. Accordingly, the most to be said of the term is that it is a sign-signal to heighten alertness, that no elements or appearances of the literary may go unregistered. A small minority, including people like Charles Nnolim and Sunday Anozie conducted a criticism of African literary works in which all the stress was on the literary, while some like Emenyonu projected the opposite view, with all the stress on the provenance. Emenyonu argues, for instance, that there is an 'element of psychology ... inherent in the behaviour of Africans.... This psychological characteristic is always present in the African in whatever creative situation he is placed whether in a historical, political or romantic novel' (1971:7). Thus he assigns the central event of the criticism of African literature as discovering and *bringing out* this psychological element which the work cannot fail to inscribe. These two responses comprise the extreme positions, with a range of other proposals in-between.

The responses, moreover, reflect two different ways of regarding the work of literary art. The first renders an account of how the critic determines the work *as* literature; the second has no discovery procedure, but accepts whatever is *given* as literature: in this case, the concern is with what goes into the

work, which isn't what constitutes it as literature, but as African. There is a third way of regarding the text, namely, in terms of what can be done with it. In Emmanuel Ngara's work, we see to what extent this approach allows the critic to forget that he is faced with literature, and that being a literary critic is what assigns his discipline and expertise. He tells us, for instance:

> My own opinion on all these issues is that the African critic cannot see himself in isolation from the African politician, philosopher, theologian, or educator, all of whom are looking for African solutions to their problems. The best of these and the truly African ones among them are striving to accelerate the process of decolonization and liberation. In the same way, the African critic should search for African solutions in criticism, or should search for those solutions which, though not specifically African, will nevertheless do justice to African works of art. With regard to the second alternative, Marxist criticism seems to have much to offer to the critic of African literature (1982:6).

The best of the African critics must be the ones who striv through criticism 'to accelerate the process of decolonization an liberation.' This is why Marxist criticism cannot be for Ngara a analysis of the literary work based on the mode and relations c production, but a revolutionary activity which repeats in th essay what the freedom fighter does in the battlefield, and th trade unionist at the picket line or rally. If the problem of the da is colonization, that is what must exercise the critic; if it dictatorship or expropriation of the wealth of the nation, perhap the task is obvious enough, in the light of the politic programme of liberation. But if the problem of the day desertification and famine, the spread of AIDS, civil war in Sier Leone, Somalia, or Congo Democratic Republic, how is the ru

to apply in such a way as to 'do justice' to African literature? A breakdown is inevitable, unless the writer is following–at a second remove, so to speak — the events and issues of the day, and the critic the writer.

The view of art as immersed in the problems of the day, as being committed, immediately raises the question of the critic: has she/he a role distinct from that of the creative writer? Obiechina had come upon this question early on, by making a case for literature as a medium for the transmission of cultural and ethical values. This is not necessarily what literature does as a characteristic function, but what it is doing in a specific situation to solve a specific problem. The difference between him and Ngara is that where Ngara invokes Marxism with no apparent sense of a need to give a demonstration, Obiechina would have said Arnoldian humanism. What we seem to be seeing is that it is by means of the critical approach that the critic determines what are the problems of the day, and which works can be seen to address these; thus, which works are worthy of the critic's attention.

Obiechina's argument is as follows:

> Social change in West Africa is proceeding at a rapid rate. Old values are quickly crumbling and solid new ones are not evolving as rapidly with the result that there is confusion in the minds of many. The individual lacking cultural direction tends to constitute himself into a culture maker. He evolves personal values which would often be determined by self-interest[:] altruism as a generating principle of individual action is replaced by egocentrism. The committed writer, as well as other intellectuals of society, has the duty of explaining his predicament to the individual and, what is more, of helping him to evolve new values which will accommodate the shock of change (1968:34).

The artist and the intellectual are here linked together in one socially relevant activity, which is to provide guidance for the confused members of society, or quite simply, to 'instruct' the reader (34). Whereas some of the writers (Soyinka, 1976), and critics (Irele, 1988) assign a secondary role to the critic vis-a-vis the poet—which is logical in an 'engagist' theory of art, Obiechina taking them quite on a par is calling up another logic, namely, that of all intellectuals, politicians, theologians, and so on, being concerned with the same preoccupation, and differing only in the tools available to them. Is this interdiction of division of labour a law for Africa alone in its travails, or is Africa in this, as in all things cultural or racial, set apart from all other peoples?

The assigning of an ethical/social role to literature and criticism brings up quite other problems, among which is the language or languages in virtue of which African literatures have been accustomed to take place for one hundred years or more. These languages are mainly English, French, Portugese—which have been added since colonization for the most part for out-group activities, reserving for the vernaculars the in-group functions—and, in a few cases, Arabic, serving both in-group and out-group functions. If the members of society are confused because of the social changes taking place too quickly for the necessarily slow evolution of cultural values to catch up, and if society has to rely on the writers and intellectuals, the elite in general, to show a way forward, it does appear to be part of this expectation that the moral leadership should be given in an appropriable form; that it should be given in a medium accessible to the entire society, especially to the most confused members. Yet for the great majority of the formerly colonized who are literate in the language in question, the processes of meaning and ideation in the language remain remote to consciousness.

Criticism as a socially relevant function implies two contradictory attitudes to language: first, it implies that language carries cultural messages that are valuable; secondly, that language is not to be trusted to say what it means. Language

suspect, and this is quite to be expected, since we are dealing with the language of literature. For Nwoga (1987:14) tells us that literary writing is the *creative* use of language, which means that it uses language in unfamiliar, and potentially confusing ways. This misleading language in itself calls for commentary and interpretation. Thus does Izevbaye (1988:110) engage for the work an 'advocate,' and criticism becomes a creative intervention by the intellectual in the production of meaning. The metaphor of an advocate suggests passivity on the part of the text, as well as authorial absence. Certain speech-act based accounts of literature explain the role of the critic in terms of the one who performs the text, who 'brings it to life;' but the critic as advocate must needs be the one who performs *on behalf of* or *in place of* the text. He is the one through whom the passive text breaks its silence, while remaining silent, the machine that is the 'life' of the text-as-a-perlocutionary act. Strangely, it is in this production of meaning that criticism fails to communicate and to give guidance. For, from the work to its critical rewriting, from the language of the original to that of the advocate, the presentation is increasingly technical and specialized. The movement is to a language more remote from the everyday, from communicative utterances as the layman knows them.

In practice, criticism is the appropriation of literature by the literary intellectuals, whose audience is necessarily limited on account of the specialized nature of their discourse. In the hands of this specialist group, the cultural messages carried in the work—if these can any longer be agreed upon—are relevant as an order of knowledge, not at the level of action and individual behaviour. On the other hand, the critic's desire to be part of a liberation struggle presents him a stark choice, either to go on being an expert in texts, and perhaps influence the struggler from a great moral distance and in a most indirect fashion or to abandon his books and plunge into the world of action.

Participation in the struggle for liberation was one of the main paths taken by criticism in the 1980s, up to the early 1990s, without the criticism abandoning the book utterly. Rather pidgin

and newspaper poetry were being held up as a breakthrough to the most exploited and disadvantaged classes, who must be made aware of their plight and mobilized for resistance. All this went hand in hand with prophecies of revolution. But the collapse of socialism in the Eastern Block in the late 1980s inevitably had a dampening effect on this enthusiasm. It would appear in fact that the failure of the revolution to materialize also gave rise to disillusionment even with poetry. Equally, there was disillusionment with the humanist tradition, which, according to Abiola Irele, was the critical doctrine in which the first-generation critics of Nigeria were trained (1988:94), such that its postulates about literature had been accepted as unquestionable truth, and were largely assimilated into the techniques which the more innovative critics were expanding into. In his sociological approach, for example, in which Obiechina speaks of the breakdown of values and confusion in many minds, he is entirely of one mind with I.A. Richards, that 'poetry is perfectly capable of saving us,' though with a little help from the critic. But few graduates of our departments of literary studies were able to keep up this faith in the face of the ever-worsening state of the social body, and the decay of institutions and values, political religious, moral and cultural, which did not spare the universities themselves; even though some like Nnolim (1988) are prepared to blame everything on the 'colonial' city and on Christian evangelism. Radical criticism, however, had survived, in feminism; but it has this key attitudinal difference, which may help keep it going for a while yet: it addresses itself to the elite as criticism always has done, and it proposes to force a change in the way in which they think and behave in the world of action.

One powerful current of opinion which goes back to Achebe's 1964 lecture, 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation' subsequently published, and much discussed, seems to make no room at all for criticism, only commentary. In this view, art is a legitimate means of showing that the formerly colonized people had a philosophy and civilization, and helping in this way to restore to them their lost dignity and self-confidence. It follows

from this that writing about art must be either in terms of what Achebe calls colonialist criticism, aiming to undercut the effort, or in terms of *witnessing* by the educated Africans. Achebe's 'witness' is ideally the one directly recreating the forms of the past (1988:49); but perhaps we can also understand it as the one who confirms what the other has done as authentic. Sociological studies of African literature, as Jonathan Peters, *A Dance of Masks* (1978) and Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (1975) derive their justification ultimately from this mode of thought. This is equally true of much of the historicist criticism of the literature, and is the basis of certain denunciations of the cultural forms that have come with colonization, which have the air of being rendered as the critic's bounden duty.

Of course, the claim that literature is a reliable guide to the true state of affairs in the distant past has largely remained unquestioned, and the exercise of criticism has rarely gone farther than what Nkosi (1981) has called the *bitter irony* of African literary artists attempting to 'rehabilitate their smashed up cultures,' by means of 'the same languages that were used to enslave them' (p. 7). This is a complaint, not criticism as such; and it is equally the case in Opoko-Agyemang (1996), where the argument is that the writers have not gone far enough in the recovering of the past. According to him, literature 'achieves its ends by naming the un-named, by questioning the mis-named, by succussing and entwining the already named into new and unsuspected nominal shapes' (49). But the African writers have done no more than 'hug the bare shorelines of African history,' leaving uncharted the vast 'depths and stretches of African history [particularly], slavery and the slave trade' (50). Here then criticism is playing the role of a remembrancer, and far from the handmaiden role assigned under 'engagist' theory, is venturing ahead, pointing out the submerged landforms and structures in need of naming, in general, being the guardian of the poetic act.

Prescriptions have also been handed down by scholars working on the poetic forms of traditional society. For example,

Mazisi Kunene (1983) argues that African literature may be more successful, that is, more African, only by recovering the tones and outlooks of the past. He tells about the preoccupations and provocations of poetry of traditional society:

> the greatest of African literature aims primarily at celebrating the life of man and all living things in the cosmos. Hence many epic and heroic poems are invocations in the form of praise and appeal (191).

Whereas Opoko-Agyemang sees poetry as the assigning of new objects of knowledge, and a mode of clarification or review of what is already known, Kunene's position is that there are no *objects* of representation as such in African traditional poetry; thus we are not strictly concerned with knowables. For instance, this poetry is not analysed into matter and form, a distinction crucial in the arguments of Nkosi and Opoko-Agyemang — unless, of course, it is the introduction of the distinction that has rendered modern African literature incapable of reconnecting to the parent stock. In this view, therefore, the thing African literature is faced with is to rehabilitate itself. Here Kunene shows how:

> The modern African writer must ... educate himself about all the details of African cosmological beliefs, their meanings and their origins. More than any other factor it is clear that the African writer's success depends on his capacity to understand and interpret the subtleties of African thought systems. He must be steeped in the profound and rich traditions of African tale-forms. For in them, is contained the epic-vision necessary for the creation of masterpieces (205).

Clearly, if the qualification of the artist is knowledge of the

literary tradition, so it is for the critic. The training of the artist and the critic is the same, though they are probably involved in two different modes of writing. The work of the artist is a contribution to the literary archive, that of the critic, a reflection on the archive as a whole, as well as on individual members of the archive, new and old. This is a conception of the critical act which is worthy of post-structuralism.

Other artists, however, think quite differently of the issue of African art. In his *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), for instance, Soyinka's view of the impetus that drives African art, or at any rate, Yoruba art, is ritual enactment; while in 'The Igbo World and Its Arts' (1984/88), Achebe assigns it as a reflection on the manifold of energy, particularly in the phenomenal world. But the findings and conclusions of these researchers on the traditions of Africa have scarcely been taken up by the critics, possibly because to seek exclusively the African in African art will lead to cutting oneself off from world culture. The criticism which finds grounds to reserve African literature to itself necessarily gives up any interest it may have in Russian literature or in ancient Greek and Roman literatures, since a similar case can be made for reserving these to their respective nationalities.

Faced with the impasse, the response of some of the critics was to strive for a middle course. This compromise is signified by Izevbaye, where he argues:

> The call for African critical 'concepts,' 'standards' or 'criteria' is not a rejection of the established modes of literary study like structuralism, neo-Aristotelinism and the like, but the rejection of certain entrenched modes of thinking which perpetuate the stock attitudes to Africa (1975:3).

Clearly, part of what must be rejected in as much as it encourages the stock attitudes to Africa is the notion that African literature can only be accessed by Africans, using African critical

tools. What must be rejected is whatever prevents African literature from taking its place in world culture, whatever distinguishes it as something imperilled and in need of special protection.

But Izevbaye is also saying that the entrenched modes of thought which perpetuate the objectionable attitudes may equally be 'occulted' (Derrida) in neo-Aristotelianism, structuralism, and so on, despite that in themselves the theories may be harmless. This is what Nwoga brings out, where he writes of 'the need to redefine concepts which have stabilized their meanings through eurocentric viewpoints' (1987:19). However, in his discussion of poetic *vision*, as a principle of criticism, we see that redefinition has not enabled the concept to escape the romantic-humanist determination which has always guided his criticism. He maintains, for instance, that 'our greatness in literature or life will come, I think only when some deep seated idea, religious or otherwise, supplied the fire that drives us' (1978:129)—which is not far from what Arnold calls 'the increasing demands of our modern ages upon poetry,' to give 'to our spirits what they can rest upon' (1962:275).

But even if Nwoga had successfully invested the signified 'poetic vision' with a distinctly native African signifier that displaced the Western humanist meaning content, there still won't have been much progress, as long as redefinition is the output of a one-off critique. One system of orthodoxy will merely have been substituted for another: one would not have succeeded in freeing thought; whatever its findings would have remained interest-bound. One would only be confronting one ideology with another. The freeing of thought is rather the direction in which criticism has been moving for some time in some Western institutions. That is the concern in Habermas's investigation of speech phenomena and communicative action, Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, and so on. Following the phenomenological method, the goal is to keep all founding concepts ceaselessly under review, to ensure that their meanings do not harden into stable forms, whereby they become elevated

to the status of transcendence. For African criticism of all schools, similarly, escape from the bind of orthodoxy must be along the path of continually keeping 'the reason that establishes [their truths] under strict supervision' (Foucault, 1972:202).

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CHINEDU ENE-ORJI

The Honourable Member

The wind-screen wipers swished noiselessly. The headlamps tore through the night. The dashboard was awash with fluorescent dials against the dark interior. As I drove through the wet road that night, I took care not to exceed a hundred kilometers per hour.

I switched over to my thoughts again, struggling with the problem the way I had vanquished thorny issues before. My teeth gritted, but kept my eyes on the road. The honourable member representing my constituency in the House of Representative was back home, and there were to be civic receptions. These fora enabled the elected and the electorate to renew their covenant. But only our representative knew what he was up to.

Before the soldiers removed their hands from the steering wheel of state, I had dug myself in a media blitz: dictating the code of conduct our politicians must follow in the new dispensation and the role the electorate must play to police them. After writing scores of newspaper and magazine articles, made my depositions on prime time discussion panels, I became known nationwide as 'Mr. Code of Conduct'.

Then came the elections to facilitate the transition. The people of my constituency had in one voice demanded that I go and represent them at the centre. Deep inside me, I knew I was not made for politics. Besides, I had moulded a reputation for myself in the literary world, as a writer, and I was sure I would be more useful to my constituency as a watchdog. I turned down the offer but elected to present someone whom I knew would be

a suitable replacement.

Okechukwu Nwosu, then a lecturer in political science in the university, one of the few young men I sincerely admired, was my choice.

The campaigns came. I sponsored his expenses to a reasonable extent. It was not beyond my means to pick up the entire bill, but I had reasons not to. I wanted the chap to be independent. I got my friends to chip-in something and a lot of them did, anonymously. We were side-by-side throughout the gruelling and tortuous campaigns, travelling from one town to another. His opponent had in his arsenal intimidating credentials, as well as a previous tenure at the National Assembly. At the end we won, but only by a whisker thin margin. I cancelled an appointment with my publishers, just to attend the inauguration of the National Assembly by the President.

Now six months since inauguration, I was yet to set my eyes on Okechukwu Nwosu. It seemed the most important accomplishment he had made was the purchase of a Mercedes Benz car. It was the refrain on everybody's mouth. I had called his numbers several times, but to no effect. The most profound of my worries was that he had not established a laison office in our constituency ...

I got to Aka junction and turned right, out of the express way. From here, the journey became slower as I engaged the narrower road, with a series of hairpin bends. As the Zebra kerb leading to my gate loomed, a gust of inspiration coursed through my thoughts and I parked beside the road. Before I slept that night, I articulated a plan. The next morning, I was off, trying to fix appointments with the leaders of various pressure and political groups in my constituency. It took about one week to put all the delicate details in place.

We travelled all night in a convoy of two buses, filled with women mostly and handful of men. In the morning, we had reached the capital city. We got to the assembly complex, drumming and singing, and disembarked at the car park. Our musical troupe was stationed at a strategic location. We then

started a carnival. Soon, we had drawn quite a crowd. Initially, it was the drivers of the official cars parked in the lot and passers-by, but people started to spill out the Assembly building. Our banners and placards were up, stating our mission: *We are tired of waiting for Godot, so we have come; Promises are made to be fulfilled: Responsible and accountable Reps., that is what we want; Since home is so far away, we come looking for you, Okechukwu Nwosu.*

The newshounds infiltrated our ranks as we continued to churn out music and choreographed dance steps. Moving around to ensure everyone was playing his role, I came across a woman being interviewed by a network T.V. reporter. A microphone, thrust to her mouth, the cameraman trained her with his lens. ".... We even learnt that they have been given furniture and vehicle allowances and he did not have the good breeding to come home and seek our opinion on what brands to buy. After all, we sent him here. We sent him here to be our eyes, our ears and our mouth, to bring back our share of the national cake....." I smiled and walked away, towards another journalist interviewing another woman.

"... Well, you can't trust these young men too much. Since we have not seen him for so long, we've come to make sure the sophisticated girls of this town have not got him..."

After an hour, Nwosu's laison officer found me in the crowd. He asked what was amiss. I said everything was fine. He insisted that our action was a charade. I said it was not. He claimed we were insulting the honourable member. I kept mute. He said our presence in this place, and the time and manner were aimed to disgrace the honourable member and assault his personality. I asked him to inform the police. Finally, he came to himself and asked what I wanted. Nothing, I replied. But if he meant what we wanted - I pointed around the crowd - it was an address by the honourable member representing our constituency. He bounded away in a fit.

The honourable member appeared, and the singing and dancing rose to a crescendo. He looked flushed and very distant.

But the politician in him responded. He danced to the rhythm of our drums in his flowing gown and sprayed wads of currency notes on the dancing women. After a while, he raised both hands skywards and the music stopped. He delivered a speech, welcoming us, and asked if we had an uneventful journey. He regretted we had not informed him that we were to visit. Anyhow, he would take us to his house to see how much comfort he would be able to provide for us. We must be hungry and tired and must need a bath.

The eldest man in our entourage replied. He thanked Okechukwu Nwosu for having the courage to come and talk to us. But do relatives inform their brother before a visit?. We were angry; that was why we came. And we came prepared. We came with food to last one week and with tents to encamp outside his house, if he was not available. Was it not our sages who said that when the drumbeats change, the footwork also changes? We had waited long enough at home. So we came looking for him. Why had he kept us so much in the dark? Were we now lepers that must be kept at bay? What about the promises he made to us? Anyhow, since we were here, we might as well go to his house.

Nwosu asked me to ride in his car which led the way. The buses followed behind. I praised him over his new acquisition — the car — and commended his good taste. He nodded for a reply; but his dour countenance did not change. While I was planning this visit, I had thought much about its propriety. I had resolved that he did not deserve finesse. You start chasing a black goat well in time, before nightfall.

We drummed and danced into the night, keeping the legislators' village alight. The women cooked the food we brought with us and Nwosu provided the drinks. A carnival-like air persisted. Representatives and senators from our state and others came around. We talked about everything, except our mission. It was obvious they were not happy with our visit. We had come to expose one of them. It is only when the wind blows that we see the fowl's rump. Since we had made our point, we

decided to stay only that night. We did not set up our tents. At midnight we stopped the music. It was time to sleep. The women took the bedrooms and some others found spaces on the rug carpet, the leather chaise, settee and armchairs.

In the morning when we were all ready to go, we assembled in the sitting room and Nwosu addressed us. In spite of the split-unit air conditioner, the room was hot and stuffy. His house had in one day and night hosted more visitors than it might ordinarily have done in a six-month period.

He thanked us once again for our visit and commended us for the honour we had done to him. In all the six months he had stayed in this estate, not one of his colleagues had had the privilege of hosting members of his constituency. At this point, I saw his eyes roam around the room, as if to estimate the pressure his newly acquired furniture had had to contend with. He went on to tell us he would come home as soon as was possible, to tell us how far he had gone on the job we sent him here to do.

Okechukwu Nwosu took the opportunity to remind us that the duty we gave him was not in the least easy, and we should exercise patience. He was not reneging on his electoral promises, as his elder brother, he pointed at me, would not allow that to happen. He wished us a safe journey back home and thanked us once more for the visit.

I stood up and thanked him for his speech, saying that it was not an easy task hosting over a hundred guests without prior information. But this was what showed he was a man of means. If he was not here, what would bring us here? We were only doing our duty by him. A man with relatives need not go far for advice. I thanked him once more and told him we looked forward to his home coming.

J.O.J. NWACHUKWU-AGBADA

Interview with Isidore Okpewho

J.O.J.N: No doubt, the language problem of the African writer has been widely discussed. Yet the problem persists. Being a newer member of the African writing corps, how do you see the issue of language, and how have you tried to grapple with it?

Okpewho: I think it is a very difficult problem. The difficulty arises from the fact that as an African speaking a specific language or languages, and being familiar with that culture, you would have grown up with certain sensibilities supported by the language(s). The difficulty there now is to match these sensibilities with a foreign language like English which you did not grow up speaking in the home, which you acquired in and from a formal setting. Now one way to get out of this problem is to transliterate, almost transliterate your own indigenous language, transfer on an almost one-to-one basis into English, which of course will not do. Some writers have tried to get out of this problem by adopting a form of English which as much as possible tries to echo the idioms and forms of speech in the indigenous language. Well that hasn't been my answer as such. I am

Isidore Okpewho, now Chairman of Afro-American and African Studies Programme at the State University of New York, Binghamton, was for many years Professor of English at the University of Ibadan. Okpewho - scholar, writer and critic - granted this interview in his office at Ibadan on 11th January, 1986.

more inclined towards some kind of experimentation. If I was to do a transliteration of my language into English, I think it would sound quite awkward because the two forms are thoroughly different indeed. What I have tried to do is to write as imaginatively as I can an English which will be accepted across the board but with a few touches here and there of my own indigenous idioms. But by and large, I would say I have as much as possible tried to develop as good an attitude to English as I can, aware that I am using the medium of English, that I am not using my indigenous language. So I cannot do the kind of violence to English than I might, if I were trying to be faithful to my own language.

J.O.J.N: You have more than one indigenous language influence. You are of the Urhobo ethnic group and you also speak Igbo. How do these two languages interfere in your creative activity?

Okpewho: Well, my father is Urhobo and my mother is Igbo. I grew up speaking more Igbo than Urhobo. Perhaps if you hear any echoes in my English you are likely to hear more Igbo echoes than Urhobo. Of course, you would also occasionally hear some Urhobo echoes and images here and there....

J.O.J.N: Do you find the two languages mutually exclusive?

Okpewho: No, not mutually exclusive. I suppose they fill into each other in a number of things, I think. Even though they are two distinct languages, spoken in two different areas of the country, i.e., an Urhobo man speaking Urhobo will not be understood by an Igbo man and vice versa, they do share certain basic sensibilities, world-views and outlooks. So it's not as if they are mutually exclusive.

J.O.J.N: In your two novels so far, your narration reflects a depth of passion and intimacy. In view of this, would it be plausible to suspect that perhaps their story lines somehow have something to do with part of your biographical details?

Okpewho: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that any writer anywhere in the world — I think at least most of the writers I am familiar with — usually springs from the background s/he grew up in. I know that there is usually no definite effort to reproduce the pattern of your own life in your work but things that you have seen, things that you have grown up with, experiences that you have had often have some kind of input into your creative thinking. The two novels I have so far written are set in Asaba. Even though I have not called the town Asaba, any Asaba man, especially any Asaba man who was growing up at the same time as I did, would definitely link the story. The experiences in the novels are not of course the ones that I have had but I have seen a lot of polygamous families. I have the knowledge of the kind of damage that polygamy can do. I have also seen some of the benefits of polygamy. Again it's a creative effort. I am not trying in any way to re-create an outright experience. With respect to *The Last Duty*, that comes closer to the experience I have had in the sense that I did see a community or communities that suffered certain traumas as a result of the Nigerian Civil War. I was also able to see these traumas as reflected on specific human beings during the time of the war. These things moved me into writing the novel. Again I did not centre these things on the life of certain individual or individuals or on myself. No novelist tries to reproduce the pattern of his life on a one-to-one basis. It's simply a chemistry between experience and imagination.

J.O.J.N: In *The Last Duty,* the story of the Nigerian Civil War is delivered with a touch of realism. Did you participate in it as Eddie Iroh or Cyprian Ekwensi did? If so, as what?

Okpewho: I did not at all participate in the Civil War. I was in Ibadan at the time the war was being fought, though I had relatives who ran across to Biafra and also relatives who stayed on the Nigerian side during this time. The only part of the Civil War I saw was in places that were recaptured by the Federal troops, especially Bendel State (now Edo and Delta States). Otherwise I did not play any part at all during the Civil War. Neither as a soldier nor as a journalist. I did not see the war as it was going on.

J.O.J.N: So *The Last Duty* is essentially imaginative?

Okpewho: It's essentially imaginative, even though I have tried to use some of what I saw during the period of the war in territories recaptured by Federal troops.

J.O.J.N: As a follow-up, how would you want us to classify *The Last Duty*? Would you want us to see it as war fiction, as a war novel?

Okpewho: Well, it's war fiction in the sense that it is set in a civil war. Otherwise the war is simply the background for the kind of psychological problem that people can encounter in situations of that nature. All the same, it's not impossible to find this kind of pattern of psychological problem being treated in the novel operating in a non-war context.

J.O.J.N: Now that we've started talking about *The Last Duty* even though it's your second novel, I notice a brisk touch in the narrative structure of this novel, somewhat akin to Emily Bront's *Wuthering Heights.* In the cadence of its

language, especially across the narrative angle, I remember Okot's *Song of Lawino*. Would you buy the idea of influence? If so, whose?

Okpewho: Influence is a very difficult thing to trace. I have read all these works you are talking about. I wouldn't say a direct 'no', just as I wouldn't say an outright 'yes', if you mentioned any other work I have read. This is because I appreciate that whether one likes it or not experiences one has had go into one's creative thinking. So I wouldn't be surprised that the books I have read have found their way without my consciously willing them into my creative imagination. I did not have any of these books at the back of my mind as I wrote the novel. It would be the same thing if you said that you observed Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* or any of Faulkner's or of Charles Dickens' in my writing. This is the job that critics do trying to look for influences and what-not. Now, I would not go into the game of contending them. I would only say that one has to be very careful about this influence thing because, for instance, I have read more books than have been cited here. You could construct a whole life of influences that acted on my work...

J.O.J.N: You would have noticed that I was a little cautious asking the question because, most times, when you ask African writers those who have influenced them they usually see it as insulting.

Okpewho: It's not insulting. I mean I have read lots of books. It's not as if I didn't have an education. I have had certain experiences too. I have read a whole lot of books. Books that you happen to mention are among those I have read. I would not quarrel with that but you would have an awful lot of work to do proving that I used these books in my work.

J.O.J.N: I find your graphological deviations in *The Last Duty* rather interesting vis-a-vis Oghenovo's articulation of his boyish thoughts. What artistic effects were you aiming at?

Okpewho: In the case of Oghenovo in *The Last Duty,* I was trying to capture the imagination and sensitivities of a little boy, his psychology of childhood. Here he is caught in the middle of this very adult confrontation of the war. Not just the war but the problems that the war has just brought on the mother. He does not understand any of these. By using the kind of technique that I have used for him I have simply tried to reflect his own very juvenile perception of the problems in which he is involved. That was simply my aim.

J.O.J.N: The ending of *The Last Duty* leaves one with a multiple choice of opinions as to what may have happened in the ultimate, an ending which reminds one of Achebe's *Arrow of God.* Yet your readers would like to know whether Oshevire burnt his house and was headed for somewhere else or was killed by Federal soldiers in the end, and whether what we got from Oghenovo's narrative art was a figment of the boy's nightmarish imagination.

Okpewho: I wouldn't blame anybody who thought that it was a figment of his nightmarish imagination, because much of his role in this story has been played through his own viewings, his own stream-of-consciousness, his own thoughts. But as far as I intended it, Oshevire comes back from detention only to discover that the wife he was certain would not succumb under any pressure, that would still be loyal to him, and maintain her purity, has been seduced. He discovers that the whole edifice he has constructed in his mind, of dignity, honour, decency and so on and so forth, as far as his family and himself are concerned, has crumbled. He cannot take this. Now

don't forget that he is a man of very rigid principles. Hi rigidity drives him to abandon the town where he ha been staying. So he quite logically sets fire to his house moves away. He doesn't even ask his family, come let' go. He simply moves away, with his family trailin behind. In that sense he is slightly an inconsiderate so of person. He just walks on. There is a curfew in towr I don't recall now how long he has been in town befor he decides to move out, thus defying the curfew. Whe the soldiers who are at the border posts, at least mannin some sensitive points in the town, ask him to stop h refuses to stop because he has no wish to get back to th town. Obviously, he does not care whether he is sh down in the process. They probably suspect that he either a saboteur or a sessionist soldier who is crawlin back through the lines after he probably has done som damage in the town. So the soldiers shoot him. His wi and child don't follow him into the line of fire. His son report is therefore an eye-witness account of wh happened to his father.

J.O.J.N: Now that I have got this picture that your two novels a basically tragic novels, why did you choose tragedy your form?

Okpewho: Basically, tragedy is a much more serious form. don't particularly enjoy comic forms. I like the turns fun, of wit in works of art, no matter how serious they a Tragedy for me is a more serious art than comedy, n because I am a tragic person nor because I have h tragic experiences. No.

J.O.J.N: I read a seminar presentation by a doctoral student he (Ibadan) in which you were described as a gynandr writer, a writer who is sympathetic to the cause women. Is such a label acceptable to you?

Okpewho: Well, I don't like labels. I recall that when the student in question confronted me with that tag, I winced. I wasn't particularly comfortable. Again, I cannot quarrel with a critic who permits himself or herself to a particular reading of my work. I mean the work is now published, is public property, and is available to any kind of responses. They say one man's meat is another man's poison. Somebody sees me as gynandrist writer. Others may see me as a petit bourgeois writer, yet some others as a socially committed writer and so on and so forth. There are so many tags really. I am not inclined to taking issue with anybody. Whatever tag you put on me, it's your own privilege, and I won't quarrel with it.

J.O.J.N: Without prejudice to your answer to my last question I got the impression after reading your first novel, *The Victims* that women are an unorganised lot who need an assertive man to control them. Otherwise, if in this novel you showed that the tragedy in Obanua's household could have been averted had he asserted his will between his two mutually envious wives, how does this portray a sympathetic understanding of women's cause, whatever that is?

Okpewho: I am not sure that I have presented women as an unorganised lot any more than men. Some men in my fiction are unorganised people. Obanua himself is very unorganised. As a matter of fact, he seems to need to control himself more than his wives. I suppose your question should have been put the other way round, because some of the men, as far as Obanua goes, need some women of character to put them right. Again these are the ways of looking at a work. I didn't have questions like this one at the back of my mind when I was writing. I was simply thinking of telling a good story. These are critical queries which never crossed my mind at the

writing stage.

J.O.J.N: Let us delve a little further into the issue of presentation of women in your work. In *The Victims*, for instance, apart from the shameful acts of Obanua's two wives, the two elderly sisters are witch-like, if not witches; Ogugua's two daughters are overtly thieves; Obanua's mother – though the most positively cast of the female characters – only appears on the scene when the quarrels between her daughters-in-law get on her nerves or threaten to dent the family image; the woman of the bar is a prostitute; the person who prepares the poison with which the tragedy in the novel is effected is a woman, etc. In *The Last Duty*, Aku, the heroine and the sole female character in the novel, not only allows herself to be Toje's mistress, she equally makes herself available to Toje's crippled dependant to whom she says, 'Thank you' after the sexual act with him. Do these amount to a positive cast for women in your works?

Okpewho: You have to look at the whole thing from the complex background of the works. There are certain approaches to writing stories on polygamy. I could choose to make the women so positive that their problem in such an institution disappears. Well, the picture you see in *The Victims* is not in any way intended to portray women in a bad light. I simply chose a specific situation in which the women don't seem to behave well. It is not a reflection of my view of women. As far as Aku goes in *The Last Duty*, again I think we should look closely at the situation in which she finds herself. She is completely helpless. Everybody from her place has run away from town but because of her own humane consideration of her situation she decides to stay. She will not abandon her husband and child. She does not allow the political situation to becloud her love for her family so that she

rises above the politics of the time, even though she realises what the dangers are. Now having stayed, there is simply no way she could support herself because she has been ostracised. The rest of society don't show her any sympathy whatsoever. Nobody talks to her, nobody sympathises with her; and so how is she to survive, she and her only child? We should not forget also that her overriding consideration is the survival of her child, not herself as such. If she were alone, she would probably have starved to death, rather than allow her honour to be violated. Don't forget also that Toje has been deceiving her, telling her all the efforts he has been exerting to have her husband released, and things like that, giving her gifts and tantalising her. So she believes that this man is on her side; little does she know that the man is planning something very unfriendly. Of course, each time she does what she does with this man she does not like it. But simply because she has to feed her child, she allows herself to be taken advantage of in the ugly situation in which she finds herself. Well, her experience with Odibo is perhaps a human response to the situation. She has constantly been brought to the point of sinning without actually being fulfilled. She might as well do it this time with whoever. Her sexual urge has been excited. Now there is no obscenity intended here. It is simply a human reaction, and from my own point of view what any healthy woman in her circumstances could do. She finds herself continually thrown into sexual situations without really being fulfilled. Perhaps it's more of an agony to be continually teased and tempted without doing the thing at all. It is simply a human response. It is not because she is a prostitute or that she wishes to be one, but because she is forced into the situation and simply doesn't have a choice. All these women you have mentioned are victims of the world in which they find themselves. They have not been presented this way because of a belief in the

inherent weakness of women. NO. Not at all. I do not have any such belief at all.

J.O.J.N: In his review of your book, *The Epic in Africa* (1979), Mazisi Kunene, while commending you for initiating an African concept of the epic genre, still insists that 'a definitive work' on the subject is yet to be written. What did you actually set out to achieve in that work?

Okpewho: Well, Mazisi Kunene probably feels that he himself is the one who is going to write such 'a definitive work,' and if that is so I wish him luck. But yes I have read his review and the journal, *Research in African Literatures* has also given me the opportunity to respond to the review and I did. I simply pointed out in my response that I did not think Mazisi Kunene had read my book adequately. I did not set out to evolve a particular African standard of the epic. My study was simply a comparative one. I did it because some earlier scholars had said hat the epic simply did not exist in Africa on the basis of course of their understanding of what the epic is meant to be — Homer and all that. All I did was compare what Homer did and what I have encountered of the African epic in a variety of texts emerging from various societies in this continent. Now, of course, I did everything possible not to produce a work which simply begged the question. As a matter of fact, in a number of places, I suggested that what one should see is the poetics of the epic — the oral performance of the epic in this situation — Homer may not have done as well as some of the oral performers of the epic have done. So I simply set out to do a comparative study of the African oral epics and the epics of Homer. It led me to certain enlightening insights. These insights are there very clearly stated in the concluding part of the book. Anybody who reads that conclusion would see them. Perhaps, Kunene did not

have the patience to get to the concluding chapter. The concluding chapter simply ties all the arguments that I have tried to make in the four or five chapters of the book. Pure and simple.

J.O.J.N: He also accused you of having spent a lot of time trying to debunk Ruth Finnegan's views on the African epic, and would have wished you went straight to the task...

Okpewho: I went straight to the task! I only talked about Finnegan as a matter of fact in the preface to the book. Finnegan denies the African epic. I went straight into the task of proving that the epic does exist in Africa, if you were to use some of these criteria we recognise for the existence of the epic. If my memory serves me well, I don't remember mentioning Finnegan in any other part of the work other than in the preface. I just went into the task of analysing the texts.

J.O.J.N: In your *Myth in Africa*(1983), you emphasized the need for critics to look at the African myth from an aesthetic standpoint. Can it be assumed that there is now an African aesthetic theory? If so, what is it?

Okpewho: I wasn't urging Africans to look at myth from an aesthetic standpoint! I simply recognised that myth was fundamentally an aesthetic resource. And that goes for the African myth and myths anywhere else even though I was examining the African evidence. I did not discuss the European text or the Chinese text or any other kind of text. My evidence was purely African texts. I was looking at it from an aesthetic point of view. Now I have not proposed any African aesthetic of myth; that was not my aim in that book. I was simply trying to explore what one could see as the fundamental elements in these tales, and I discovered that the fundamental element was simply

the imaginative element. I was in the book trying to contend the position about myth held by certain social scientists who saw authoritativeness, sacredness and belief as the basic elements of myth. I said no, these are not the basic elements because you would find these things in other kinds of tales. I saw myth as simply the irreducible imaginative resource in all these tales. On that basis I explored not just oral narratives but also some of the creative writings that had been done with an eye to the oral tradition in this continent. I also examined the nature of traditional African culture on that basis.

J.O.J.N: So we actually don't have an African theory of aesthetics at the moment?

Okpewho: I am not sure we need an African aesthetic theory. For instance, you watch some European films and plays, some Japanese and Chinese films and art and you admire them very deeply. Now is it the African in you that is responding to them, to something that is Chinese, Japanese or German or is there a fundamental aesthetic that you are responding to? You respond to a foreign thing, not as an African but as a man. I have not come to the point where I recognise that there must be an African aesthetic as such. I don't think that it is such a compelling mission, such a compelling priority that we should go looking for something exclusively African in works of the imagination. I mean we are free to admire beauty anywhere we encounter it. And if we do, and the beauty we are admiring is not African or was not created by an African, then we have no reason to feel that it is the African responding. There is no urgency as far as I am concerned about constructing an African aesthetic in these matters.

J.O.J.N: I think that for some time we have left a number of

things still hanging and I hope this would not be used against our generation. For instance, the language issue has not been resolved; the aesthetics we have just mentioned has not be resolved. There is also the issue of the poetics of African literature. Do we continue leaving these things hanging as they are or do we want to push them to the generation to come?

Okpewho: Well, they are very difficult problems to tackle. I am simply saying that we do not saddle ourselves with tasks that need not be undertaken. Well, as far as language goes, the fact that we use English is as a result of our historical experience. There is no other way in which I who am not a Hausa man or Yoruba man can address myself to these people except through a common language. Now, if we all decide in this country that we are going to use one African language as a lingua franca for the entire continent and everybody learns it and speaks and writes in it, I would be extremely happy. But I am not sure whether it is the task of the writer to evolve this or that language or the task of government. The moment we are all forced to do it I would be happy. I mean I would like Swahili or Mandinka or Hausa or Yoruba, to read and write in it. But I don't think that the writer should take responsibility for that. My duty as a writer is to write; I am not in the business of searching for a lingua franca. Now if I am appointed to a committee which is meant to evolve a lingua franca for Africa, well I'd be happy to participate in it. But that is not my present task. Again we have to ask ourselves whether we want to choose an African language as a lingua franca for this country or simply to accept the fact of the historical experience through which we have been and continue to express ourselves in English and French. This is not a question I alone can answer. I simply don't want to fight battles that may dissipate my energy and in the end I

would end up not making any contribution whatsoever, but simply engaging in a controversy rather than settling down and doing something which, for whatever it is worth, stands as a contribution no matter how little, however insignificant to the growth of creative consciousness among my people.

J.O.J.N: And the poetics...?

Okpewho: Of course, there are two ways of looking at poetics. It can be seen as Aristotle sees it, i.e., as a way of looking at form and its contributions to a body of works. This is the way most people have read Aristotle's work on poetics. As a descriptive effort or something that arises from a description of a body of works of art as done by a number of writers. Other critics consider poetics as the form towards which writers should strive. Again some critics have taken the view of Aristotle's 'poetics' which I think is wrong. Aristotle did not set out to prescribe anything; he simply tried to describe what he saw most of the time. Now if we adopt the view of poetics as the form which African writers should strive to achieve or certain ways in which they should try to do their work, then I am afraid that I don't consider such a mission urgent. Writers are simply to keep on writing to the best of their capabilities and to express their views of reality as they see it individually. There is no way which you can prescribe to anybody how to write. I don't think that it is a healthy thing for critics to do. They simply have to wait for writers to do their work. Of course, any number of writers writing within a certain geographical area, within any cultural background whatsoever will end up saying very much the same thing rather imperceptibly, sometimes unconsciously but they are going to be saying certain things which, taken along with what others from the same area have said, will present some kind of unified

picture. But each one of them is going to be expressing the accepted reality in his own way. So there is no need constraining writers by striving to evolve what one could consider as an African poetics. The best writers operated in a free atmosphere, not in an atmosphere of critical constraints.

J.O.J.N: Nobody would actually be pressing for prescriptive poetics as of this moment. But my question actually is stirred towards a situation whereby — based on what we already have — somebody describes what has already been achieved. Once in a while, I have heard people say no, it's too early to engage in that type of task. I mean, to you, you think it's too early? My question is predicated on the fact that some people are saying that our written literature, for instance, is not even up to an age in British literature. My fear is that if we leave this to coming generations, especially when those who started written African literature are no more, whether we won't be shirking the responsibility of ensuring that the task is not badly done later because of our failure to participate.

Okpewho: Of course, the British have been writing much longer than we have done. British literature started several centuries before ours and there is no way we can match their record or history in this regard, especially in literate expression. But, I don't believe that we have not done enough in African literature to call for some kind of descriptive effort. I mean a number of books have been written on the growth of the African novel, the history so far, etc., of various aspects of African poetry, and so on and so forth. Critics who care to do that have all the time in the world and all the justification to describe what has happened so far in African writing. I don't think there's any quarrel with that. As a matter of fact, critics should take it upon themselves to plot the history so far. Many

writers, of course, are not going to listen to what critics say or read some of these critical works. Writers will continue to do their work, whether or not any form is described or prescribed for them. They will simply go on doing their work if they really care to do the work.

J.O.J.N: Let's get back to the point where we started from. That is writing. Do you believe that there is a generational obligation between one writer in a generation and the one that comes after him or her? In other words, do the older writers owe the newer ones anything?

Okpewho: Not in the least. I don't think that any generation's writers should set themselves up as a model which a later generation should follow or that they ought to do certain things whatsoever other than doing their work well. I don't think anybody owes any other person anything. Every generation's writers will simply do the work of writing to the best of their capabilities, and also in response to the particular conditions of their time. Conditions change, and to the extent that conditions change, writers' responses to them will change, will be different from what the earlier writers did. For instance, the generation of Achebe, perhaps, felt it was their duty to document the clash of cultures between the traditional culture and the colonial experience. Well, not many writers feel that way now. I mean the theme, as far as such writers are concerned, has been overflogged. And besides there are more serious problems happening today. Economies are collapsing, military governments are taking over, civil wars are raging between ethnic groups that had hitherto lived in some kind of harmony. There is widespread hunger, political repression and so on and so forth. Things that did not happen during the colonial period. So the response of these writers simply has to change. To that extent no generation of writers owes the

next one anything nor do the present writers owe the previous generation anything. This is because each generation faces its own challenges.

J.O.J.N: By 'owe' I am referring to schemes by which the older writers could help the up-and-coming ones. The older writers have often been accused of not doing much for the budding ones. Instead, the older writers, they say, rather enjoy hearing it said that since they wrote, nothing else has been happening in the writing arena, thus indicating that the older writers have been standing on their way. Do you believe such a thing exists?

Okpewho: Well, I don't know about other people but I have been approached by a good number of aspiring writers. I have a file there where I keep copies of the reports on their works. Once in a while, somebody comes in here, to my office, to tell me he/she is anxious to write and that he/she wants my advice. And I talk to hem. I don't think anybody should hold back anything. I think that we should give encouragement to anybody who shows sufficient interest in the kind of thing we are doing. I think it will be unfortunate if an aspiring writer seeks help from an older writer and such assistance is denied him or her.

J.O.J.N: Your last novel (then *The Last Duty*) was published in 1976. Have we heard the last from you?

Okpewho: Not in the least! As I said earlier, I have a third novel in the making. All things being equal, I should finish it in the not-too-distant future.

J.O.J.N: What's the title?

Okpewho: Well, I don't usually give my works titles before I

complete them. However, I have a rough view of what I am going to call this one. It's likely to be called *Tidal Rage*.

J.O.J.N: What's it about?

Okpewho: It's a story set in Rivers State of Nigeria. I am moving away from the areas I am familiar with. But I have done some research on the setting. It's about the problem which people living in that area are encountering - the oil pollution, the curtailment of whatever gets down to that side, especially the dams that have been built in the upper reaches of the Niger and so on and so forth. People are suffering. I am trying to explore this suffering, again from a writer's angle. I am simply exploring the problems the people are living with. That's the broad concern of the work.

J.O.J.N: Were you attracted by the environment, like the streams and the rivers? I know that some writers purposely set their works in such environments.

Okpewho: No, I don't have a romantic view of settings. As a matter of fact, such things are not described at all. To some extent it's like *The Last Duty*. I don't speak at all. It is the characters who speak. It's an epistolary work - two characters are communicating with each other all the way through. So the entire story is told in letters. I don't speak at all, so I do not have any chance at all to describe scenery. I am not attracted by scenery, I am attracted by the problem, the kind of psychological and other stresses which operate here.

J.O.J.N: So, I begin to sense Alice Walker already, *The Colour Purple*, which is essentially epistolary.

Okpewho: I came to Ibadan in 1976 to teach. I have taught Creative Writing among other courses. About 1977, I started letting my students experiment with the epistolary novel. That was long before Alice Walker published *The Colour Purple*. Alice Walker is not an influence at all. I simply think that the epistolary novel is a very effective form of exploring the minds of people. It is in that sense that it is somewhat like *The Last Duty* because the characters are allowed to speak and they give us the benefit of their minds, their thinking, their views, their own descriptions of what goes on.

J.O.J.N: What of Mariama Bâ?

Okpewho: Bâ's is one long letter. Characters in her work don't exchange letters. The one letter is so long that it becomes the story itself.

J.O.J.N: Thank you.

Okpewho: You are welcome.

FRANCIS I. EDE

Lizzy

Lizzy
In beauty and kindness lies the lure
Like a sprouted tendril after the sun
Lizzy
Sweet, enduring and captivating
Like the nectral fragrance that spellbinds
the butterfly
Lizzy
The sight of you lights
The candle of my heart
And your nearness inflames it
Lizzy
In the sanctimonious shrine of your love
I supplicate, enthralled in its reflective glow
of purity and free flow like INEWE unmindful of its course.

CHINYERE NGONEBU

Book Review

TITLE: *Blind Expectations*
AUTHOR: May Ifeoma Nwoye
PUBLISHER: High Cliff Publishers, Benin, 1997

Blind Expectations is a collection of four short stories which portray human foibles, ambitions, and deceit. The first story in the book, "Just One More Day", is about a greedy, irresponsible divorcee, whose insatiable cravings land her into the net of a money lender. The second story, "Imelda", centres on a jilted lover. "Slippery Diamond" is a story of two criminals who are double-crossed by a friend. The last in the collection, "Dinner with a Stranger", is another case of treachery. Goddy having warmed his way into the heart of Mrs. Ejike, dupes her, making off with her car, a sum of ₦350,000.00, expensive jewellery, ornaments, clothing, and cases of canned food, wines and other goods Mrs Ejike stocked in her shop.

Pervading the entire collection is the depiction of a society bereft of trust and sincerity. For in each of the four stories we have instances of breech of confidence, dashing of hopes and breaking of long standing relationships: Alero fails to pay the money lender when payment is due; Hilary does not turn up on his wedding day; Chief Amayo exacts vengeance on Imelda's father for defrauding him in a joint venture; Bright betrays his friends; and Goddy violates the trust placed on him by his benefactor, robbing and ruining her in the end.

The pleasure we derive from these stories arises from the

subtle, but discernible, hope of cleansing society, and a better understanding of life which each story conveys. Behind the stories lie lessons for those who wish to learn.

It is obvious that May Ifeoma Nwoye has written interestingly and compellingly. It is equally obvious that she has spent much energy in constructing the experiences she expostulates, and in manipulating the structure of each narrative in such a way as to achieve the desired effect. We see, for example in "Slippery Diamond", the turmoil of a mind driven by lust for money and how the author skillfully presents the blackmail and murder that are its aftermath.

However, it seems that Nwoye pays too much attention to the plots of her stories. In putting the scenes together, Nwoye errs in one indispensable aspect of creative writing — and any other type of writing for that matter: language. The language of a literary work — and this includes the syntactic structures, and other linguistic and para-linguistic choices a writer may make in the course of writing — is an invaluable component of the work. The totality of the impact which any written work of art makes on the reader derives much from the way the writer explicates his subject matter, develops or conveys his feelings. In other words, in as much as it is important "to pay attention to what the novelist has to say, it is equally important to pay attention to the way in which he says it" (Palmer, 1986). This is particularly noteworthy because literature is language use. When we talk about literature, we talk about language in action; using words to do things, if I may transpose Austin's book title. Texts, therefore, are constituted to communicate and all prose narratives are embodiments of the use of this language for communication. What this implies, is that since literature teaches the use of (the) language - in addition to its other functions - literary texts should embody the finesse of (the) language.

Linguistically, however, *Blind Expectations* leaves much to be desired. A writer like May Ifeoma Nwoye who prides herself over several published works is expected to rise beyond certain avoidable linguistic blunders. But what do we have in

Blind Expectations? First, poorly constructed and uncoordinated sentence structures abound in the book (pp. 18, 24, 21, 23, 37, 119, etc). In the first story, for instance, we have this example:

> She was a middle cadre staff of the university but looking at her, nobody would ever have an idea that she was poorly paid, always very expensively dressed, and that did account for why credit was immediately granted her (pp. 9 - 10).

The problem lies in the fact that the two main ideas "she was a middle cadre staff of the university" and "always very expensively dressed" do not cohere within the same sentence. In the same vein, the subordinate ideas "but looking at her, nobody would ever have an idea that she was poorly paid" and" and that did account for why credit was immediately granted her" create an incongruous effect, as they are not systematically structured as supporting ideas in this unnecessarily long sentence. Gronbeck, Ehniger, Monrose, and German (1988:139) advise that "subordinate ideas not only should be directly related to the main point under which they fall, but they should also be coordinated with each other - that is, they should be equal in scope or importance." The Nwoye's sentence lacks this coordination as the ideas which make it up are clumsily jumbled together. If the author wishes to clear the muddle in that sentence, she has to break them into two or more shorter constructions.

Another instance of jejune construction in the book is the direct speech presented below:

> "I think that's what I am going to do", she was now determined (p. 13).

We notice that the reporting clause "she was now determined" has no close link with the direct speech. This is because the reporting clause expresses an attitude and not a statement which is the natural follow up of a direct speech.

Again, consider this:

> Idris listened attentively as she narrated her story and concluded with how impatient her creditors were and swore not to patronize them again (p. 13).

The sentence is vague and confusing. Does it imply that Idris listened attentively to Alero's narratives and arrived at the conclusion that Alero's creditors were impatient, and then swore not to patronize them (the creditors) again? Or is it Alero herself narrating, and concluding, and swearing.

Think of this:

> She concluded that the person was heartless referring her to her husband who hated her (p. 29).

And this:

> She could not believe herself and she had the modesty of expressing that to her parents and what is more to a promising, handsome young man like Hilary (p. 44).

In these two instances, Nwoye shows thorough ineptitude in the use of the personal pronoun. Such slip-shod writing fills every page of the book, leading readers into frustration and confusion. The author needs to recast many of her sentences, especially those that fail in expressing ideas. She also needs to tighten up her prose and avoid excessive use of compound-complex constructions, as she appears to have no firm grip of their use. In addition to this is the unsatisfactory use of the pronoun 'she'. As a matter of fact, Nwoye uses this particular word *ad nauseam*. The following are some examples of this irritant:

> She was so relieved by what she did. Even at the shop of the woman selling clothes, she nearly enticed Alero into incurring fresh debts but she

> resisted the temptation (p. 21).
>
> She eventually managed to enter her office to catch some breath. She badly needed a cold drink to soothe herself. She had become extremely confused and miserable (p. 27).
>
> She even had sweet dreams, she dreamt that she was rich and even found herself in a front seat of a 'Family Support' activities, just two seats away from the local first lady. And she was dressed in the latest green lace. She thoroughly enjoyed the occasion (p. 19).

These are regular features of this text with pronouns that lack clear-cut antecedents and that lead to monotony and feeble prose.

Another unwelcome feature in this text is that Nwoye vacilitates arbitrarily and unnecessarily from simple to complex terms. There is, for example, no need for her to use "avuncularly" and "countervailing" in the passages below:

> Duke assured her rather avuncularly (P. 18).
>
> But there was a countervailing sound, the old lady's, raging fearlessly in anger (p. 37).

These often result in ovequalifications which make her descriptions more often than not strained. These also lead to such jejune syntactic structures as the three below:

> Chief Ezeugo was very excited to hear about this enthusiasm to attend from his critics (p. 40).
>
> So the wedding preparations were big than elaborate (p. 32).

> Instructions were given for the bride to be quickly rushed back to the house, some were shouting to the hospital, hospital! (p. 46).

Prominent also in this book are the collocational errors (pp. 15, 16, 20, 30), wrong choice of words (pp. 15, 27, 28), uncoordinated constructions (pp. 19, 13, 21, 27, 28), too many to reproduce here. I equally need not venture into the grammatical aberrations (pp. 26, 27, 28, 30, etc), misspellings (p. 40 etc), chaotic punctuation (pp. 21, 22, 23), faulty quotation marks, (p. 42 especially), etc. Nwoye merely conveys the impression that she was in a hurry to publish the work and so gave no thought to editing it. These errors are so consistent that we find it difficult to attribute them to typographical problems. They make the entire work drab and colourless and the images non-provocative.

These remarks, however, do not imply that there is nothing commendable in this collection. Worthy of mention is the form of some of the dialogues. For instance, on page 18 is this conversation between Duke, the money lender, and Alero:

> "How much do you want?" Duke asked.
> "₦25,000", Alero replied, but immediately changed her mind. "₦40,000", she shouted with some sense of greed.
> "No problem", Duke said smiling mischievously.
> "When do you want it?"
> "Tomorrow".
> "What time?"
> "In the morning" (p. 18).

This apt question and answer sequence succinctly conveys, not only the intended message, but also the feelings and attitudes of the participants. The direct abrupt interchange reflects the urgency of the situation and the intensity of Alero's greed. Here, Nwoye shows competence in creating realistic conversations in dialogue form.

This notwithstanding, the numerous linguistic aberrations

in *Blind Expectations*, to me, destroy what would have been an impressive literary work.

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CHIKA NWANKWO

Book Review

TITLE: *Not Yet African: The Long Voyage Home*
AUTHOR: Kevin Gordon
PUBLISHER: Passegitta Press, Pueblo, 1998.
PAGES: 299
REVIEWER: Chika Nwankwo

> Kevin Gordon-all-round great kid, smart, athletic: parents ever-so-proud of him. But he never had to try. He also didn't know what it was to be black. So maybe that's why I needed to go to Africa — to search for a tangible base, something I could call my own — a history, a past (p. 1).

This is Kevin Gordon's introduction of himself and his compulsive need to go to Africa. He enjoyed a middle-class upbringing in Canada, and attended Havard University in the U.S. He is completely ignorant of the deprivations suffered in the black ghettos. He is therefore alienated from his fellow blacks. Yet his skin colour earns him the same treatment by the rest of American society. He wonders what he has in common with black Americans besides skin colour and the snobbery of the white Americans. 'Jamaica', according to him, "offers a closer, more direct link to his personal family ," but then there is no link with the rest of Black America. "Where is the motherland?" he asks.

The monster with which Gordon is grappling is *rootlessness*. To live without a history is to live without a form of memory. Without history, the individual, the family, the tribe, the nation, the race, appears to be without roots, without a past. The present seems to have no foundation and little, if any, meaning. A knowledge of history brings a feeling that one is part of a fellowship that runs through the ages, from long before birth, to long after death (Stanford: 2001).

True, all humanity seems to be trapped in this quest for the meaning of life. The French artist Paul Gauguin, just before his death in 1903, in French Polynesia, painted a picture of his interpretation of human life as a great mystery. Gauguin titled that painting *'D'on venous-nous? due semmes-nous? Où allon-nous?* [Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?] (*Watchtower*: 1998).

But, for the black man in the diaspora, the quest is more poignant. His isolation from the mass of humanity surrounding him creates a crisis of identity that is more personal than the general human philosophical quest for the meaning of life. His very identity is in question. So Gordon says, "Off to the continent to view my soul, so I could forge an identity. I could become African (not just black) or something tangible and unassailable... To know Africa is to validate myself, to prove that I am true, that I am not *ashamed*" (p. 2).

Gordon chooses to record his experience of Africa in the autobiographical genre, using the journal or diary form. Journals and diaries are by their very nature disjointed and less refashioned by retrospective analysis of events. They give us the inestimable boon of personal impressions while these are still fresh. Yet often, too, they provide reappraisals in the light of later experience. What they lose in artistic shape and coherence, they gain in immediacy and frankness.

Gordon's journey of self-discovery and self-revelation/analysis takes him from New York through Amsterdam to Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroun, Gabon, Congo, Zaire, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania,

Kenya, and back to Chicago. He sets out on the first day of November 1993 and returns by the fourth of April 1994, a total of one hundred and thirty-five days of travel.

The journey is not easy, but like an epic hero, Gordon is prepared for it, or so he thinks. He says, "I'm so ready for this (as far as I know). To discover the motherland. I've been waiting for this moment... Since I've been able to think for myself, overcoming the years of noneducation which spoke nothing to me of who I am or where I came from" (p. 5).

He is excited as his plane touches down at Accra airport-Africa! First to strike him is its similarity to Jamaica airport. He is familiar with the tourist hustlers, the devalued local currency, the ubiquitous cab drivers, and the tropical scenery. His cab driver Cofi (sic), who is very friendly, he hopes it is not just for the money, takes him to the Crown Prince Hotel.

On his very first day in the city, he experiences what he describes as a sensory overload. The smells from the open sewage, the fish, the bread, the people — the bathing children, the crowded market place, the shopkeepers, the greetings called out to him — Rasta!, Selassie', or Eddy Grant' — all of this assault his senses in a way he has never experienced before. Although Accra is English-speaking, the accent is of course strange to him, so 'things are familiar yet strange.' He ends the day in an Accra nightclub and feels that the throbbing pulsating beat of music, the free uninhibited dancing by men with women, men with men, and women with women, and the free flow of beer bought by those who can afford it for those who can not, all under the stars, is just what reality should be. He is happy.

His second day starts off equally well — friendly smiles, giving faces, and polite greetings. He has made some friends, Andy, a hotel employee/hanger-on, and Confidence, 'a dark skinned beauty of uncertain occupation'. He feels a sense of freedom, absolute freedom, unlike any he has ever experienced. With a Bob-Marley identity (rasta hair) and throbbing reggae from the night club, he believes that Marley's one-love philosophy may be a reality.

By his fourth day, however, he begins to see things a little differently. He begins to suspect his 'friends' motives, and he sees this as the first test of "Africa versus the West". Meanwhile, he ignores the warning from his *Lonely Planet* guide book not to eat from street vendors or shacks.

Throughout his travel, he has series of good experiences, experiences that help to sooth his nerves and renew his interest in forming a bond with Africa. There is the easy smile from an old woman as he is being harassed by beggars. He writes. "I'll never forget her steady gaze — intense yet unthreatening. She was beautiful. Everything was okay again because this sixty (seventy?) year-old woman shared a smile with me" (p. 16). There is also his trip to Labadi Beach in Accra, which he describes as another day in Paradise. Then his encounter with the family of Mrs Verylongname (so called because he can not pronounce her name). In this middle class home in Lusaka, he receives open-hearted hospitality. He admires the children and the grandchild Mahara. For a long time, the memory of his stay with Mrs N's perfect middle class existence remains with him. He sees that they have the basic necessities, from job and accommodation to a stable family and entertainment.

He also enjoys aspects of his bus rides (except in Lagos) especially when people share snacks. He constantly refers to this ability to share as one of the greatest assets of Africa. At Oshogbo, Nigeria, he notices the value of close immediate and extended family ties in which everyone is taken care of; no one is homeless, and the elderly are respected. He feels that American society can learn this from Africa. He has his best experiences in Ghana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania.

In addition to his positive experiences, he also has a great deal of culture shocks. These shocks and how he deals with them reveal a lot about him and his motives for coming to Africa. His very first day in Accra gives him such a shock, as his Western upbringing clashes with African culture. He tries being polite the Western way, but ends up giving offence. He writes:

> I meet a nice woman while eating my first foo-foo in a roadside cafe... I cut short our conversation under the pretense of having to go somewhere — I wanted to allow her to finish her meal without the obligation of speaking to me. As soon as I left the restaurant, I realized that what I had done must have seemed incredibly rude instead of courteous as I intended it to be (p. 6).

Then, he has to learn the wonder of the Ghanaian or African handshake — the grasp, shake, and snap, or the shake, grasp, and snap. He patiently takes lessons from Mose Benkua, one of the hotel staff. In addition to this, he finds that his male friends like to hold hands with him while they walk around town. He represses his Western aversion to this display of affection between males as a hint of homosexuality.

He is also shocked by the natural way nudity is displayed in Africa, starting from breastfeeding mothers who see nothing wrong with uncovering their breasts in public, to naked children who dance and play together unabashed. The adult male nudity almost drives him crazy. He writes:

> Bizarre case of stage fright at the STC bus station. Typical urinal scene — group of men peeing against a wall, when suddenly, people are squatting! No problem I think, until a fellow squats beside me and I experience visions of splashing him in some sort of urinal faux-pas (p. 19).

The culture of begging is another kind of experience that Gordon is unable to accommodate. All his 'friends' keep asking/begging for money. Chadian refugee children grab, pull, and cry to get money from him. Roadside cripples beg, and even the host at the museum asks for 150,000 cedis from him to buy a wedding dress for his lady. Because the people keep begging,

he resists the urge to give. Begging puts him off. The final straw comes when the hotel clerk asks for 2500 CFA for the room he had told him the previous day was 1500CFA. He knows the boy is angling for a 'dash', but he is in no mood for *dashing* anybody anything.

Next is his attitude to the crowds in the open market. Initially, he is overwhelmed by the crowded market scene. Walking across the markets give him a feeling of being the object of everybody's gaze. He has to summon all his reserves of courage to walk past all those staring eyes. At that point, he writes:

> What do you do when everybody stares? Smiles don't seem to be returned here. At times the sensation evokes memories of the covert glances stolen by whites in America wary of my presence in a particular store or restaurant or neighbourhood. Is there any land where I will feel welcome? (p. 16).

But later he gets so used to the crowd and the hustle and bustle of big African cities that in the small Congelese town of M'binda, he feels nostalgic, not of America but of Africa. He writes:

> I find myself missing the comforts, not of home, but of bigger or different African city. The pleasantness and tranquility of M'binda is nice, but I miss the travel, the new discoveries, the glace vendors, the range of fruits, and markets. (p. 111).

He also has very negative experiences with some people. He has his first test of one-love or African brotherhood in Togo. His host family in Akloa turns out to be after his money. He loses $100 in travelers' cheques before he realizes that the invitation to visit the village home of his 'friend' Jacques has an ulterior motive. But it is in Nigeria that he begins to concretize

what he hates most in human nature. The squalor of Lagos, the dirt, the sewage, the anarchic traffic, and the *danfo* bus culture of run, grab, and hold on, all hit Gordon hard. He also loses $70 to a 'friend' who offers him accommodation. He writes:

> Lagos encapsulates all that is evil in human nature. It's a completely anarchistic atmosphere with survival of the fittest in full effect. The wealthy sport around in their Mercedes and Land Rovers, and the self important are police escorted around town while the hurdled masses under the bridge sleep in their own sewage (p. 57).

Ironically, the negative effect of the language barrier hits him harder in Nigeria, where English is the official language, than in Togo where French is. This is because of the Lagosian habit of speaking Yoruba all the time.

When he leaves Nigeria, Cameroun, Congo, and Zaire present him with several bitter and frustrating experiences. The climax is the long weeks he has to wait in M'binda for transport out of Zaire. That long indefinite wait makes him bitter and, while expressing his bitterness, he writes one of the most poetic paragraphs in his journal:

> When you're bitter,
> You don't appreciate people playing
> basketball for fun — not to compete.
> When you're bitter,
> You don't realize the beauty of
> watching a football game played
> by shoeless people in the pouring rain
> on a half-mud/half-bush pitch.
> When you're bitter,
> you don't stop to watch young girls
> singing and dancing in the mud and rain
> When you're bitter,

> you forget that you enjoy a hard rain
> instead you just notice the clouds.
> When you're bitter, you wish that
> the train would come (p. 109).

It is also in M'binda that the problems of underdevelopment hit him hardest. To empty his bowels and have a shower in the morning, he has to first squat over a hole, water dripping on his head and back (from the leaking roof), then cover the hole with a piece of corrugated tin. As he bucket showers, the odour of wet faeces drifts up and envelopes him so he does not really feel like he's cleaning himself. In addition to this, he also has to deal with cockroaches in a funny way. This is how he describes it:

> I turn down the lamp and get ready for sleep. Moments later, the tell-tale buzz-whack of the flying cockroaches announces a visitor. I suppress my first instinct which is to flee the room entirely, and instead decide that he won't bother me and cover my entire world with the sheet. Immediately after closing my eyes I feel something on my ear. Roach! Scramble out of bed, fumble for light, heart pounding (real manly stuff here). When the excitement subsides, the lamp glows protectively bright (hopefully until sun up) the roach cowers under a pile of books and stuff and I prepare to sleep at best fitfully while creepy roach antennae probe from underneath his hiding spot (p. 117).

In the middle of all of this, he suddenly feels that he has become African, because he can now "greet people correctly and naturally, publicly pick his nose without reservation, dump in a hole, share more easily, and take effective bucket showers" (p. 110).

The absence of technological development is one

common denominator in Gordon's African experience. Ninety per cent of the time he has to do with crude substitutes for facilities taken for granted in the West. He learns how central previously routine activities can become - things like a morning shower, telephone call, transport from one place to another, functional electricity, and so on. At one point, he declares that he has become "comfortable with the idiosyncrasies and intricacies necessary to accomplish tasks that would be taken for granted on other continents" (p. 133). Yet, in discussions with friends, he finds himself heatedly extolling the virtues of African life to some members of the street exchange district in Kinshasa. Rightly, he asks himself, "What am I trying to prove? Do I believe it myself?" His answer: "I don't know" (p. 133).

At Ilebo, he admits that he will never be the same after Zaire. He learns now and forever more to appreciate anything and everything vaguely positive, and disregard or simply deal with anything negative. The situation gets so bad that he is not even sure of getting out alive. He says, "my appreciation of variety will be infinite when/if I get home" (p. 163). When eventually he boards a plane to take him out of Zaire, he says:

> I have never been happier in my life. No exaggeration. No lie. I now sit comfortably at a window seat on the wing... The point is I'm back in civilization. Not that I was with uncivilized people over the last few days, but the events that have transpired since Monday have changed my life forever. I have seen absolute desperation. I have been absolutely desperate. I cried (well, almost). I thought about praying to a god but realized that I don't believe that shit... My experiences of Tues - Thurs were unfathomably spectacular, running through the entire spectrum of human (and perhaps animal) emotion. I have seen the best aspects of humanity. I have seen what people resort to when they have no hope (p.

189).

Once out of Zaire, however, things begin to look up generally. In Zambia, he says, "life is good" (p. 199). Everything is clean and modern. There are garbage bins, service-oriented stores, banks with posted exchange rates, and English-speaking people. In Zimbabwe, he meets other tourists, and the atmosphere brightens up even further. He notes that the gap in living standards between West and East/Central Africa is very wide, but he feels that it is at the expense of politeness, consideration, honesty, and national self esteem. He meets more whites and finds that he does not feel friendly towards them at all. He has learned to be defensive of Africa. He has seen so much suffering that he feels hostile towards those who see Africa only as a tourist paradise. He deliberately withdraws from the tourists in Blantyre, Malawi to go off on his own to see the people.

In Tanzania, he continues to enjoy the environment and the people. Commenting on his casual friendship with Dave, he says:

> There are signs that I'm achieving close to full Africanness. Hanging with Dave—a very mellow, experienced traveller, I notice the differences dealing with typical African circumstances: i.e., patience, crowded buses, food, service, etc. Especially after hanging with Dave and the South African guy, I realize how much fuller and freer I feel when not restricted by their presence... I'm definitely loving the experience (p. 259).

This change in perspective helps him to cope with further travel frustrations on his way to Dar-es-Salaam. He writes of this trip:

> Here we sit... Well we're still in Mangula, waiting for whatever... It's interesting how my reaction to

> this situation is so different than previous setbacks. I can't even refer to this as a setback, since I'm not in the least bit annoyed (p. 260).

Thus relieved from stress, he enjoys the friendliness and communal feelings of other travellers. He finds Nairobi better than he had expected. Days of safari delight him immensely, but by this time he has had so much adventure that he feels tired. On Sunday 27th March, he writes, 'I'm tired. It seems that this last phase of the journey consists of hanging with the tourists, seeing sights, and being treated accordingly by the local populace. I can't blame it on the company, because the opportunities are still there. I just lack the motivational energy" (p. 274).

So, Gordon lazily concludes his journey by enjoying picnics and nature trips and viewing memorable sights like the vivid, orange, full moon just above the mountains on the horizon; the giraffe silhouetted against the night sky and white moon; the moonlight reflecting off the river in the background, with the sleeping crocodile ten feet away on the river path in the foreground" (p. 276).

When he finally gets back "home" to Chicago, he is a bundle of experience, emotions, recollections, and reflections. Slowly but surely, inevitably it all begins to unravel.

He rationalizes his trip, wondering if it has all been a useless waste, or worse, a negative growth, to gain "true" perspective only to realize that one cannot happily exist (or even unhappily, for that matter) without pain or joy. He terms the mix-up of feelings in him 'Demons of Omni-experience'. He quotes Ben Okri, "The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you" (p. 286). He continues to struggle, but fails to get integrated into the African-American society. He admits that he does not know the culture to which he has been assigned by his colour. He feels frustrated and quotes Toni Morrison, "Sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside, not America - not black - just me" (p. 287). He feels so

unhappy that he thinks his is a fate worse than death because what he has seen he is unable to share. He has seen and experienced too much but not enough. He wants to live but is denied that by too much vision. He captures his mood in this poem he writes on Tuesday, 7th February, 1995:

POETRY OF HOPE

I wish...
Break crush burn rage
Not understand
Stop thinking
Be out of control
Fuck something up
Shatter
Strangle
Stop. Being so damn inhuman
Laugh
Cry. Scream
... but I can't
(p. 285).

Not Yet African is interesting, and even outstanding in many respects. It is epic in scope, very original in technique, historically relevant, and shocking in its revelation of the realities of twentieth century sub-Sahara Africa.

This record of Kevin Gordon's journey of self discovery is bulging at its seams with details. Cinematographically, this young man records the daily lives and fortunes/misfortunes of people in fifty-one towns and villages through which he passes and in each of which he spends time ranging from 2 to 12 days. The sheer quantum of experience is intimidating.

His technique is original. This is not to say that the journalistic style is new. What is new and refreshing is the modest way in which he uses it. At the very outset of his work, he seems unsure of the effectiveness of the journal genre to

contain his experience (p. 11). He thereby gives the impression that he is not sure that his technique suits his material. This immediately wins him his readers' good faith and allegiance, because he seems to be inviting the reader to decide with him which technique to use.

This quality of modesty is also reinforced by the transparent candour of the narrative. Gordon tells of his doubts concerning his own reactions to situations. He does not hide even his dreams and their possible interpretations. There is, for example, this conversation with his friends in Dibaija, Zaire, who ask him, "If you had the choice where would you live?" His journal entry reads:

> Good question, and one that has come up a few times of late. I lie and say that it's difficult to answer, since the way of life is so rich and beautiful here, but I would miss my friends and family. *Truth is, the life is hard here, and I'm probably only able to be appreciative of the finer things of Africa because I know that my suffering is only temporary (p. 151, emphasis mine).*

Again, in a memorable paragraph, while expressing his appreciation of a beautiful scene, he writes, "If I were a poet or author, I could better express the wonder of it all. Unfortunately I'm only me" (p. 142).

Secondly, his historical position is strategic. Few movements or events in the history of mankind can be ranked with the transatlantic slave trade which started in 1502 and ended in 1808. Kevin Gordon is a descendant of an African slave, several generations after. So his work provides an insight into the feelings of alienation from home and culture which Africans in the Diaspora suffer. It also gives an insight into the psychological situation that has developed overseas, in the sense that a generation of blacks has been spawned who, because of their middle class upbringing, are alienated from their black

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brothers who have had or are still having the ghetto experience. So we have here a case of multiple alienation: alienation from the white West, alienation from the blacks in the diaspora; and alienation from the African motherland. His journal is a document that must be consulted by anyone interested in African history and the effects of the trans-atlantic slave trade on the slaves and their descendants, as well as those interested in bridging the gap between the homeland and the diaspora.

Finally, Kevin Gordon's visit to Africa is, in my opinion, comparable to the visit of the Messiah to Jerusalem in the first century C.E. He bewails Jerusalem as a city that knows not the hour of her inspection, and has been caught napping. The Andrew Youngs and Jesse Jacksons, and the rest of the so-called influential black caucus may never have seen the Africa visited by Gordon. There is no politician in flowing gowns to show him what to see and where to stay. Not for him the Sheraton and Hilton hotels. He moves about on his own, mostly unnoticed. He discovers the real Africa.

Africa hopes that the questions Gordon raises as to what can be done to improve the situation will not lie unanswered for too long. When he grows up a bit more and perchance has more power, will he remember Africa? Take for example his comment on Zaire:

> Throughout Zaire there were signs of what once was (or could be?): houses and stores with electrical fixtures and indoor plumbing facilities. What happened? (p. 113).

Then, on a general note, he observes that "Africa has got to be the number one outlet for cheap t-shirts and over sized belts. Why? How has this happened? How can it stop? Does anyone outside Africa really give "a shit"? Of the Nigerian working class, he notes "A world and a life ago I was a professional tennis instructor. Just now it struck me that during one lesson with ... suburban tennis ladies I made more in an hour and a half than

my Nigerian immigration friend makes in one month (about 2000 N)" (p. 55).

A survey of Afro-Caribbean/American novels shows no direct tradition which reverses the journey into slavery to a voyage back home. Yet going back home is a recurrent theme in Afro-American works. Since the movement which resettled freed slaves in Liberia, some individuals have continued to trace their ways back to their African roots, and not a few have settled in Ghana. W.E.B. DuBois (1868 - 1963) was one such. Towards the end of his life, DuBois disposed of his American citizenship rather than further compromise his dignity and his conscience. Even before embarking on the journey home, he had written a verbal embrace of his new country, "Ghana Calls". In that poem, he asks the question, "And what is the truth about Africa?" To find out, he said:

> ... I came to Accra
> Here at last, I looked back
> I heard the voice in my dream that loosed
> The long-locked dungeon of my soul
> I sensed that Africa had come
> (Miller 1971).

But unlike DuBois, Gordon does not quite fit into Ghanaian or any other African community. His sense of alienation persists. Why?

Professor Millet in his Preface to Gordon's book feels that the fact of colonialism and decolonization, not to speak of slavery and the slave trade, are really not the mindset of today's young blacks. "To the generation of the nineties all that is ancient history" (p. xii).

I do not quite agree with Prof. Millet's conclusions about Gordon's mindset with respect to colonialism, decolonization, slavery, and the slave-trade. Rather, I would say that Gordon is very conscious of all these negative contacts between Africa and the West. Throughout his book, he questions the rationale

behind using Africa as a dumping ground for Western goods. He comments on the role Western religions have played in undermining true nationalism. He even resents seeing Africans in Western clothes.

That he is painfully aware of slavery and the slave-trade as part of the ancient forces that fashioned today's Africa is shown in his record of his emotions two days after his visit to the slave castles in Cape Coast, Ghana:

> All night I thought about my brown skin — unlike that of my Ghanaian brethren. When did the rapes in my family tree occur? It makes for me especially poignant (albeit contextually removed) the female slave dungeon's trap door leading to the governor's private quarters. With the color of my skin I'm a legacy of the vilest act imaginable along with most black (brown)Americans (p. 17).

I believe that Gordon's identity crisis persists, inspite of his journey through Africa because he is somewhat disappointed with the reception he got in Africa. On Monday 11th August, 1994, he records a dream he has just five days after landing in Accra. In that "vivid and strange" dream, an English speaking Ghanaian leads him through town and welcomes him into his home. In retrospect, he thinks the dream is a reflection of his strong desire to find a niche and be welcomed, in order to experience Africa, not simply as an outsider. He may have hoped that his visit to Prampram, his ancestral village, would provide this much needed anchor.

That visit ends in an anti-climax. He does not even pass the night in Prampram, despite being armed with a list of relatives made by his father's uncle some thirty five years before. When he gets to the village, he is disappointed that it looks ordinary. He writes, "This can't be it! It doesn't look different, sound different, feel different." But when he steps out, he writes:

> ... and suddenly... I'm home. Something way down in my soul makes me shudder at the enormity of the moment, my heart pounds as our tro-tro friends take us to the royal house... I'm home. We enter the royal house... I'm enthralled with the dancing women and stand watching them out of the window (a tear welling?) (p. 26).

However, this feeling of homecoming is one-sided. The Prampram royal court does not reciprocate with a welcoming embrace, nor does it set a welcome feast before its descendant returning after centuries of absence. The dancing women (apparently practising for a performance) do not break out in ululation at the return of a long lost son. He leaves Prampram not more than one hour later, having received only an address in Accra from his nearest surviving relative and the promise that a libation will be poured for him (after he makes a gift of a bottle of gin to the chief). Why is that libation not poured in his presence?

Yet, the trip to Prampram is good for his psyche. When he gets back to Accra the same day, he writes, "It was very odd arriving back in Accra. As I walked back through the town I felt grounded and at ease like never before" (p. 28).

From his journey through Africa, Gordon gains a fresh perspective about the continent. He must have dropped his romantic ideas of the homeland. But he also finds out that Africans do not live on trees and that they are humans who could teach the world some values. He also comes to realize that the concept of Africa which African Americans have when they sing and talk, praising Africa, is far from the reality. He discovers that, for him, "the true Africa is the spirit, the laughter, the dance, the energy, the life, the hospitality, the family, the community, the nature, the simplicity" (p. 284). He even gets to the point where (at home in Chicago) he feels that the man in Lagos who accommodated him in his two room structure is not really so badly off, because Gordon's material Western comforts

pale in comparison with the Nigerian's loving, albeit extremely poor, family situation!

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CHUKWUDI ANTHONY NJOKU

Recreating a Master Craftsman: A Review of Ezenwa Ohaeto's *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*

TITLE: *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*, 326 pp.
AUTHOR: Ezenwa Ohaeto
PUBLISHERS: James Currey, Oxford &
Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indiannapolis
1997
Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria), PLc, Ibadan, 1999.

Finally, finally someone has taken up the challenge to put together the fragments of the story of Chinua Achebe, Africa's living literary legend, for us and for posterity. Long in gestation, it has been a patient work, a labour of love and admiration befitting a master craftsman, an "Eagle on Iroko".

Starting rather with simple strokes, simple strokes as deceptive as the simplicity of its subject, Ohaeto goes on to sketch an enduring portrait, following with perceptive detail, the manifold routes Achebe has so far traversed, retracing those historic strides, capturing the critical moods and varying atmosphere that shadowed and nurtured his profound artistry, re-telling the great moments and opening windows of understanding into some of the lowest points of the on-going Achebe life trajectory.

There are stories folded within this arresting story. We are offered freshly illuminating glimpses of the life of Christopher

Okigbo, the poet, who was quite close to the Achebe family. There are rich slices about the glorious early days of Government College, Umuahia, the breeding ground of a number of outstanding literary personalities in Nigeria, such as Chukwuemeka Ike and John Munonye. Through the lenses of Achebe's roots, we are placed at the strategic juncture when the Christian missionaries arrived in Igboland and were just fanning out into the villages. By giving unusual voice to the experiences, expectations and reactions of the elderly folk at the time to this new religion and its baggage, we are enabled to penetrate their perception of the foreign missionaries and their varied proselytising techniques.

Ezenwa Ohaeto also goes behind the doors to reveal to us the story of the writing of *Things Fall Apart, No Longer At Ease, Arrow of God, A Man of the People* and such short stories for children as *How the Leopard Got Its Claws*. There is also the neatly folded story of Radio Nigeria, and the creation of Voice of Nigeria, as well as the story of *Okike*.

Among these, however, the story of *Biafra* stands out and runs in and out of the varied rivulets of Achebe's story. The overarching shadow of *Biafra* is unavoidable and provides an important key for understanding the bigger story. In revisiting and resurrecting *Biafra,* Ohaeto takes us down memory lane to its why, its resilience, its tragedy, its pathos, its creativity, its spirit, its pains, its joys, and its soul. Through such revealing slices, he enables us to grasp the passion and the strength of character behind the man Chinua Achebe, and to have a feel of his seasoned, ceaseless social commitment.

Here is a kaleidoscope of the creative prodigality of Chinua Achebe. Here we have a first full glimpse of the roots and branches and flowers of his enormous creative energy and passion. You can smell the fragrance that has enveloped us all and made Achebe a household name.

As one of those who have had the luck to go to Nsukka on pilgrimage to meet the man face to face, I could not help saying to myself "that is the man!" almost at every corner and turn of the

story. Here and there in Ohaeto's skilful narrative, one finds hints and glints that make one shout "*Ehee*! No wonder!" "Is that so?!" "Now, I understand". And there are sharp turns and curves in the story that take your breath away and create respectful silence in salute of such a rich life. For there is something about Chinua Achebe, something so captivating you will never forget if you ever have had even a few short minutes of meeting him—that strange mix of shyness and rugged courage, of simplicity and profound wisdom, that disarming and disturbing prophetic honesty, that at-one-ment and total attention he gives, that readiness to be of help, yet to tell the truth as starkly and as compassionately as possible. Achebe is a rare phenomenon, a major gift to Africa and the world, a great ancestor in the making, an *Ijele*[1] who moves about conscious of his mission and ready for its myriad challenges, an old man refusing to relinquish his youth, his fire, his passion and his generosity, a restless spirit bubbling with creative energy, a true son of Igboland and a worthy frontiersman in African and world literary culture[2].

Ohaeto has done a job of a lifetime for himself, for Achebe and for us all and richly deserves to be congratulated for this self-imposed task, executed with inspiring candour, touching devotion and great objectivity.

Ohaeto's labour benefits immensely from an unprecedented extended access to the man, his family and his

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[1] Ijele is one of the most respected and most lavishly costumed masquerades in Igboland. It makes its appearance only in due season and when it takes the floor, other masquerades beat their retreat in tribute. In its profuse beauty, Ijele is a symbol as well as a celebration of prodigious endowment and wealth in a rather attractive extravagance.

[2] A measure of the overwhelming reception of Chinua Achebe in the literary world can be seen in the prodigious success of his first major literary outing, *Things Fall Apart*, published by Heinemann in 1958. *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into over fifty languages, including all the major modern languages. This unique achievement makes it one of the most translated novels of the twentieth century.

most intimate network of friends, kindred spirits and critics across the globe. This advantage gave Ezenwa access to a vast untapped reservoir of information, documentation and perspectives on Chinua Achebe. This is no mere library and archival research. One can almost feel the reels of interview tapes gently unfolding the rich oral sources, gathered from far-flung places, in a plethora of voices and carefully pieced together. Almost seamlessly.

Almost, but not quite. The linguistic style adopted by Ohaeto in crafting this very promising narrative could have been improved. Short sentences are of course good for clarity but an overdose of it can be boring. Again one misses that flavour, that icing, that picture–splashing quality that makes literary writing both informative and aesthetically attractive and lifts it from mere chronicle to a work of art. That variation in tone, that flexible creative deployment of words by the artist, resulting in the construction of happy, memorable lines which remain with the reader, is rather sparse in Ezenwa Ohaeto's narrative style. But for the magnetic power of his subject, Ezenwa ran the risk of losing many readers with the quality of the language he employed to craft this biography. What he misses in style he makes up for in the freshness of information he supplies.

In spite of the enormous effort noticeable in Ohaeto's hunt for sources for this biography, there are important gaps in the sources which could have been remedied. One would have loved to hear what the younger generation to whom Achebe is handing over the literary baton in Nigeria say about his work. Voices like those of Odia Ofeimun, Ossie Enekwe, Isidore Okpewo, Chinweizu and the like would have further enriched the narrative.

Interviews with outstanding contemporaries, like Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o specifically, for this biography, would have added richer perspectives to the work. Interviews for this biography were concentrated too much around the friends of Achebe. This lopsidedness in admitting voices is a grave risk, for it could make the uninformed reader go away with the feeling that this was a long praise song because of the muffling of the

voice of the devil's advocate. The admirer's blind spot is clearly at play here, and Ohaeto should be forgiven for his extended enthusiasm on the flute for a man who justifiably deserves the rich melody of all the drums that could be rolled out in our market squares.

Ohaeto takes us deftly and courageously into a rare view of Achebe's domestic space, his family. Yet, like Oliver Twist, the reader wants more. His tantalising openings have made us even more curious to lift the veil of anonymity which has covered the children of Chinua Achebe. How, for instance, are they coping with the weight of achievement to which they are heir? How does the man go about the actual crafting of his works? It may also have been interesting to hear from the small circle of staff who have worked faithfully with Achebe over the years, people like Esther Ogadi, for this could possibly offer us richer and unexpected perspectives on Chinua Achebe away from the familiar rhythm of the academic critics.

These then are some gaps one would have loved to see filled. These trails and more could be followed up, for these ellipses tug at the reader's imagination and yearn for more information. The gaps in this biography emphasise even more the immensity of the man and the need for more biographies. For, is Achebe not like the proverbial *ukwu ose*? *Okilikili ka a na-gba ukwu ose, a naghi ari ya elu*".[3] Who could ever hope to have a firm and complete hold of this man of many parts? Who? Achebe is a critic's bottomless gold mine.

Ohaeto has made a major effort full of trustworthy signposts, vivid outlines and telling sketches. The celebration of Chinua Achebe must continue for what we have is not an individual but an institution. And the departments are daily

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[3] This Igbo proverb indicates the peculiar character of the pepper tree cluster. The pepper tree cluster allows you to go round it and take as much of its fruit as you want but it never allows you to climb on top of it, a metaphor for finally mastering it. The most any one can hope to do then is to go round it in circles and respect its ageless taboo.

growing and students of a multitude of tongues and concerns keep converging from every conceivable background, eager to savour the lessons as diverse as the wind. Ezenwa Ohaeto's *CHINUA ACHEBE* is an important, ground-breaking, pioneer effort in this elastic celebration. And it has only just begun, because Chinua Achebe is one of those mortals who have confronted, frightened and banished their deaths forever.

Every library, private or public or institutional, that contains *THINGS FALL APART*, and *NO LONGER AT EASE* and *ARROW OF GOD*... should also have *CHINUA ACHEBE*, for this biography provides the key to the heart of Achebe's profound creativity and irrepressible social commitment.

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