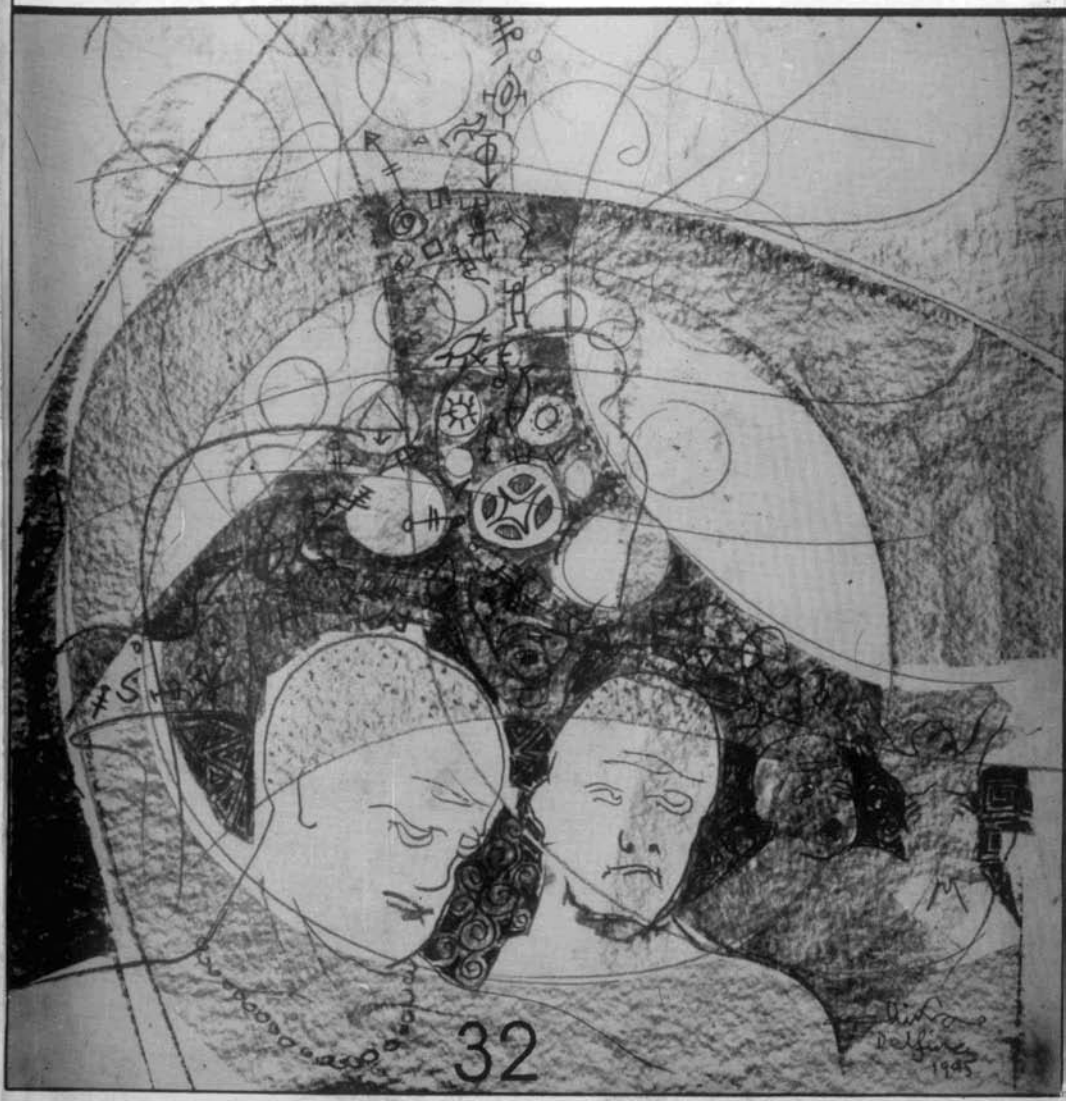
OKIKE

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



OKIKE
NUMBER 32

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NUMBER 32, FEBRUARY 1996

Manuscripts should be in duplicate, typewritten, double-spaced with ample margins. A brief autobiographical note should accompany each submission. Unused manuscripts shall not be returned, unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelops.

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An African Journal of New Writing

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Contents

From the Editor

In this issue, we feature the work of several young poets and fiction writers, who are appearing in print for the first time. This, we are sure, will delight all our readers. This is something to celebrate. We hope that they will grow from strength to strength, which is the goal of *Okike* founders.

Since No. 31, we have been receiving more contributions than ever before which shows that the impact that we hoped for is being felt. However, we do not receive short stories, short plays and reviews as much as we would like.

We are happy to announce that *Okike* will be twenty-five years in 1996 - another cause for celebration. The October 1996 edition will mark our Silver Jubilee. We invite special contributions for this issue. Contributors should remember, in this case, as in all cases, to send biographical notes, together with two copies of their manuscripts. Remember: manuscripts should be in duplicate, typewritten, double-spaced with ample margins.

Have a pleasant year.

Onuora Ossie Enekwe

CHINYELU NZEWI

Tomorrow In Our Eyes

If you see me
Lying on the tarmac
Bloodied
Dyed in red
Fragmented ankles
A debris of tissues
Dismembered heart

If you see our yesterday
Reported in history
Twisted through tales
Broken into shreds
Plastered on faces
Draped in black

Will you stop and say
Hello?
Will you report
I was there?
Will you make firewood
Of the fallen branches
And sit on the trunk
Of the fallen tree?
What will you do
I beg you,
Be my friend tomorrow.

USMAN M. TUMSAH

End Of Dreams

Pictures run through my mind
substituting acardian dreams with reality
dreams and reality, juxtaposed
in this abysmal depth of mental passion

Dreams

Creator of honey scented reality
flowing through my arid fountains of desire
forming rich pictures of reality on my heart
to make dreams of diminished value
and life goes around in reduced circles
waiting for time to come around

Reality

The end of dreamy existence
dawn of monumental significance
as dreams are banished
to the realm of nightly visitations

Dreams or Reality

Who needs the domination of dreams
when reality has proved attractive
needing only a little tightening here and there
a little moonbeam polishing
and the stars must bow in shame
as pictures of reality shine in my dreams.

Lamentation

I sit here wistful at dawn
wishing, praying, the morning would not come,
hoping the night would remain
thick and dark
submerging my loneliness
bringing relief from inhuman gaze.

I pray, this early at dawn
and hope the gods will understand
and make the morning
tarry a while
for the day has nothing to offer
as melancholic visitations
bring fear to a depraved soul
and make the mind wish for death.

I pray to the gods, this early at dawn
and beg them, blot out the sun
and plunge earth into darkness
for I have no use of light
and I fear the sun's rays
which touch deeply my soul
opening it to sneers of fools.

Song Of The Lonely

In the middle of the night
when passion fills-up
I will go walking in my sleep
through the valley of dreams

hand in hand I shall stroll
with the shadow of my love.

In the height of noon when my soul feels cold
I will go swimming in a trance
in the rivers of hope.
Heart to heart I paddle
with the ghost of my love.

When the sun goes to sleep
and my heart lies alone
I sing my mournful tune
upon my harp of melancholy;
loud and clear I sing
besides the grave of my love.

At the first light of dawn
when pain denies me sleep
I let the tears soak my pillow
remembering promises untrue
while I cry myself to sleep
with memories of my love.

CHIKA NINA UNIGWE

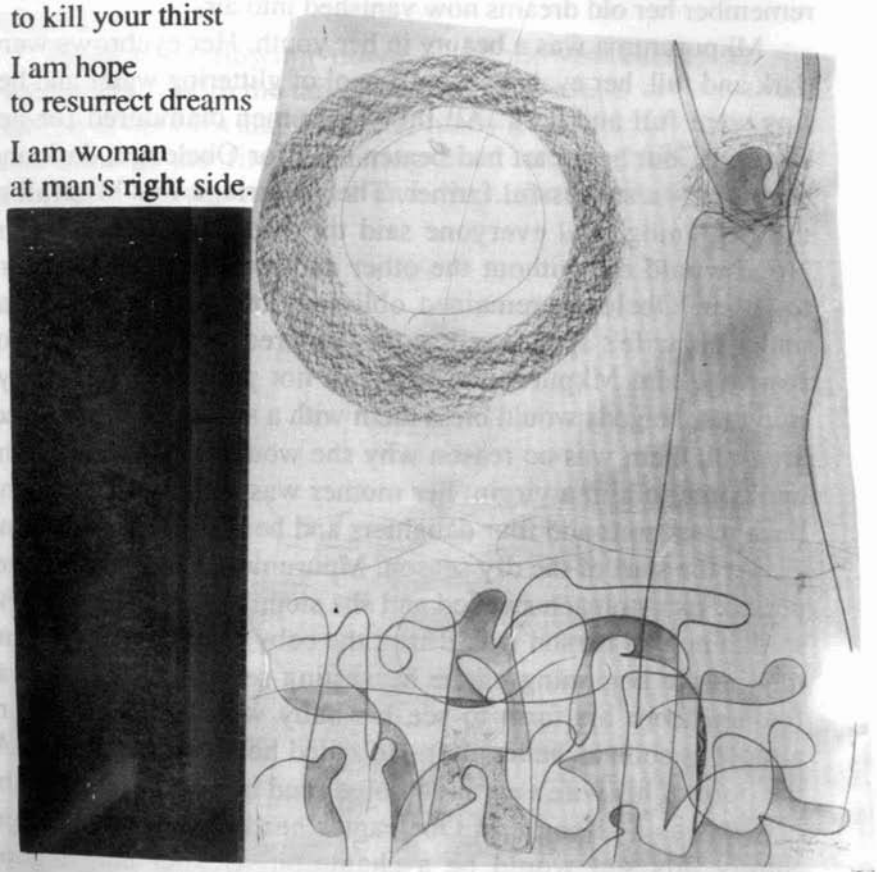
I Am

I am fire
red glow in the dark

I am water
to kill your thirst

I am hope
to resurrect dreams

I am woman
at man's right side.



A Woman's World

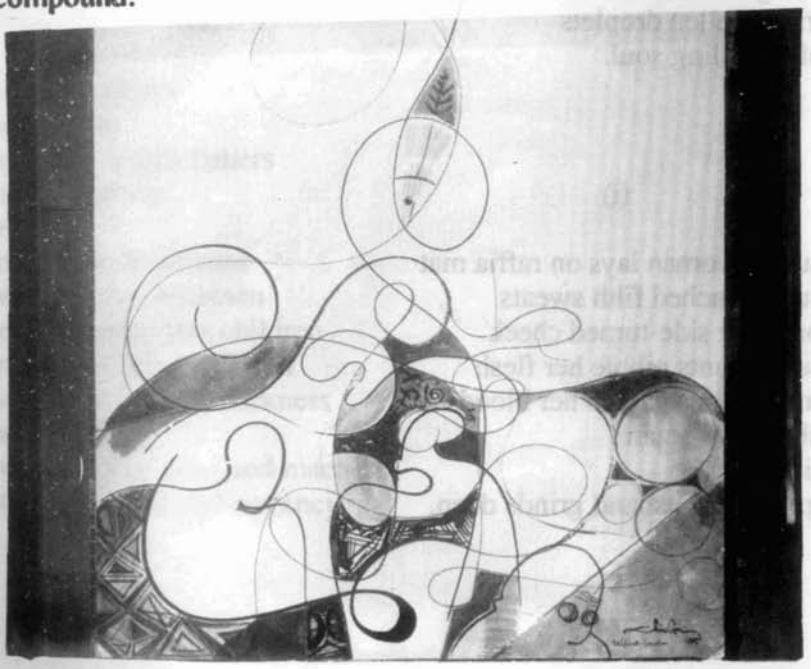
Mkpurumma's cheeks were two round balls as she blew into the dying wood fire upon which her tripod pot stood. "I wonder why this fire won't stay", she muttered, scattering the ashes of a dead fire across her well-swept compound. She watched a trail of smoke become a spiral wisp and then disappear into the clouds. A large tear ran down her thin, oval face as she began to remember her old dreams now vanished into air.

Mkpurumma was a beauty in her youth. Her eyebrows were dark and full, her eyeballs were a pool of glittering water and her lips were full and dark. All the young men clamoured for her attention, but her heart had beaten only for Obeleagu, dark and muscular - a successful farmer. Their marriage was blissfull at the beginning, and everyone said they behaved like siblings. None would eat without the other and they went everywhere together. Obeleagu remained oblivious of taunts that he was under his wife's spell, even as they entered their fourth year of marriage and Mkpurumma was still not pregnant. He always said that the gods would bless them with a son at their own time; after all, there was no reason why she would not conceive. She had come to him a virgin; her mother was very fruitful, giving birth to six sons and four daughters and he was his father's son.

At the start of the dry season, Mpurumma began to miss her period. Her stomach swelled and she stopped going out at night, so that no evil person would steal the baby from her womb. One day, at the beginning of the harvesting season, Obeleagu was fetched from his farm to see his baby which had been born almost as soon as he had left. He sailed home on the clouds. At the door of his wife's earth-coloured mud hut, he heard his baby cry. It was a strong cry. Obeleagu's head swelled with pride. Surely, his son would be a champion wrestler and a good

farmer. Bending under the low eaves. he entered and saw his beloved lying beside his baby. She gave him a weak smile as Ada, the stocky village mid-wife handed him the crying baby. He stretched out his happy hands, accepted the bundle, gave a wide grin as he looked down at it. He stared at the genitals and his grin became a frown. Immediately, as if he had been stung by a scorpion, he handed the baby back to Ada, picked up the hoe, dirty with mud that he had dropped in his haste to carry his baby and thundered, "So for this I waited four years"and walked out as Mkpurumma broke into a loud wail. She had to leave his house soon after.

Tears were flowing down her hollowed cheeks as she remembered. With the tail of the cloth tied round her waist, she dabbed at her eyes and wiped her runny nose. She stooped again and blew at the fire, scattering dead ashes which her little daughter, Ijenwanyi, naked and dirty, came chasing into the compound.



VERONICA MITCHELL

Spirals

(for Obiora Udechukwu
on the anniversary of his birth)

Part 1

like up-turned leaves
of cocoa yams.
after the rain
mango-sweet cheeks
trap swollen droplets
of a chilling soul.

(i)

sullen woman lays on raffia mat
sun-drenched filth sweats
onto her side-turned cheek
soldier ants nibble her flesh
mosquitoes parade her blood
shut up woman
lift your leg
groaning husband grinds deep.

(ii)

I took form
in her shallow womb
sucked erect nipples
seeping dust
of greed and empty gestures
survived to rattle walls
of my cardboard cradle
survived to sling the hoe
in highways of cassava mounds
stung by Yellowstar's tendrils
soil oozing between tiny feet
I watched drivers chauffeur age-mates
dust tracks' grit never leaves my tongue.

(iii)

toothless elders
break kola
with hoe-weary fathers
each watching
fearing
tomorrow-filled sons
world-weary wisemen
see tomorrow-less children
mocking the ogene's call
preferring to farm Darkness
baring teeth
welding fists, guns and machete
to harvest pain and currency.

Part 2

like the crystalling breath
of the Reaper
iced eyes await the damned
to spit the fire of fear
which torches emotion
and burns desire.

(i)

God's path their transport reads
insulator from lepers
malignant as the carbuncle's eye
hungry lizards vie for sunning ants
geckos foretell of moral blight
insulation stripped
in martial silence
Time collapses and power shifts.

(ii)

shut up woman
I'll beat you again
no killing tonight
big mouth woman
see their face in dirt men like me
with grit on their tongue
mad woman
think me ignorant
how much are you worth

shut up woman
lift your leg

it's sweet to you.

(iii)

things fall apart
kate's wing drops
on wild grass
inside compound walls
shivering mother
dreams of blood spilled
tight-lipped elders
swallow condolences
shamed father buries
blighted harvest
in silence
the ogene sounds
a child is born ...

May 22, 1992
Nsukka, Nigeria

Hello, When Was The Last Time I Saw You?

This Western linear concept
of time is fine for children
They know
a day is a day,
Forever's 'til Dream-Time.

But Ole gals like me?
don't know, don't understand
see moments fold into moments
No past
No future.

The Snake That Lost Its Bell

I came home licking my wounds
crying to stars
my children cannot see
children cannot see
children cannot see
children covering each other
crouching on sidewalks

bullets mangling lives
snuffing futures.

I came home licking my wounds
praying to ancestors
my children cannot hear
children covering each other

in fantasy dens

mothers grieve children
rotting within.

I came home licking my wounds
dancing to thunderbolts
my children cannot catch
children covering each other
on the Euphrates shore

bombs scrape Ishtar's womb
of history

I came home licking my wounds
mourning mothers
my children cannot touch
children covering each other
in stairwells making selves

recreating worlds
outside of pain.

God gave Brer Snake a bell to
identify his whereabouts because
the animals had complained that
Brer Snake had been goin' 'round
poisoning everyone he could get his
teeth into' in the name of
protecting his generations.

I came home licking my wounds
gasping for air
my children suck through pipes
children covering each other
scratching backs of ghosts

minds etched in poison
from Brer Snake.

OGAGA IFOWODO

The Last Night

Spiked by a three-day growth of beard
the mirror presented a stranger
as he contemplated the damned route of power.
One more day grew on his jaw
leaving, unshaved, the ache in each root of hair.
To free the body for the hard task of regret
the can of shaving powder slipped to the floor freeing the night
from barricades of recent memory:

Ah, the choice tainted the road
tainting each step on a thorny route!
The voice of God, so clear
even above the massive roar of night seas had dissolved
into the temper of the streets,
I hear now only the last prophet's voice.
He that dwelt last on his rock
and at time of departure
rolled it against the door
that none may ascend till his second coming.
But an angel rolled it away
and I sat thereupon.
The night rehearsing to sit straight
on a blind stool had commenced.
Without a knock, the door opened
and the commander of the army
(who I was warned would steal my sleep)
walked in with gun-bearers, and announced:
"This moment marks your departure
There's time for a shave, and at midnight
you 'll be driven out of my town incognito."
Four guns drove my hand from the phone,

the guards had left their posts.

Through the windows of the Council Hall
faintly, through the fog of heavy breathing
I saw my television time at newsbreak:
the changing chairs as I replaced a soldier's ghost,
the airport crowd where I smiled alone...
And at the summit of governments
where I poked my nose in condoned offence
there I was in the shadow of a withering tree,
barely visible in the backroom raised a fist to mark my space.

But news from home had fouled a moment of history,
there was hardly time for the pose
but for the nation and family album
I fought with a fist for the camera's eye.
And there I was in broadcast to the nation
tender at heart, I had the balm to hand -
a promise of eight months of kindness
saying lastly: " I take power only as sacrifice!"

In the thinning air guarded by guns in the clouding fog of heavy breathing
I doubted the screen and cursed the impostor:
Lord! was that me in the hour of power?
The commander opened the back door
I asked a favour: your excellencies
may I beg to turn off the TV
to retrieve and burn the master-tapes?

It was a night journey, full of its woes
but compassionate beyond my imagining
for they said to save me
from the waiting stones of housewives.

My head on a can of petrol
I close my eyes to the damned route of power.
He must have seen terror in a sudden fever
as he announced the route to my country home
ensconced beneath the rocks of my ancient

but now hostile hometown
for I arrived the guest of the company
where I was to declare of dividends
earned in ways the memos never told.
The silence of the house was blunt
like a loom of cobwebs.
A Servant was ready with rudeness
I called him by first name, seeking
to affect the awe and respect of yester-days
vexed, he showed a bandaged arm,
victim of riot bullets.
"I sought to better your lot in the long run", I said
"Better as e be for short run", he said.

Spiked by a four-day growth of beard
the pillow was harsh to a head in need of rest.
He turned on the bedside lamp
to light his eyes to familiar things
and pulled out a pack of sleeping pills.
On his way to a glass of water
he saw the business-lunch photograph
of him and his kinsman
whose greatest joy
he crushed beneath the rock.
Crashing onto the massive oak bed, dusty
now with eighty-two days of unkempt memory
he wept and slept, dreaming fitfully
of his television advert
and a rock rolling down his road.

11 December 1993

ABUDU AFEGBUA

Preludes

The beginning sprung upon wheels and...
The end fell upon wheels and sprang before
Again and again.

The first pulse of my dawn
Lean refuge on the grey before
Upon white-washed continents
Under your bridled sky
You break the pulse of ascent
Nightings of our sun
In your unbroken duel.

We throw sickles at brown fields
We sleep forever in the grey of sun
We pluck the moment's yield
When a seed is pregnant above.

Refrains
Upon brown fields and grey suns
Myriad roses and springs
Harmonies of broken fine-cord
Where this vision lay defaced.

After, a light, a candle
When a shadow weeps. Solitude
on melting snow-peaks.

No music after the dissolute
When a torturer prevails
Safer in the knell
And it...
... will hide me

Where light and a shadow
Had one eye
At withering heights
The shadow cries
On whitened streams
Seeking
for a heart. Nighting
To spread the glistening evanescence
of a heart within.

Pause

Memories these hands have spurned
A honeyed dance of exploding minds
Bear truth to probe on grid palms
A lament is wild
A pulse seeks the heart's secret'

And I will eat with the birds
The honey grains of the tongue
I will dance the laughter of crocodiles
Within the sharp-edge confines of bliss

I have broken the kolanuts
I have broken the kernel shells
I have wrapped myself in threaded cowries

Nights on broken wheels.

EMEKA AGBAYI

Cross Over, Little Brother

Like a breast heavy with milk
my veins are laden with helplesness,
my eyes with pity
when I look at the pain in your eyes,
at your shrivelling body
or listen to the groans from your soul.

But there is nothing I can do for you,
little brother,
nothing that I know of.

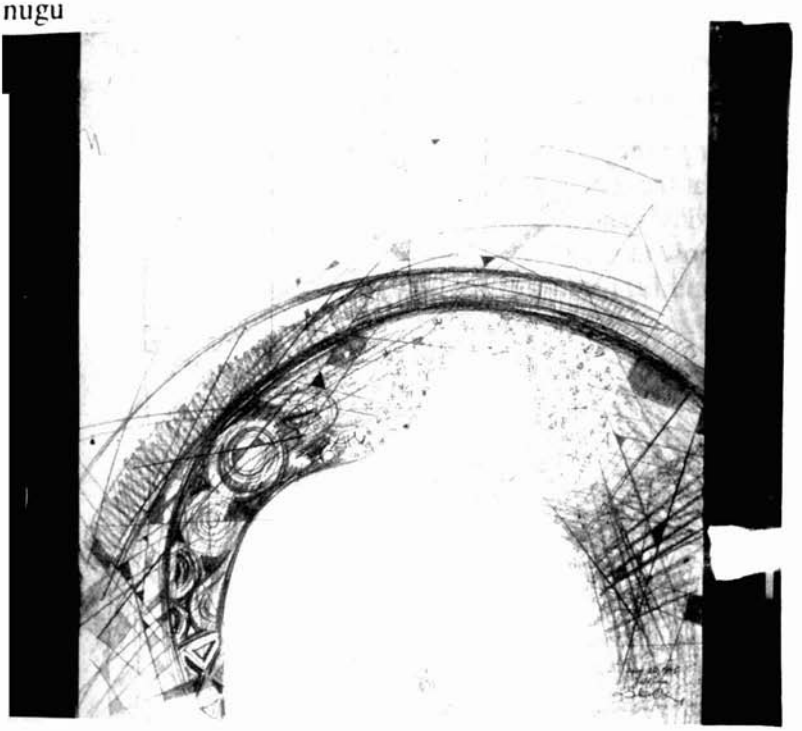
When the fruit is ripe,
and the sun is set,
nothing but a thud,
and silence.
Then peace.
When the game is over,
the hunter home,
in the heart of the game,
silence.
In the hunter's heart
glee.
Silence.
Peace.
When the sun sets,
life ebbs,
and at the passageway
one soul stands stranded, confused.
Cross over, little brother, cross over.

lothing can be done.
lothing.

ross over, little brother, cross over.
here is nothing here but emptiness,
aste, illusion.

ross over, little brother,
ross over in the silence
nd have peace.

eptember, 1990
nugu



C.KRYDZ IKWUEMESI

At The New Dawn

Bring down your flutes
And rouse them to laughter
Our tyrant's palms have touched the earth.

Oracles are falling.
Sand castles are sinking.
Old shadows are melting.

Seek not for holes
To hide your heads.
Rouse you flutes
To sonorous laughter.

Bare your poverty-painted teeth
And jeer at the feeble ghosts
Of yesterday's snow giants
Melting now in the glow
Of the youthful morning.

May, 1995

Artist's Statement

Against the veil
Of a setting sun
A furious whirlwind
Journeys across the panting land
In one sweep

Mad and turbulent.
In the lonesome square,
The man of giant testicles
And the woman of colossal breasts
Dance hand in hand without shame.
From the fringe,
Lonely and worried,
The visioner watches
With silent disdain.
More and more he wishes
To take a step,
A step to the frenzied centre
And there to become
The conscience of the feckless crowd
Attending the marriage
Of heaven and hell.
Alas!
Who would listen to him?

Port Harcourt,
August, 1993.

OSITA OBI

The Lamb

the lamb

the meek, the mild
the one comelier than a rabbit
delicate like a dayold shoot

the lamb

beady black eyes so ignorant, so harmless
a bleat like a cherub's note on a harmonica

the lamb

elegant limbs like a grown gazelle's
neat-set on hooves like high-heeled shoes

the lamb

ever leaping ever bounding
kneeling and suckling
projecting delight in a little lively tail

the lamb

wavy fur glossed and scented
the image the saviour chose

the lamb

1995

Rainbows Die

Before I began to toddle
You were an infant rainbow
Arched over my head like a bow.
You swarmed with intense colours
More alluring than a valley of flowers.
You did not wait for me
To reach out for you
Before you broke into wisps
Like a fog drifting to sea
And melted into the clumsy clouds.

1992

CHI OCHU AKPORJI

A Swig of Coke

The steel grey Brazilian-made Mercedes-Benz luxury b wended its way towards Bridge-head, Onitsha, the three quart mark on a full journey to the East. The sun was now overhea shining brightly against a clear pale blue sky randomly dott with pure white cotton wool clouds. The scorching yellow b intermittently picked up and fired the individual gold lettering IJEOMA TRANSPORT SERVICE boldly emblazoned on t sides of the bus, breaking them up into disparate lengths brilliance. Then, just as suddenly, they would be dimm altogether by the uneven shadows of the tall deciduous trees a elephant grass flanking the sides of the just retarred du carriageway.

Tagbo looked out at the scenery from his window seat, ey engaged in a running battle with the interplay of light and da Admitting defeat after a while, he closed his tired eyes, lea his forehead against the window pane, allowing the strange comforting mixture of warmth and cool to seep through worry lines to the full frontal headache raging within. He clo his eyes and fell into a deep sleep. Total peace reigned in blackness of his mind's eye for a moment or two. Then, alm imperceptibly, the tortoise-shell spectacled visage of the b Managing Director loomed large.

"I am afraid we cannot offer you the Contract for construction of our new branch at Idumota," boomed the b M.D, voice echoing throughout the blackness.

"But you've just told me my tender figure is the lowest o those received," his own voice desperate, pitched in from blackness.

"It is not just a question of competitiveness, the lo tender or the lowest Quotation. I ..."

"But you saw my portfolio. You've seen what I can do...

"But these are small jobs compared to what's on offer here. Let me remind you that this is a 15 million naira job, and ..."

"Well, a man has to start from somewhere, then graduate to the bigger jobs. I can assure you ..."

"There is no need for all that Tagbo. The Contract has already been awarded to another firm..."

"Who bid higher than I did?"

"Yes. But, they were, shall we say, more aggressive in their lobbying," the Managing Director, added, smiling knowingly.

"More aggressive... Oh, O.K., you mean..."

"You understand."

"Yes, I do understand very well". After a pause he continued. "But I was willing to stake ten percent of the contract sum for you and your directors."

"How much is ten percent of the Contract sum?" the M.D. said derisively. "That will not help us in any way. These others built in much more into the Contract sum. And they've paid us up front. Up front. Up front. UP FRONT."

Tagbo suddenly jerked up from his troubled recall, the worry lines more pronounced than ever on his forehead. He turned to look at his mother by his side.

'She is still sleeping, thank God,' he comforted himself. He recalled how she had scrimped and saved to make sure he had a decent education. She had been the most senior of three wives whose favour in her husband's eyes dropped further with the arrival of each subsequent wife into the matrimonial home. Her situation was exacerbated by the fact that she had only two issues for their father, Elder Nwokocha, the consequence of a long and difficult labour for the birth of her twins Tagbo and Ikem. Relegated to a mud hut at the furthest corner of her husband's compound, she had devoted her whole life to her two sons, selling all manner of foodstuffs, from dried fish to fresh snails, to supplement the money for tuition their constantly distracted father threw at them. Even the school fees stopped coming once the third wife arrived. This coincided with his completion of the West African School Certificate examination, his brilliant performance notwithstanding.

Tagbo remembered her distraction during those crucial months of his transition to manhood, as she wondered how on earth she was to meet the quantum leap which his educational fees had taken. Her rivals, freed from the rigours of sourcing fees, grew more robust and prosperous than she was. Ikem did not help matters either. Older than Tagbo by twenty minutes, Ikem went to seed before her very eyes, flunking exams and repeating classes till he was forced to drop out altogether in class four. Her fervent prayers had not gone unanswered, however. Help had come in the form of a Commonwealth Scholarship for Tagbo which was, applied for and promptly forgotten about when he took a temporary appointment as a primary school teacher.

"While I was away in the US, studying to be a structural engineer, she was here, living under the most hellish conditions imaginable, toiling away at a small patch of land to keep Ikem and herself together."

Her responsibilities grew to include the coterie of pampered widows and seventeen children following the death of Elder Nwokocha. Eschewing bitterness, she had dutifully observed all traditional funeral obsequies, winning the respect of the entire village in the process. He had returned home to meet her a leader of the women in the community, assertive in her decisions and demands, surer of her ways.

"Unfortunately, Uche is equally assertive and decisive," Tagbo continued his reverie.

"Your mother's stay here is becoming unbearable to me," he recalled the confrontation four afternoons ago in their bedroom.

"You just don't want to understand her."

"There you go, taking her side again," Uche had retorted, voice rising.

"I am not taking any body's side. She is an old woman. She has had a rough life. For somebody who's been used to scraping every morsel of food off her plate, she just can't stand to see food being wasted."

"Oh, so my children now waste food."

"Yes, well. They never finish their portions. They pick at it until they can no longer eat it. The maids don't want to touch the kids' left-overs. The food becomes fodder for the garbage bin. You don't seem to want to do anything about it. Things are tough and are getting tougher. I work very hard to make that money for feeding the family. And when I try to force them to finish their food, you accuse me of being too harsh on them. All they want is more toast bread, butter, cocoa, corn flakes or rice crispies, baked beans and sausages, apple juice, orange juice - imported stuff that are getting too expensive for my pocket."

"Well I want only the best for my children."

"So do I. So do I. But... You indulge them too much."

"We've gone over all that before. I..."

"No, if you had got them used to our foods here, to yams, beans, garri and soup, earlier than now, Mama would not have complained so much."

"But they ate yam this morning. With ordinary palm oil mind you, since she keeps insinuating that we waste tomatoes making stew so often. In case you've forgotten, these children were not born here. They have to be gradually inducted into our native foods. I have already begun the process of getting them used to these things. As usual nothing I do ever impresses Mama. She feels I am not good enough for her precious son. As if I don't have my own parents who think equally preciously of me. As if you did me the world's greatest favour by marrying me..."

"Don't take it down to that level, Uche, please..."

"I am tired of her insinuations and complaints. We have no common ground. She should leave me alone to run my home the way I want to. To bring up my children the way I want to. After all I also make some of the money being spent on food in this house. I have told you how I have had to supplement the house keeping allowance many times over, sometimes doubling it to buy what I want for my children..."

"They are my children also..."

"But you have found it convenient not to acknowledge my input. You must be the man of the house in everything, the

captain of the ship at all times even when it is obviously sinking..."

"Uche stop, please ... please, for the sake of peace..."

"Stop preaching peace to me. You should be preaching to your mother, not to me. She should leave me in peace to bring up my children..."

"They are my children too; and she in their grandmother."

"Just as my mother is their grandmother. Yet she understands them and where they have come from. She pets them. Buys them stuff they like. She does not stand over them, threatening them with a cane if they do not finish their food. And you had better warn her..."

"Warn her for what? Warn her for..." his voice rising.

"I will not take her lashing any of them again"

"And what will you do if she does? She has every right to. Snatch the cane from off her hand? Eh? Eh?"

"Just you warn her. I've had enough. I've tried to be accommodating. She comes here and stays months on end. I have tried to be peaceful, to understand her, to restrain myself as you've asked me to..."

"I recognize all that, I ..."

"No, you don't. If you did you would not be supporting her all the time. She always gets her way with you. She knows it and exploits it."

"Uche, don't talk so irrationally. I am only trying to be fair,' he had mellowed, going to her.

"Fair to whom?' she had shouted, retreating from his advance. 'Fair to whom? Your idea of fairness? You want me to be as stingy as she is."

"My mother is not stingy ..."

"Oh yes, you want me to have a life of scrimping and scrounging down to the last penny, just like she did. Well, let me tell you. I will not ... repeat ... I will not. You knew where I was coming from before you married me. I had hoped we would work together to build an even better future for our children. Life was not so rosy in the States but, at least, there was a future. I was not crazy with the idea of coming home finally, but you convinced me of a better life once we got home. Engineers were all the rage, you had said, what with the oil boom and the frenzy to build, build".

"Uche, don't lose hope ..."

"No! Instead, what do I get? I find myself working all hours of overtime to make up the so-called house keeping money you dole out every month-end. I find myself saddled with a shrew of a mother-in-law. I find myself saddled with a useless brother-in-law whose waking life for all the time he has been with us is eating, watching videos and checking up on everything I do in this house for onward transmission to dear mother."

"Ikem is not useless ..."

"I cannot even give my children the best of all I had as a child. All because ..."

"All because of what ..."

"All because I am saddled with you..."

He had stared at her for a long time then. The gulf between them was widening with each passing day. Words of comfort, of hope, were becoming more and more meaningless in the attempt to bridge it, to restore it to the tensile strength and the lustre of the shiny new bridge which had linked their two souls over a decade ago. The deafening silence had been broken by Odera.

"Daddy! Daddy! Open the door," his six-year old daughter had cried out trying the door anxiously. She, bless the little angel, had saved the situation, demanding that he compliment her for her school exercise that day, for which she had scored full marks, five over five, and her Math teacher had remarked "Very Good".

His mind had been a veritable whirlpool as he browsed over Odera's exercise book, careful not to let her sense the tumult within, something which judging by previous incidents, she had shown she had an uncanny ability for. Uche had stood apart from them for a while, watching father and daughter poring over class work. He had raised his head just in time for him to see her nod sadly in frustration, to see the first tears roll down her cheeks before she left the room.

There and then, he had decided to cut short Mama's ten-month stay. He had asked her to pack her belongings for a trip home to initiate discussions with ndi umunna on the parcel of

land for his proposed country home. Excited at the prospect of her son joining the revered league of country home owners, she had jumped up, blissfully oblivious of the circumstances of her departure.

"Uche is just frustrated,' Tagbo thought sadly. 'Not being able to afford what she was used to as a successful doctor's daughter, not being able to keep up with her friends: the opulent satin laces, beaded sequins and flashy lifestyles her so-called friends flaunt. I don't really blame her. I had hoped to reward her for all those long cold nights in Minneapolis, working overtime at the Memorial hospital, because it meant extra money. Extra money to make sure there was food on the table at least. To feed Eloka, whom we had not really planned for. She was instrumental to my career in her own way. She, too, sacrificed a lot for my sake. These two women in my life did. Uche. Mama."

"It's hard not to be drawn into this whole maelstrom of ostentation. There is so much peer pressure. So much. Not only among the women. It's even worse with the boys. Look at Simon. Abandoning his doctoral degree to trade in second hand vehicles, rejects from Europe that are all the craze now. All in the name of 'making it'. Those evenings we spent planning our professional lives, once we completed our studies are long forgotten. He now jostles for parking space with barely literate traders along Western Avenue, at the mercy of the elements and of the municipal officials.

Or Johnson, the architect. My professional colleague. Our past collaboration now seems meaningless. His designs were always 'wow', yet functional. Felt he was not making any headway. The market had become saturated. Creativity and originality no longer reckoned with in this country. Pressure from Linda, of "Hi y'all. I am Linda Carstairs. Welcome to good old Alabama "fame. Ha! Good Old Linda. 'Niger' to the core. A Yoruba woman whose parents are white. She must have convinced him. To turn from designing eye-catching buildings to designing flashy clothes for women.

"Poor woman. 'Niger' to the core but not 'Niger' enough to know that Lagos is not New York. Or Paris. Or London or Milan. Fashion design is yet to come into its own in this country. To say nothing of male fashion designers. Johnson now competes with vocational school leavers whose idea of design is basically cut and sew. And designing clothes for the wife of the Head of State and the cream of society ladies, as he is often quick to boast, to me is not it, no matter how much they pay."

"Jide. Now Jide. Who would have thought that he would turn out to be the wealthiest of us all back in those days in Minneapolis? He was the quiet type, slight, unassuming. Government studies had been his only option since his various attempts and failures to get into Law School. How he cried and complained to me when Johnson stole that Puerto Rican girl, Rosina from him. He was really timid and very conscious of his full lips and face marks. Johnson was not only tall and good looking, he also had reams of confidence sometimes bordering on arrogance. Faced with a choice between the two, any girl would have chosen Johnson."

"Yet look at him now. Jide. Stout. Pot-bellied. Strutting his stuff in his very expensive white sequined satin lace. Three garishly bleached wives, all in the same *asoebi*, trailing behind him. Donating half a million naira at the last launching of an "Appeal fund for the construction of a befitting palace for the Oba of his home town'. The spoils of his various fraudulent deals. Playing on the greed of spurious foreigners angling for a slice of the Nigerian cake. For his pains ... mind you, ...ehn O Togbo, you missed your road. Or did you?... the Oba is to confer a prestigious chieftaincy title on him as part of ceremonies marking his fifth year on the throne later this year. Jide is now a man of the people, chased by all manner of women, eulogized by Musicians on the look-out for a naira-rain, and out-spraying everyone else at those endless night parties for which he has become famous.

"Jide. The last of the communists. With visions of inciting revolutionary zeal in his students once he returned to Nigeria as a lecturer. Now his whole waking being is making money and flaunting it for all who care to see. How that money is made is a non-issue. "Emeka, also. The various businesses listed in his

call card, from electronics to luxury light fittings, to wine merchandising, are fronts for his real trade. The front man for the leading drug baron in government. The numerous trips abroad to source materials. Ways and means of disposing his hard drugs. We all know that. But who cares? As long as one feeds from the oily crumbs that fall off from his filthy horn of plenty. Everyone seems to be doing just that. Everyone. Everyone seems to be losing his head. Or, maybe I am the one losing mine".

"Where are we now? What time is it?" asked his mother, stirring from her sleep, jarring him awake from his thoughts.

"We have just snaked through Onitsha. It's about one thirty-five now. We are making our way to Awka, then Oji River junction."

"I must have been sleeping for sometime?"

"It's good for you, Mama. You need all the rest you can get."

"Rest is the word. Rest is what I am looking forward to. Away from that wife of yours."

"Now, Mama, don't you start."

"She does not appreciate anything. Who does she think she is anyway? Just because her father was some third-rate doctor does not give her the right to put on airs."

"Mama, lower your voice. Do you now want to entertain the passengers? Because you might as well stand up and shout your objections to Uche for all to hear."

"Anyway, I am happy to be going home. I am looking forward to the discussion of that issue with the *umunna*. It shows you are finally coming to your senses. I heard that argument you had with her some nights ago. I expected you to thrash her as any man would an insolent wife."

"Mama please..."

"Yes, you are too soft with her. The way she talks to you, in my days no woman would talk to her husband like that, even if he was a mean selfish bully like your father was."

"Stop it, Mama. Things have changed, you know. These are not the days of your own marriage. I keep telling you that."

"I wouldn't have decided to go home if I didn't want to. I would have stayed put in your house till we'd seen who had the

greater control, me or her. But your request is timely. I hope it is not just an excuse to get me out?"

"No, Mama."

"Good. We will meet your uncle Emma first at Enugu. He will advise us on the preliminary steps to take. You know how scarce land is in our clan. And the petty rivalries and jealousies that abound. My co-wives and their children will not be too thrilled to hear of your intentions to build your own house on the only good tract of land available. They are already up in arms over Ikem's claims..."

"Your claims, you mean, Mama...your claims..."

"Ikem's claims to the rightful ownership to your father's small house."

"It is solely your campaign, Mama. Ikem couldn't give a damn ever which way. I hear you're threatening to eject them from the family house. People will say you are trying to punish them for what they did to you when Papa was alive. Don't waste your time and energy negatively."

"Anyway, they're now reaping the fruits of their labour. Who would have thought that I would be lording it over them? They who reduced me to nothing before my husband."

"Mama, stop rehearsing the past."

"And now, my son the engineer is to build a mansion befitting his status, " she added, beaming at him proudly."

"Not a mansion, Mama. Just a three-bedroom house. Three bedrooms. No more."

"And one of those bedrooms is for me."

"Eh, ehn, Mama, there will always be a place for you."

"I want that room opposite your wife's, if we follow that design you showed us."

"Mama," Tagbo sighed, exasperated."

"How soon can you start?"

"As soon as I can get the funds, Mama."

"We will start clearing the land as soon as the *umunna* assent to our plans. They really have no choice but to. I will call a meeting tomorrow morning. I should be able to get some kola nuts and alligator pepper ready in time for the meeting."

"What makes you think they will listen to you, you a mere woman? That is what they will think."

"Ha! You've really been away for too long. With my age and experience I command more respect than some of you men. Don't worry. They will answer my summons. They will attend the meeting. Your task is to begin arrangements for the digging of the foundation. You must immediately buy and pile up some cement blocks. This will signal the seriousness of our intentions to the towns people."

"Mama, don't raise your hopes too high. Money is hard to come..."

"The sooner you start the better. After all, your mates who did not go to University in the whiteman's land like you are all building-Nwa Chijioke, Okafor, Uba, Ephraim-they're all building," she added determinedly.

"Mama, these are traders. They buy and they sell. Mostly smuggled goods. Whatever ingenuity it needs has to do with how to beat or bribe your way through the Customs."

"Well, why don't you join them? Why don't you buy and sell? Better still, why don't you even leave what you're doing now and join the forces? All the boys from our town who joined seem to be doing well. Look at Eliezer's son who joined the Customs..."

"Oh, Mama," he sighed, closing his eyes and throwing his head back onto the head rest. "I was just asking why..."

"Yes, yes I know, I know..."

'Always the 'why' question. Always the 'why' question. Why? Why? Why? Why?" Why? pervaded his mind, asked variously by fleeting hazy forms which, one by one, materialized into familiar faces.

"Daddy, daddy, why aren't we members of wonderland. My friends from school tell me their daddy takes them there on Saturdays. They swim, play video games and buy real ice-cream and popcorn?' Eloka's trusting ten-year-old face longingly asks him. He thought of the N15,000 membership fee. How it would rip into the budget for other more pressing needs, the fees for their private school included. Eloka's face suddenly blanked out of view, to be replaced by the dour face of Chief Odunnaike, his landlord, mouthing the very words he had used in their last confrontation three weeks ago."

"I have given you more than enough notice. Your tenancy expired on August 31st. You are yet to pay the new rent.

N90,000 naira per year. N180,000 for the usual two years. If you can pay for three years, better."

"But from where do you expect me to fork out N180,000?' he had shouted back, nearing the end of his tether. 'I paid less than half of that amount for two years, two years ago."

"Where you get the money from is none of my business. It is none of my business, you hear. Hee! You, ke! You! An engineer, talking as if you don't know what is going on in the country. I am even being lenient, considering the fact that you are a sitting tenant. You've been here since your return from abroad. I know I can comfortably get up to N200,000 naira per annum for this flat."

"Oga, listen to me.' He was scouring his reserves of tolerance just to keep calm, listen to himself think and come to some form of agreement with this modern-day Shylock. 'Just give me some more time. Till the end of November, if possible. I am expecting some money from a contract I am sure I am going to get from the bank. I'll be able to pay you even the full N200,000 then. I..."

"Bank contract, ke! Who do you think you're fooling? You know you can no longer afford to live here. Why not pack out? Look for cheaper accommodation?"

"Oga..."

"Don't Oga me. I've run out of patience, Here's your quit notice. You are to leave this premises latest by October 31st. October 31st. OCTOBER 31st.' Chief Odunnaike's bass voice reverberated through his mind, then faded to nothingness. A tremulous quiet filled the blackness."

"Why are you delaying my shop? Why? What of my shop? What of my shop?' Ikem's childlike voice, plaintive, trailed him everywhere."

"Ikem! Look. I do not owe you. I will set you up when I am good and ready to do so. Not before."

"But you promised. Before the end of the year."

"There, Mama,' he turned to the sleeping form beside him, talking to her in his mind. 'There's your proof. I've always told you the man's born retarded. He couldn't make it through school because of it. He cannot stand on his own two feet because of it. I've told you that time and time again. You have refused to accept it. Hear him whining like Eloka. Our struggle for space

and supremacy in your womb must have taken its toll on his brain. And you said he had to be dragged out."

"Well, Ikem, things have not worked out as I planned.'"

"When, then?' Ikem asked hesitantly."

That did it. His voice reverberated throughout the inner pace.

"Don't push me. Don't you push me. You live in my house. You have been living off me for the past six years. You've been the cause of constant arguments between me and my wife. You messed up your life. I did not mess it up for you. So, don't go feeling you have a right to my energy. Or my money. You don't. I am only helping you for Mama's sake. And for God's sake. When I'm good and ready, I will set you up.'"

"If you so much as set him up in the building materials business, I swear to God, I'll take my kids and disappear,' Uche's trenchant voice threatened, scaring away, Ikem's desperate look."

"Oh Uche, not you too?"

"Not you too, she says', her defiant face betraying her thirty-four years of age, coming into view. How smooth the oval, ebony face had been when he had first met her."

"Uche please..."

"Oh, oh you think I want to continue working my fingers to the bone for the rest of my life? You think I want to continue answering yes sir, yes sir, to total nincompoops who call themselves my bosses in the office. To continue taking all the put-downs I take from co-workers everyday. Oh you think I am not good enough to run my own business? A shop? Fashion shop? A cosmetics shop? A gift shop? Some place of my own where I could come and go as I like? Have one or two assistants as employees? And join the league of kept wives?

"Uche, darling..."

"Don't Uche darling me.... I've had enough. Do you hear? I've had to work, work, work, right from the day I met you. You gave me a false hope. 'Work with me Uche and we'll reap together come harvest time.' Well, I've waited long enough for the harvest to come. I'm beginning to see it's all a pipe dream. You keep meeting new clients with projects that don't see the light of day. I spend the little money I make trying to improve the lives of our children. What do I get in return? Insults and questions about my house and wifely competence from your

mother. From your good-for-nothing brother who feels I have the time to conduct some ever lasting competition with him for your attention, your property, and whom you now want to set up in business. My years of hard sweat, of course, will continue to count for nothing."

"In the first place I do not have the funds to set him up in business."

"I have been warned. No funds to do anything when it concerns the wife. But the funds suddenly materialize when it comes to girlfriends, brothers, sister, mothers."

"Who warned you? And about what?"

"Well you set your brother up over my dead body. Do you hear me? Over my dead body. Over my dead body. Over my dead body...,' Uche's face chorused, simultaneously, bloating to fill up the entire expanse of his consciousness. Tagbo felt his head enlarging.

'Good God! I'm about to explode!' He felt himself bloating beyond the bounds of his physical body for a moment. He panicked, jerking himself into full consciousness, all the more quickly to obliterate the rush of a nightmarish image, of a million fragments of himself floating like speckles of light through space.

The bus slowed down. Looking over the heads of his mother and the other two passengers across the aisle, he saw one of the village markets ubiquitous on the Eastern route. The make-shift sheds were peopled with the usual array of market women seated behind rickety, dun tables with small piles of rural produce; greens and other vegetables, cocoyams in neat piles, dried cassava cuts, okro, peppers, fruits. Some of the market women sat beside wide enamel basins filled with chunks of ice and soft drinks, protected from the searing heat by dirty brown jute bags topped by equally dun polyethylene bags. These ensured the drinks remained cool, ever ready to be hawked to passers-by. One woman had a huge black vat of oil rested on an iron cooking tripod licked by raging fires which she had just stoked to vitality, frying the akara (bean cakes) and buns she sold to complement the soft drinks.

The bus stopped.

'Perhaps, the driver, perhaps some passengers want to buy some of the snacks. This is not a normal stop on the route, Tagbo thought.

Suddenly, voices in the bus rose in agitation. Various passengers rose from their seat, gravitated to the window to his right, blocking his view of the market instantly. Other passengers from their seats, craned their necks in a desperate effort to glimpse the object of sudden attraction. His mother joined them in their frantic curiosity, almost stumbling in the process.

"What is it?" Tagbo asked the stale air within the bus. "Mama, let me pass. Sit down or you'll strain yourself,"

"Eh? Oh, sorry, my son. There seems to be something terrible going on across the road. Some madman."

"A madman? When has madness suddenly become the object of such intense curiosity among our people? Anyway, we won't know what the something is by jostling for space with all these people," he said as he edged himself out of the narrow seat careful not to step on Mama's toes.

"Driver, open this door!"

"Eh? It's true...o, my brother," hissed the driver, forcing his face away from the window and turning the lever that operates the automatic doors.

"We're all here straining against windows when we could have easily gone down to see this thing properly."

"What thing?" Tagbo asked as he stripped down the opening doors of the bus, closely followed by the driver who released the lever, barely allowing it to complete its command. The folly of inordinate jostling for a view suddenly dawned on some other passengers and they quickly followed suit.

"Ehn.... Make una no push my bus down on its side...o," the driver shouted back at the mass surging through the narrow door. Tagbo came round the front of the bus and looked across at the market scene. All he could see was elementary school children in their purple pinafore and white shirt uniforms bright against the midday sun, chatting and milling about the place buying frozen liquid contents of soft drinks disgorged from their bottles into polyethylene bags (at the ratio of one bottle to two bags to make the thirst quenchers more accessible to their less

privileged customers and maximise profit) and akara from the women."

" Where's the madman then?' he asked aloud."

"Over there. Dancing, as he usually does to music wey only him dey hear," answered the driver. He was standing beside him, pointing to a solitary figure dancing to highlife music emanating from the skies upon which he trained his face. His eyes were closed in some fit of ecstasy as he shuffled, one hand raised to the air holding an imaginary partner, the other folded at his waist.

Tall. That was the first thing that struck Tagbo. His long thin legs stretched down in tattered trousers. He wore an equally tattered green buttonless shirt, completely sleeveless on the arm cupping the waist. The lower half of his lanky, still good-looking face was framed by a long matted beard flecked with the grey which was totally absent from the lengths of tight black matted hair more appropriate on a rastafarian.

The market women were obviously used to him. They ignored him altogether. Suddenly, he seemed to be aware of a new audience. He did a half turn and stopped. He opened his eyes and glowered at them. Tagbo felt his anger at the rude interruption directed at him in particular.

'The eyes, oh see his eyes,' he cried inwardly. He felt an immediate kinship with him. The twin brother he would have liked to have.

"Not Ikem. We're both the same height. Apart from the man's matted hair and long beard, the only other difference between us is weight. I still have some flesh on me, by reason of my increasingly fragile hold on sanity."

The man turned his back on them with a hiss, and moved to one of the vacant tables. He sat on its edge facing the unwelcome tourists, planning to outstare them if possible, back into their bus. He got up, startling the bystanders. They retreated, feeling he was making for them. He walked over to the circle of children in their colourful uniforms, instead. He came to them and seized up a little girl not more than six or seven years old, spilling some of the contents of a bottle of coke she held in her hand. He scooped her up in one arm and held her to him tightly.

He snatched the bottle of coke from her. In one swift motion he raised it to his mouth and drained half of the contents in one

gulp. Instinctively, Tagbo drew closer. The driver and a few other passengers followed suit.

That girl is not much older than Odera, Tagbo thought. Newspaper stories of pedophilia in America, of little girls kidnapped by perverts and lunatics, raped and brutally murdered flashed through his mind. The recent local story of a little girl in Lagos, kidnapped by unknown persons claiming to be her mother's friends on her way to the corner store to buy soft drinks for her daddy to entertain his visiting friends. The body was found days later. Bloated beyond recognition. Barely formed breasts, tongue and vagina were missing. The victim of ritual murder. Of madmen capturing little girls and doing strange things to them, like burying six-inch nails into their skulls. Curious bystanders would just watch, unconcerned and even amused by the antics of another member of those living on the fringes of sanity. Of the various warnings to Eloka and Tagbo, jnr., to Odera in particular, never to respond to beckonings from people in strange cars, nor to accept sweets and childish gifts from kind but unfamiliar adults.

"Oga, don't go near him," the driver interrupted, trying to restrain his advance.

"These mad people can get very violent when provoked."

"But, he could harm her. He could carry her off to rape her," Tagbo shouted back, frightened by the vision of excess libido let loose on one not in control of his senses. "What can these women do to stop him?"

Seeming to confirm his fears, the madman suddenly lifted the little girl up, as if she were a feather, and put her in the crook of his shoulders. She perched there, uncomfortable inert. The madman took one more swig from the bottle of coke and brought the bottle to the little girl's mouth. Distraught by now, Tagbo looked at the girl's face to gauge the level of her fear. Tottering momentarily, she tilted her head against the madman's, took a swig of the proffered coke, some of the brown liquid staining the collar of her white shirt. A smug, satisfied look suffused the madman's face.

Tagbo made to snatch the little girl from him. One of the market women seated on a stool by one of the sheds stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Don't bother yourself," she said, head down on her wares, hand arranging an already perfect pile of oranges, tangerines and hot, spicy yellow peppers. "He cannot do her any harm".

"But how come you women are so unconcerned? Why do you allow him to fondle the little girl the way he does? Don't you know he could run off with her? Or rape her?"

"His madness hasn't got to that level yet".

"Why? What makes you so sure?"

"He is not so far gone yet that he would want to rape his own daughter. Yes, his daughter," she said, looking up at him from her table. "And I am his wife. I bought the coke for him. He's only annoyed she did not give it to him soon enough. You know children."

"How!! What!...What happened to him?"

"You're coming from Lagos, are you not? You see me now and you're thinking this village woman; what does she know about life in Lagos? We used to live there too. We being me, my husband and our four children. This one is our last and the apple of his eye. I had just had her when his problems started."

"You still haven't told me..."

"My husband is,... was ...is an engineer. Trained abroad, Germany to be exact. Came home. Joined a good firm in Lagos."

"You're still not telling me what happened...?

"He,... well, he just couldn't take the pressures any more. Just couldn't. Cracked up."

A.N. AKWANYA

Talents

Our romantics have sent
a hopeful message:

of necessary evil,
there are rites and phases -
violence and strife,
crime and fraud and mismanagement,
everything
the great nations have left behind,
one by one.
And when we have slid to the valley's bottom.
and tasted gall.
when the dust has settled on the wreck,
we shall resurge
like the young sun wrapped in night,
and soar skyward
after them
one by one,
beginning with Nigeria.

And some of their number
tell us the blood bath
of fueds and white-eyed greed,
as sacrifice
poured forth at a deity's foot,
goes to the root
of all our wickedness;
it will wrest a blessing
at day's end

from this black Earth.

The Christian humanists are more sombre
over our fate.
Does not the Good Book show
they come
every last one of them,
mean and great,
with the master's talent,
and divide equally
between the ordinary fools,
brainless,
near-sighted,
and the happy few
who know the ways of the world
and turn their talent
to merchandize.

But there was one other,
the eleventh virgin
we must tax
to have set the balance aswing.
She too had a talent
she buried deep,
held close to the chest;
and time passed,
and it turned up again
a living thing
she hardly knew.

A White Noon Sky

You have never seen his mood
more angry and scorching

than against a white noon sky
when he strides up from the south
in March
pursued by the rain.

A vague sense of having offended in some way
fills the house
when he stands so with is knapsack behind his back.

No one says a word -
you have to be careful in our house,
a little shake one way or another
could bring down the sky
upon our heads.

But we are well-practised
and know
neither will drop the gaze;
only the sweating betrays our turmoil:

what if he should stop at the door
and block out the rain.
after we had been thinking
we had the worst behind us!

Sap

If you have ten lives
in an economy pack
as I do,
and light up
at easy intervals,
your span is well over seventy.

You don't drop dead
all at once
from your perch on the pane
like flies scotched with flit.

These last few years
I have reached down
three or four times in the drawer
for the lighter
with which my heart-beat quickened
then eased
to an even pace.

And
do I care to see what's left,
care to rob death's surprise?

One To One

Why does the porter mould to break?
And the smith melt to mould?
Why does the builder build to destroy?
Why do we rise to fall?

We are born to die,
We die to live,
We suffer to laugh,
We kill to keep alive.

For everything, exists another
One, the other to give essence.
Complications and contradictions
All exist in harmony.

Without hatred, we know not love
Without sorrow, we know no joy
Without ugliness, beauty is unknown
This is because that is.
I am because you are.

KWADWO OPOKU-AGYEMANG

A Crisis of Balance: The (Mis)Representation of Colonial History and the Slave Experience as Themes in Modern African Literature

Introduction: A History of The Present

Knowledge of its past forms part of a society's security, its forward path into the future. When it is being itself, literature behaves as a refractive medium through which is sought the density and significance of the past. This makes literature a perpetual adjustment between the writer's freedom and a certain responsibility to remembrance, which is why even the soliloquy, inward thought represented as speech, always ends up as a dialogue with society. The tension involved in keeping inviolate the middle position between the writer's personal sense of imaginative freedom and that difficult knowledge we call the historical sense accounts, in part, for the essentially subversive tone of literature. Literature of lasting value is of necessity subversive of given values, if only because, in keeping its precarious middling position between artistic freedom and social responsibility, it calls to order certain of our assumptions about our society, ideals, customs and institutions. When it speaks with the full force of history, literature subverts our complacencies about present order, to impose its own authority, its exacting and pristine innocence. It proceeds by sharpening the diurnal cognitive focus, which is to say that, as art, literature expresses its fullest quality by burnishing dulled identity. It 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.

Its fictitious status notwithstanding, therefore imaginative literature contains the essential truth of society: this it does not by

perfectly imitating contingent reality but by highlighting and then transcending the limits set by its facts. As such the creative writer assumes the fundamentally impracticable but necessary burden of accounting for history. By no means does this mean that everybody who ever wrote a piece of fiction must write afresh the history of the world. Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1963) took one day in the life of Ivan Denisovich to encapsulate years of suffering in Soviet prison labour camps and to evoke the terror of Stalinist rule.

The total range of themes available to a writer provides the meaningful value and moral framework of his or her work. This body of themes is constituted from a pool into which has collected the full and raging story of society, all its prejudices and malaise, its worth, glory and dignity. It provides the life spark of metaphors by whose incandescence historical and present experience is illuminated. From it the writer may fashion a vision of self and society and express these as theme, plot, style and character.

What can be observed about modern African literature with regard to the range of its themes is that in their pilgrimage to the pool for thematic inspiration, few of our writers indeed have flooded their imagination, their consideration and the conscience, with commitment to its fullest exploration. For the most part our creative writers hug the bare shorelines of African history, touch the colonial experience and report that to be all there is. The vastest depths and stretches of African history, slavery and the slave trade, are hardly ever regarded in a sustained way or mined in any serious fashion for its lessons, its truths and its metaphors. And so the swirling mass of agonizing beauties that lie beneath - the beauty of struggle, survival and triumph - and the incredibly vulgar and spectral visitations welling there are rarely brought to the surface to remind us of the history of our present estate or if they are raised at all it is to distort the true value of the experience they signify.

II The Gap Between

Ours, then, is essentially an age of forgetfulness, and the evidence is a gap in our history four-hundred years long. More than decades ago, C.L.R. James addressed this verity and it remains as valid now as it was then. He wrote of the scholarship on slavery and the slave trade in Africa:

> ...an important area of research remains univestigated... What were the social and moral effects of slaving on the Africans who bought and sold slaves - what did they think of them-selves? What have been the long-term effects on the African peoples who remained on the continent? Our sources and scholarships are almost entirely Western, and Western thinking has governed our assessment, regardless of whether our standards have been overly racist or antipathetic to slavery. But surely one of the most important areas of study is what Africans themselves thought of the trade, and what effect it had and perhaps lingeringly continues to have on Africa itself.
>
> (C.L.R. James 1970: 126)

James is referring to the African's own memory of the actual impact of the slave experience on life's very grain in Africa. "What Africans themselves thought...": the position from which Africans, whether as predators in the trade or as its victims, viewed and judged the slave experience. James is drawing attention to the true legacies of the period, the ravages of the slave wars and their impact on the future. This is the area that remains univestigated. And yet it is the factor without which the story of slavery and the slave trade cannot be fully told, not in the Diaspora and certainly not in the history of industrial North America and Europe.

What did it do to a people to be hunted down, chased from settlement to settlement; to have the slave-raiders follow their spoor; to be tracked down, branded and marched off the edge of the world? What did it mean to be bought and sold, to be haggled over in the market-place, to be touched roughly in intimate places by fearful strangers? What did it mean to a society when the powerful could set upon the weak and sell them

for trinkets? What was it like to see loved ones coffled again and again and not to find the strength to stop the agony? What did it do to the man, the woman, the child, the mind, the body, the family, and the psyche of society to have this ravaging go on, not one year. not decade, not one century but four hundred years? What was the actual impact of these horrors on Africa itself when for all those years, without sag or let, cataclysmic events became common and unimaginable horrors were forcibly injected and absorbed into the veins of daily-living? What happened when life itself was poisoned and broken up, and the people were let loose upon each other? What was the impact on the ontological base of the victim society? According to one view, the unceasing destruction of crops, for example, led to cannibalism. Furthermore:

> the captive women became concubines and degraded the status of the wife. Tribes had to supply slaves or be sold as slaves themselves. Violence and ferocity became the necessities for survival. The stockades of grinning skulls, the human sacrifices, the selling of their own children as slaves, these horrors were the product of an intolerable pressure on the African peoples, which became fiercer through the centuries as the demands of industry increased and the methods of coercion were perfected...
>
> (James 1970: 120-121)

Whatever else we may think of James' hyperbolic turn of phrase, this is thinking about the slave experience, not as an abstraction, or as a summary of far-off, unconnected events, but as the chaotic seed of the future culture, the cognate of the present. The slaving experience transmogrified the African societies and affected life such that there is nothing the mind can imagine today so tragic and so horripilating that has not already been suffered by Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora. The density of the themes thus unleashed most probably cannot be duplicated anywhere else in human history.

Here then is an adequate revolution, one would think, for the modern African writer to espouse: to bring to the centre of contemporary discourse the largest segment and most traumatic

body of events in the African experience. Unfortunately, such has not been the case. For reasons difficult to see, the bulk of attention in modern African writing has gone to colonialism, that bitter fruit of the genealogical tree of the slave trade. The subject of colonialism seems to have overtaken all other concerns in African letters. This is never clearer than in modern African imaginative literature.

We have the classic colonial novels in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and *Arrow of God* (1964), in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1970), and in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). There are the prototypical colonial poems in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966), and in Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great* (1979). In drama, there is Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), which, despite an insistent authorial disclaimer, is still a powerful exercise in anti-colonial rhetoric. There is even the classic study of the psychological and `cultural impact of colonialism in Frantz Fanon's influential *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968). The major literary genres are thus fully represented.

In the building canon of modern African literature, these titles are among the most important for the reason that they are among the most read and thus the most influential. They show up regularly on national and regional school and college certificate syllabuses. They are studied because each brings to the subject of colonialism the scrutiny of deep analysis and the insight of wise imagination. Colonialism is shown in its various aspects, its advent, its enduring malignancy and the vast solitudes it generates in its victims. The strange thing is not that in one short generation colonialism, as a literary subject, has been explored so well, done almost to death, but that not one work of comparable value on slavery and the slave trade exists in the canon.

The full meaning of such a sustained gap, an area of blankness, in the literature may be slow in showing forth, but two truths are immediately clear: first, the literature's claim to maturitv cannot be fully upheld in light of thematic truncation;

and secondly, if literature is to be seen as an index of cultural self-definition, then that large crack in historical and thematic continuity surely labels present African effort at cultural regeneration and wholeness as potentially inefficacious.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the nature of the gap, the absent history of slavery and the slave trade in four well-known works by three well-known writers: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (1964); Ama Ata Aido, *Anowa* (1970) and Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975).

III Vision and Revision

Without question the most successful exponent in African literature today of the colonial experience as a literary theme is that luculent and impeccable stylist, Chinua Achebe. Since he identified that period in African history brought to formal being by the Berlin Conference of 1884 as the point "where the rain began to beat us" (Achebe 1975: 44), Chinua Achebe has gone on to elaborate a monumental literary vision that places at its centre colonialism and its logical corollary, what he calls "the task of re-education and regeneration" (1975: 45).

When Achebe speaks about looking back to "try to find out where we went wrong" (1975: 4), he means the colonial experience, not the slave history. His first and best-known novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is set among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria during the last years of the nineteenth century when European colonialism was seeking to entrench itself in Africa. The story is a parable about old and new power. The action of the plot is shadowed by colonial authority, and the crisis of both Okonkwo, the protagonist and strong-man of his day, and his village, Umuofia, is deepened beyond recovery by the overarching propaedeutical escapades of the European colonial administrator and the Christian missionary. The immediate cause of Okonkwo's suicide is the knowledge that his village would not support him against the power of the European colonialist after he beheaded the saucy messenger from the district office:

> Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messenger escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult.
>
> (Achebe 1958: 188)

Too much had been made of the point that Okonkwo was rash and unthinking in beheading the white commissioner's servant (Gareth Griffiths 1971; G.D. Killiam 1969). But he felt, and perhaps rightly so, that the time to go to war had arrived when the British colonial officer collected the elders of the village together and humiliated them beyond measure. The old men were tricked, disarmed, handcuffed, imprisoned, starved, shaved, insulted, beaten and freed only after a fine of two hundred cowries was paid to the colonial court. Okonkwo brought down his war-dress in anticipation of swift and effective reprisal. But nothing happened. When he finally discovered that in the end his village would absorb the injury rather than fight back, Okonkwo took his own life.

The death of the strongest Umuofia man signifies, in the context of Africa's subsequent history, the end of the community's power and independence. And the power ultimately responsible for this defeat is the gathering European force. Logically, killing the strongest man in Umuofia has made the European the strongest presence in Umuofia.

There is no doubt in the mind of Obierika, Okonkwo's closest friend, that Okonkwo's death was caused directly by the white power. His epitaph to Okonkwo is also his indictment of the colonial officer:

> That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.
>
> (Achebe 1958:191)

But already, in the colonial officer's victorious mind, the most prominent man in Umuofia had been reduced to an insignificant paragraph in the book he would write later on. The thesis of Achebe's seminal novel may be stated in the terms that things fell apart in Africa in large part for reasons of 19th century

encroaching European power and hegemony, a situation which the tensions within society did not help.

Arrow of God (1964) is the chronological sequel to *Things Fall Apart* even though it was the third of Achebe's novels to be published. It elaborates the theme already established by *Things Fall Apart*, that there is a causal relationship between European colonialism and Africa's problems, that indeed the rain began to beat us with the coming of colonialism. Set in the Igbo community of Umuaro in the nineteen-twenties, the story takes place at a time when European colonialism was already a fact of life in most of Africa. The struggle that Ezeulu the dignified chief priest of the Umuaro God, Ulu, undertakes is not to confront and overcome European power but to come to terms with it, and if possible to channelize its impressive knowledge and power to his own use. This is why Ezeulu sends his son Oduche to the mission school. A shift in power is evident by now, and the breach in traditional authority that began in *Things Fall Apart* is confirmed in this novel. Ezeulu, the chief priest considers himself an arrow in the bow of his god, Ulu, but that God has now been supplanted; the son he sent to be his eyes and ears among the whites, to discover the secret power of the Europeans, returns converted to a new religion and a new god; indeed, to assert his new faith, the son tries to kill the sacred python of Idemili. With son now against father, and power, effectively entrenched in alien hands, the overthrow of traditional hegemony and the triumph of colonialism seems complete.

Thus, in these two important novels, Achebe has established a clear connection between Africa's problems and its history, and that history, as far as we can see, begins with colonialism. Slavery and the slave trade play almost no part in this history. Now, one is not saying that as a creative writer, Achebe is obliged to write about the slave trade or indeed about any particular event in African history. The writer's prerogative in this regard is as infinite as the universe of the imagination. As an artist, the writer can take any theme under the sun, or invent one if it cannot be found and make it the subject of his or her art. Furthermore, we may point out that an articulated theme does not

necessarily constitute an ideological position, and to strike a correction would be fallacious. It is Achebe's analysis of the history he elects to write about that can stand some looking into. Let me explain what I mean by referring again to an episode in *Things Fall Apart*.

During the second year of his seven-year exile in his mother's village of Mbanta, Okonkwo is paid a visit by his faithful friend Obierika who tells the story of the destruction of the village of Abame by the Europeans: "Their [the Abame] clan is now completely empty ... A great evil has come upon their land ..." (Achebe 1958: 130). Obierika explains that this great evil is something that has been predicted by the Abame oracle. Then Obierika points out that it was not the first time that marauding Europeans had paid such a fatal visit to the village of Abame. Stories are told that they had visited before:

> We have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas *but no one thought the stories were true.*
> (Achebe 1958:130 my emphasis)

This is late nineteenth century Igboland; yet the history of European enslavement has apparently so receded in the memory of the people that it has become an absence, and we can rightly speak of collective amnesia. There is no history of the Europeans who supplied the guns that fired the factories of slavery. There is no residual hurt, no memory of anger or danger, no lingering knowledge of defeat or a heritage of resistance. No one among the people thought the stories of slavery were true. At this point, so soon after the experience, the slave trade is not history, not legend, not even myth because myth has the coercive power of religion behind it, but untrue stories, mere rumours and gossip. Thus, when Uchendu points out apropos of what is in effect Obierika's rumour mongering, that "[T]here is no story that is no true" (Achebe 1958: 130), we know immediately that by the same token there is no story that is true.

In Achebe's book the history of slavery and the slave trade went by, and it left no footprints. When the lovelorn Duke in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* asked Viola about the mystery

lady: "And what's her history?", Viola answered: "A blank, my Lord: she never told ..." (*Twelfth Night* II V: 110-111). Since the past has become a blank, it cannot be submitted to scrutiny. It is an absence, sight without vision.

IV Against the Logic of the Evidence

Yet, which is the deeper absence: to directly ignore the past, or to remember it but hollowed of all pith, with no lessons to teach? For, in contrast to the principle of categorical historical denial operating in texts like Achebe's there are other creative writers in African literature in whose work the subject of African enslavement is given some prominence. But even here, when the slave experience is given play, it is often considered in a reductive context that denies it any lasting impact on the African landscape. This kind of literary reduction occurs in the literature in two ways, and they will be considered in turn.

In the first kind, the slave experience is used as a literary tool, either as a convention, a trope or a motif, to frame a subject that harks closer than slavery to the heart of the narrative or dramatic action. The prominence of the slave experience as a theme in such texts is predicated on its usefulness in setting off the major theme. An example of this, in which the history of slavery in Africa is reduced to the role of a thematic minion, can be found in Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* (1970). The story itself takes place less than thirty years after the Bond of 1844 in the state of Abura in the Gold Coast, West Africa. Seen as a drama about sexual inequality, the play is fine indeed. It closely dramatizes and implicitly contests the view so basic to patriarchal society that women are not to be taken "seriously" (32). Thus, the eponymous Anowa sets out to prove against the strictures of convention that she can successfully strike out on her own. The striking thing, however, is that Anowa's revolt against man-made culture takes place against the backdrop of slavery and the slave trade, an equally if not more complete oppressive system. The main sources of suspense, tension and interest in the play consist of first Anowa's decision to marry the man of her own choice against the flow of custom, and secondly, her

unwillingness to bend her will to her husband, Kofi Ako. These provide the basis of conflict in the play. For the most part, the havoc of slavery is reduced to a feature in the couple's marital squabbles. For Kofi Ako has grown rich trading in slaves. He dresses and lives opulently in a richly-appointed mansion that reads like the slave castle in Cape Coast. But his wife Anowa cannot bring herself to enjoy the new wealth because of its connection to the business of slavery. Thus, while Kofi Ako "sits fat like a bullfrog in a swamp/ ... *Anowa* daily grows thin" (Ama Ata Aidoo: 41).

The problem of slavery is real to Anowa. Even as a child barely into her teens, she agonized over it; in a superbly fused flashback, she subjects her old grandmother to all manner of difficult and probing questions about the slave trade. Her questions cause the old woman to finally look for refuge in amnesia. She speaks with Anowa in one of the most affecting passages in the play:

> You are frightening me, child.
> I was not there!
> It is too long ago!
> No one talks of these things any more!
> All good men and women try to forget;
> They have forgotten!
>
> (46)

In the grandmother's outburst, the play reminds its audience of what history has been forgotten, and it is one of the few writings in African literature to do so. The good people do not talk of slavery; they try to forget it even as it flourishes around them.

In the drama's present, Anowa is the sole sensitive point in society who wishes to remember. But how important to the play is what she remembers? Terrible as slavery is to Anowa, her real problem in society, the problem that determines the course of her life, is that as a married woman she cannot bring herself to do as all good wives do and succumb to the will of her husband, even if the man is as patently foolish as Kofi Ako. This is the thesis of the play. Anowa's problem then is gender-centred; it is causally

related more to her sex-role than to her feelings about slavery. Indeed in the play, slavery is often little more than a dramatic device by which Anowa's character is revealed. Slavery is a subject she feels strongly about, and as such it affords her the opportunity to express the nature and depth of her determination. For this reason, when Anowa undertakes her life of self-denial in the midst of domestic plenty to protest the evil of slavery, the focus is less on slavery than on her strong unbending will. Perhaps this is why the play as a whole avoids speaking frontally to the true nature of slavery and the slave trade. There is something benign, even comfortable, about the situation of the characters who are actual slaves in the play, the nameless Boy and Girl, and the Twins. They carry trade items like skins for Kofi Ako and they clean around the house, but on the whole, the details of their lives do not speak directly to the absolute horrors inherent in the condition of the enslaved. They are minor characters in a play about gender relations that happens to be set in the era of the slave trade. The drama of Anowa occurs in a setting or framework provided by slavery, meaning therefore that in this play the slave experience in Africa has been made into a convention of setting, a matter only of form, without the urgency of history to foreground it. This being the case, we cannot even speak of the relationship between slavery and the problem of sexual equality in the play as contrapuntal, especially since as depicted, slavery has little of the tension, significance and original freshness of gender relations.

The second kind of literary reduction of slavery and its history in African literature likewise recognizes the slave experience as a historical fact in the text but attributes no long-lasting effects to it. The trajectory of the history is faithfully traced; its explosive force measured; the people are shown to absorb the blow; they reel; they stagger from shock. Then the verdict: no impact; the people remain intact. Like magic all is as it was. This denial occurs often enough to signal the mind of the creative majority. There is an example of this out of Wole Soyinka's otherwise magnificent dramatic outing, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), that will illustrate the point. The

relevant passage occurs at the head of the play where the thematic parameters of the action are defined. Elesin Oba, the King's chief horseman, must soon die to complete his own cycle within an on-going ritual whose purpose is to fertilize the future of society. When the drama opens, he is engaged in a half-serious antiphonal frolic with his praise-singer at the market-place. As Elesin's retinue of drummers and singers proceeds through the market, the tone of the conversation shifts. Elesin and his praise-singer abandon the subject of women ("When I come among the women I am the chicken with a hundred mothers" p.10), and come to the darker subject of forebears, history and the horseman's imminent death. When Elesin discloses his wish to enjoy the intimacy of women before he dies to join his great forebears, the ancestors, the praise-singer says apropos of the ancestors: "In their time the world was never tilted from its groove, it shall not be in yours" (Ibid.). Elesin agrees that the totality of their world remains intact because "The gods have said No." Thus, historical continuity and social wholeness are established and insured in the play. Then, in relatively prosaic language which contrasts effectively with the panegyric passages that not long before stressed Elesin's elevated and aristocratic status, the praise-singer speaks to Elesin about the world of the ancestors, and thus of the history of the dramatic universe:

> *PRAISE SINGER*: In their (the ancestors's) time the great wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home - but Elesin Oba do you hear me?
> *ELESIN*: I hear your voice Olohun-iyo.
>
> *PRAISE SINGER*: Our world was never wrenched from its true course.
>
> (Soyinka: 10)

The fact of African resilience is noted, but the larger significance of this exchange is expressed in the praise-singer's

view that his and Elesin's world, and by implication, Africa itself, remained intact, unaffected in any serious way by the veritable catalogue of horrors visited upon it across the centuries. In other words, the praise-singer is saying that a race of people may lose their heart, their mind and their muscle; they may suffer the fatal attraction of slavers and lose the pick of their population; survivors of such ravaging may have to constantly move city and citizens to avoid capture; they may get caught in an endless round of raiders' wars; but they can claim after the devastation, that no destructive impact is to be observed; and that is so because the gods have said No.

Clearly, this is an argument that runs against the logic of the evidence: when a people lose their heart, they stop breathing; when they lose their muscle, they suffer debility; when they lose their mind, they grow mindless. And then they forget, and they call such forgetting, this absence, their history.

V Achebe's Shadow

The problem is how to recover this void, the largest bulk of our known history, for our imagination. But as we have seen, much of this blank really is an effect of Achebe's shadow. For, such has been the power of Achebe's presence in modern African literature that for the last three decades his vision has predominated, and his theme of choice, the tragic nature of European colonial intrusion, and its corollary Africa's independence, have become the predominant theme in modern African literature. No matter that in view of its shunting of slavery and the slave trade and its treatment of colonialism as a totally discrete entity, this is a truncated vision. But in a lot of ways Achebe's influence is easy to understand. Take *Things Fall Apart*, for example: here is an embarrassment of riches, a first novel of the first order, seemingly simple but structurally sophisticated and impeccable, fluent in its narrative surge, in its texture as pliant and as pleasing as silk, and in colour as multi-hued as a swath of kente. In our history of the arts, Achebe's impact on modern African literature can, perhaps, be compared only to the effect that Charlie "Bird" Parker has had on Jazz

music since the nineteen forties. No African writer of fiction wrote like Achebe until he came along, and African writing has not been the same since, and over the years, his shadow has grown long and broad; today it broods over the field of modern Africa literature like no other, Nobel winners notwithstanding.

With the possible exception of modern South African writers since theirs has been such a special case, nearly all the major contemporary writers have made their mark writing about the themes that were brought to literary maturity by Chinua Achebe. As such, there is little imaginative transmutation of the only theme in the repertoire more imposing than colonialism, slavery and the slave trade. Novels such as Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1977), and Elechi Amadi's *The Slave* (1978) that refer to slavedom in their titles are not about the slave experience at all. They announce in their titles more than they actually deliver. In theme and plot, they are not about the slave trade. Emecheta's heroine, Ojebeta, for example, is more of a "slavey", a female domestic servant, than a true slave living in the poisoned environment of the victim society. Likewise, Amadi's slave, Olumati, is a slave only in the restricted sense of being an "osu", tied by birth to serve the god Amadioha.

Since slavery occurs under total conditions and is of such a dramatic nature, it lends itself easily to metaphorical use. Hence when people are forced to perform labour under threat or duress, whether as prisoners of a god, or as members of a domesticated sex, or even as workers in a concentration camp, the arrangement is called "slave labour." This is the metaphorical reference of the term in Elechi Amadi's title. As for Buchi Emecheta's character (Ojebeta), her predicament for the most part illustrates the kind of "slavery" spoken of in contemporary feminist discourse in connection with the relationship of woman to man under patriarchy, as in Adrienne Rich's essay "Motherhood in Bondage" (1979: 195-197). In both of these African novels, the substantive term of the titles is employed metaphorically to designate slave-like contexts and conditions.

In real terms, there is an imbalance in the representation of colonial history and the slave experience as themes in African

writing today. Whereas colonialism has come to possess a variety of predicates, a supporting vocabulary and a wealth of mythology in Africa's modern literature, the history of slavery and the slave trade is an orphaned cry, a rootless echo that has no lineage, no biography and no presence beyond a vaguely familiar but ultimately strange body of mute voicings. The theme of African enslavement constitutes a silence in our literature. It is a sightless nightmare blind to its own cause and effect.

We know of it by its deep concealment in the twilight of lying memory and opaque fear. In that uncertain light, the metaphor loses its referent, its clean-drawn and expressive profile, and it becomes less than memory, only rumours. You may well ask: In such a cause what becomes of history, then? But that, too, is clear. History that advances by denying itself is not history but a pain that perpetually begins anew. Or if you like, you can think of it as a series of masks, a repertoire of topoi, familiar but frozen expressions, each askew because unconnected, all serving blind purposes, little of which is meaningful or particularly relevant. "Now", wrote Roland Barthes, in the first book of his career as a critic of literature and culture, *Writing Degree Zero*, "it is when History is denied that it is most unmistakably at work" (Barthes 1986: 2).

VI Conclusion: Ambitions of the Imagination

This means necessarily that our imaginative literature lacks unity. It lacks unity because it is not connected *(con-nectere)* with the total history of the place and the people it seeks to represent. Except for a handful of exceptions, such as Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1971), Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1978), and Sembene Ousmane's "Tribal Scars" (1987) which confirm the rule, modern African literature as a whole is partial and truncated; it lacks the historical centre, the essence of literature. What we find in *Things Fall Apart* in fact is a disinherited society, and a hero without history. This may appear an unkind comment to make about Umuofia, a society so full of its own culture and about Okonkwo a man so soaked with his own history. But the truth is that Okonkwo and

his society have been cheated of the full resources of their past, and this leaves them unconnected: it is as if they sprang fully-formed out of nothing. For, the sole and unqualified relation of the crisis in the novel to colonialism means that *Things Fall Apart* does not measure fully or transcend its subject, which is Africa's history, but is trapped within it. The same can be said about most of our literature. What we see is really a literature by history's victims, not its creators, a literature of the soft vision and contracted horizons. This literature has not succeeded in building artefacts to move the heart and trouble the mind with a sense of the truly tragic, something which claims with the full weight of history that something human survived it all.

Therefore, to move at all, modern African literature will have to discover anew the breath to draw its ambit more perfectly, and also, to confirm the writer's natural call to subvert the so-called natural fact. Another imperative is the mnemonic responsibility to return the historical sense to the creative centre and without rancour or fulmination but simply as a matter of self recognition to play the imagination over lost territory, and thereby extend the ambition of the imagination.

The way to properly reclaim our unspoken memories is to metaphorize past verities. This is the solution of literature. David Vincent (1981), speaking for autobiography proper, has pointed out that if we wish to understand the meaning of the past then "we must first discover the meaning the past had for those who made it and were made by it" (Vincent: 6). But, in the absence of an essential point of departure in Africa's slave history, such as the genre of the slave Narrative has come to provide in American literature, it is perhaps to the imaginative writer that we must turn to find judgment: it is left to the creative writer, by that certain potency of insight, to urge the past to confess.

The difficulty we have sought to express in this paper is that no modern African writer has yet done for the slave experience what Chinua Achebe has been able to achieve for the colonial experience. As such, the problem of African response to the impact of slavery, posed by C.L.R. James more than two decades ago, has still not been answered. As it is too much vital history, the pathos and weals that line the bottom of the Africa's story, is glossed over and not touched enough to life.

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Envy

I do not envy you
Secure like a kernel in a shell
living where termites never bestride
what happens when you die?

I do not envy you
now that you live in Venus
blessed with sunlight and abundant carbon dioxide
what happens when you breathe?

I do not envy you grown like a tree
one must climb to reach your ears
now you have overgrown the assembly
in a world that detests climbing
what happens when you desire to communicate?

F.U. OKORO

The Alarm Clock

Chiming, timing at wrong times
Nagging like a wife in pain
stealing sleep and stalling rest
Goading us to stand and peep
peeping till the tired pages
stare at us in faces blank

Policeman of work or war
Sentinel unpaid, unliked
Must we heed your nagging calls?
Skip and scamp when heads are weak?

Only books that need no sleep
Created you to steal our own
Eunuch spite and nothing more
In my box shall you chime.

OSSIE ENEKWE

Truth

The cat lingers in the shadow.
Its flickering tail
trails behind it
like a tell-tale cloud.

It tarries like truth
often shouted down by falsehood
until it emerges
in all its glory
in sunlight.

A New Day

Morning breeze fingers
the green rug of paradise
spread wall-to-wall
across the colony of the dead.

Frolicking birds dive
and petch on gravestones.
Their songs cheer
a lonely traveller
wandering far and wide
for a home through October
when flowers die a glorious death.

The traveller
hurries through the shadows
into a new day.

(Upper Montclair: October 1, 1992)

CHINYELU F. OJUKWU

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Mother, Sing for Me* and the New Consciousness in Kenya.

Mother, Sing for Me is the latest play by Ngugi Wa Thiongo'. It is a musical and, more than any other work by Ngugi, is embelished with and virtually enacted through songs and dances. It also shares, in terms of content, in Ngugi's usual preoccupation with the theme of exploitation of blacks by their colonial masters and the continued oppression of the same peasants by the new black government, which are all characteristics of Ngugi's later works such as *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross* and *I will Marry When I Want.*

In the years preceding the presentation of *Mother, Sing for Me*, Ngugi had written mostly literary essays: *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* and *Barrel of A Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* in which he philosophises about, and critically analyses and endorses resistance. These have become the focus of his crusade against colonial and neo-colonial exploitation *a la* Kenya. This refinement and explicit statement receives further intensification in *Mother Sing for Me* which benefits by all the indigenous cultural equipment which Ngugi had been experimenting with for some time now. The cornerstone of this approach has been his exploitation of the folk tradition and language of his people. Through these means, Ngugi is able to make the people experience his drama first hand, appreciate fully the ideas being presented or the emotions being urged, and empathise or identify with the characters. The historical bent of these works is also very significant and deliberate, because the aim has been to show the people that their past had been well ordered before the disruption, brutal exploitation and the cruelty that came in the wake of colonialism. The pent-up fury, the misery and the protest of the people are

canalised through the folk medium to prov... ...dewell for a revolution determined to rid the society of the cancerous nuisance which exploiters have become.

Any discussion of this musical raises a problem in the sense that there is no published text by the author except the adaptation or reconstruction of the stage version by Ingrid Bjorkman which is based on the author's manuscripts of the play (one written in an indigenous Kenyan language and the other in English) and the tape recordings of the performance.[1] All these provide a vivid picture of the performance, which in turn constitutes the base on which my analysis of the play is made.

Mother, Sing for Me, set on Gorge Scott's plantation in Kenya during the 1920's and 1930's[2] focuses mainly on the need for unity among the blacks in order to fight oppression and exploitation. It is based on an old and familiar folk-tale whose moral extols the virtue and strength of unity. In the story, an old man who has come to the end of his life beckons his three sons and wants to leave them with his last and final instruction to remain united even at his death. He requests for some sticks and is given. He ties them together and attempts to break them but cannot. But when he unties the bundle, he is able to break the sticks one by one. He then tells his sons that there is strength in unity. So they should always remain united, no matter the situation.

In this musical, this cardinal idea is demonstrated by the old, deaf-mute man who attempts in vain to break a small bundle of sticks. But when he unties the bundle, he is able to break the sticks one by one. The labourers round off the old man's demonstration with a protest Song "Let us stand firm". The musical is a sequel not only to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, but also to Ngugi's other creative works in the sense that he has remained the same in his portrayal of human frailty among the blacks. A particular deformity which occupies his mind is the problem of betrayal among Africans. It is prominent in *Petals of Blood*, *A Grain of Wheat* and others. In

this musical, Nwendanda's fast and first rise up the social ladder is as a result of his betrayal of his comrade Kangethe. His white master (Kanoru) gives him elegant clothes and new equipment "for he's a jolly good fellow". Here the author is very satirical not only of the saboteurs among the peasant workers in Kenya but, also, of everyone who betrays the just cause of humanity in order to enrich his pocket or satisfy his selfish desires.

The play is structured into three Acts, each beginning with the Singing of "Kaleso". The first Act presents the beginning of the musical which is reminiscent of the Opening and First Movements[3] of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in the sense of the calculated use of darkness, silence, chilling screams, whip lashes and mournful songs as dramatic techniques not only to sensitize the audience but, also, to plunge them into pensive reflections. The two plays are interestingly historical as they both reenact the bitter history of Kenya's encounter with colonialism and her subsequent subjugation. According to Ingrid Bjorkman, "the cultural heritage from which the musical draws its inspiration has its roots in the colonial era, an era of oppression and suffering which intensified the people's longing for freedom."[4] As in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi has also in *Mother, Sing for Me* used historical names and letters like Kang'ethe and KCA (Kikuyu Central Association), respectively, to authenticate his message and criticism. Every Kenyan, thus, sees the story of his life reenacted on stage and feels deeply committed to the fight for emancipation.

Thus, at the start of the play, we are presented with the miserable and repulsive picture of the peasant workers under torture in the scorching sun. Most are dressed in rags and patched clothes, and among them is a pregnant woman. These labourers are full of lamentation and protest songs which are occassionally interrupted by whiplashes from the kanoru (Mr Scott), the plantation owner.

The musical embodies all the philosophies, ideologies, teachings, criticisms and assertions of Ngugi which are also contained in his novels. For instance, Ngugi is very satirical and critical of some assertions made by the whites as contained in the historical documents presented in this Act:

> A white man's country ... a territory admirably suited for a white man's country, and I can say this, with no thought of injustice to any native race, for the country in question is either utterly uninhabited for miles and miles or at most its inhabitants are wandering hunters who have no settled home or whose fixed habitation is outside the healthy area. This will be one source of profit to the United Kingdom (Johnstone 1901).[5]

Ngugi's criticism of the use of violence by the colonial administrators is also apparent in the subsequent document that follows: "The colonial philosophy of force and the prestige which rests on a belief in force are the only way you can do anything with these people... these people must learn submission by bullets - it's the only school... (Hardinge, April 25, 1897)."[6] The exposure of the above documents to the people is intended to make them not only aware of their past but also aware of the fact that they were subdued by violence and it is only through the same means that they will be delivered from their bondage.

In this Act, the slavish role of the Africans is also enacted, as a rickshaw appears bearing Mr. Scott, pulled by an African. The workers begin to sing a Kikuyu lamentation but are quickly silenced and intimidated by kanoru's whiplashes. The workers protest the bearing of *kipande* - the symbol of imperialism - round their necks. They are informed that "He without a ***kipande*** round his neck trespasses. Trespassers will be prosecuted."[7] The workers are interrogated to find out who incited them to burn their *kipandes*. Kang'ethe, their leader, is betrayed by Mwendanda. He is imprisoned and later tried and executed.

There is a conspicuous recurrence of events and actions in the play. This demostrates the cyclical pattern of events in the history of Kenya. For instance, the appearance of Kanoru in a rickshaw pulled by an African occurs a number of times, but the most striking is the appearance of Mwendanda on the same rickshaw pulled by an African, just as kanoru had been. This is a carry-over from colonial Kenya.

The musical draws its inspiration from the tormented lives of the oppressed peasants among whom there is a pregnant woman who is beaten up by the police because she is too weak to work with others. She miscarries and is driven insane by grief. The entire cast is angered, not only by the miscarriage, but also, by the agony of the tormented mother who does not believe her child is dead and still searches everywhere for the baby.

... She hears the cry of the missing child everywhere. At times, she imagines she has found him. At such a moment, the cry of the child ceases. The mother picks up the child. She sings one, two or three songs. Then she realizes she is not holding the baby. She hears another cry. She rushes here and there.[8]

The most remarkable feature of the traditional African theatre is its participatory aspect. The actors and the audience are one body. It is, therefore, easy to visualize the reaction of the audience during the drama regarding the destabilized mental state of the woman deprived of her child.

Kariuki is later forced to take over Kang'ethe's role as plantation mechanic and as the people's political leader, symbolized by his appearance in Kang'ethe's overalls. Nyathira is later raped by Kanoru. The cast becomes confused and desolate. The old deaf-mute tries to organise them by teaching Kariuki how to make a gun and what to do with the gun but he's shot dead by Kanoru.

The play goes further to demonstrate the fact that the Christain church and the colonial administration have worked towards achieving the same purpose - subjugation of the peasant

workers. In the musical, there is a grimly cynical and satiric scene in which Kanoru, the slave driver, rapist and executioner "is anointed Bishop in a solemn ceremony before a kneeling crowd", and his collaborators Nyabaara and Mwendanda the saboteurs among the peasants become church priests. The repressed and desolate workers seek refuge in religion. They are consequently subdued and disarmed by the Christian faith. There is also the subsequent religious dispute which disintegrates the people and later leads to ethnic conflicts, but is finally resolved after a patriotic freedom song. Ngugi, in this regard, urges every Kenyan to ignore the disintegration brought by the different factions of Christianity and organise themselves in pursuit of their freedom.

The second act begins with the singing of 'Kaleso" and the torturing of Kariuki, in preparation for his ritual rebirth. The ritual rebirth of Kariuki before the outbreak of the war is reminiscent of the incident in J.P. Clark's *Ozidi* when the young Ozidi is reborn and becomes Ozidi himself. He is then ritually and spiritually prepared to avenge his death (by the same token, the death of his father, Ozidi).

Kariuki, in *Mother, Sing for Me*, undergoes a traditional ritual of rebirth and becomes defiant and totally committed to their struggle for liberation. Kariuki starts teaching his compatriots how to manufacture weapons. Here, Ngugi advocates violence as the only solution to the persistent problem of oppression and exploitation. His belief in negotiation and conciliation as a means of bringing about a change in society has been totally displaced by his belief in confrontation and violence as the only means of bringing about urgent change. For him, it is a period of bitter repugnance and revulsion against the emergin African bourgeois class.

His support for the use of violence could be traced to h discussion in *Homecoming*, when he says, "violence in order change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery. purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unju oppressive social order is criminal, and diminishes man Ngugi then says of the two types of violence in Kenya: "M

Mau violence was anti-injustice, white violence was to thwart the cause of justice, should we equate the two forms?"[10]

Mother, Sing for Me, to a large extent, portrays this new defiant and pugnacious attitude of the author which he has transfused into the minds of his characters in most of his later works. Nyathira, who was once raped by Mr. Scott, has returned to the village. (She puts off her western dress and lures a soldier away from his duty post where he watches the workers so that the workers can examine his gun). These are all part of the preparations for the long advocated war which later breaks out and is enacted in mime. Two of the oppressors are killed. Information comes from the governor and a peace conference is held. One of resolutions is that the stolen land must be returned to its rightful owners. Mwendanda's demagogic speech, after the 'peace Conference', is sheer cajolery of the blacks.

Hear me to the end
Kanoru's plantation is to be sold
At least some of it!
And it will be sold to anybody
Without any colour bar
Or any other form of discrimination
In a word, there is no colour bar
In the selling and buying of this plantation.
If a black man has got money
Or if a group of black people have money
They can buy this farm
From today money is the bar.

Ngugi has been most critical of the idea of the extortion of money from the peasant blacks for the release of their own land. This is largely criticized in his *Petals of Blood*, when Wanja sells all she has in order to regain her grandmother's land. That constitutes her ruin. She reverts to her long forgotten profession - prostitution - in order to survive.

The third and final act of *Mother, Sing for Me* is a criticism of the modern African bourgeoisie who have slipped completely into the roles of their white predecessors.[11] Mwendanda now

sits on the rickshaw (formerly occupied by Mr Scott) pulled by an African. Like Kanoru, he carries a whip and a whistle and wears a watch-chain (his inheritance) which hangs on his stomach. He is now in control of a multinational company's plantation. How else can Ngugi demonstrate the image of the black bourgeoisie who have perfectly slipped into the role of their colonial masters? While inspecting the workers, like Kanoru, Mwendanda finds it a good opportunity to fondle the young women. His obsession with money and position plunges him into wanton and indiscriminate desire for women. Nyathira, again, becomes his victim. She is dragged off-stage amidst her screams of protest.

The rape of the black women is one of the important issues Ngugi has seriously treated in most of his works. His anger and disappointment with those he calls the "Black Europeans" is not only because of the usurpation of the land of the people but, also, because of the exploitation and humiliation of their women. His criticism against this debasement of womanhood is mostly manifested in *Petals of Blood* when Wanja who was exploited as a young girl and got with child by Nderi Wa Riera, MP for Ilmorog, is forced to go through him again by circumstances beyond her control, after so many years of abandonment by him. Again, in *The Wound in the Heart*, Ngugi's early play, Ruhiu, a young freedom fighter who is released from detention comes home to discover that his wife has been raped and has had a child by a white man. The strong and highly determined hero tragically commits suicide out of utter disappointment and humiliation, thus leaving his mission unaccomplished.

Waringa in *Devil on the Cross*, is no exception. She, too, is exploited and ruined by 'The Rich Old Man from Ngorika' Gatuira's father who had a baby (Wambui) by her when she was very young and still in school. She, like others, is also abandoned after the incident. That is a crime committed not only against her but, also, against humanity, and this, she avenges at the end of the novel by killing 'The Rich Old Man'.

Thus, this experience appears to be a recurrent ... only in Ngugi's works but also in the histo... women. It must be noted, however, that in *Mother*, ... Nyathira does not revert to prostitution after her rape, ... clings to her national identity. She throws Mwender... back at him and runs to her own people - the struggling ... This is a symbolic action and is a presage of new dev...

Towards the end of the play, there is a repet... breaking of loose sticks one by one and the inabilit... tied bundle of sticks. This emphasizes the need for u... the peasants. The musical finally ends with patriotic ... songs. The end of the play foreshadows victo... oppressed people of Kenya, provided they are united a... by the tied bundle of sticks which cannot be broken.

Ngugi's use of songs and dance in this musical ... effective technique of raising the morale of the masses and ... arousing in them the spirit of togetherness and ... commitment to the just cause of the oppressed and ex... Ngugi has all along been known for his use of songs ... in his novels and plays but *Mother, Sing for Me* ... musical which emphasizes his faith in the powe... songs, dances and the total theatre as important elemen... for the radicalization of all oppressed peoples in thei... times.[12] According to Kinuthia Mugia, as quoted by ... and Nottingham; "Songs win over speeches every time. ... easily remembered and enter the head more quickly ... lasting ... songs are a great prayer to God because he hea... quickly as a mother hears a loud cry from her baby."[13] ... must have shared in the belief in Mugia's concept of the pow... of songs.

Again, the kinds of songs used in the play are mostly thos... that awaken the singers' spirit of patriotism and resistance in the face of oppression:

... I will prepare the way to go home
No matter how far the home,
I will start the journey O,
I will start my home coming
For I will not endure this suffering anymore.[14]

For the Kenyans, starting the journey (of homecoming) is the first step towards fighting oppression and regaining their freedom in their own country. These songs and dances provide the right atmosphere for the enactment of the drama.

The play also reveals some radical suggestions regarding their surest means of regaining their freedom. The most revolutionary and radical aspect of the play is demonstrated in these lines which recognise the power of the "Decider" - the riffle.

> Mark you, courage and unity in demanding/ our rights are good qualities to have/But by themselves they will never liberate/Us from these Kipande chains round our necks:/That courage and that unity/In demanding all our rights/should be given a new power/The power of the Decider/Yes![15]

The play's message is also contained in Kang'ethe's last speech before his execution: "Too much cowardice perpetuates poverty in the land./God helps those who help themselves .../better to die fighting for your country/Than live a slave in your country."[16]

The characters in the play are stereotypes depicting the different types or classes of people involved in both the fight for freedom and that for continued oppression. For instance, Nyathira represents the sexually exploited and humiliated Kenyan women who are at the mercy of their white lords and their African collaborators. On the other hand, she also represents the mentally and spiritually undaunted Kenyan women who still fight the oppressors and refuse to be intimidated by the humiliation they are subjected to. Kang'ethe represents those who lost their lives while fighting for freedom. Kariuki - the patriots who are still determined and ready to give their lives for the liberation of the Kenyan peasants. Mwendandi represents the saboteurs who betray the freedom fighters for the white man's 'pieces of silver'.

Through the character of Kariuki, Ngugi urges the Kenyan who are still suppressed by colonialism and are still afraid of it perpetrators to rise above their fears and intimidation and figh the oppressor. It is after Kariuki's rebirth that he acquires th courage, bravery and resilience that are required for the war ar

for which Kang'ethe was known. The unnamed woman who has miscarried and is for ever in search of her child represents the psychologically maimed peasants who have lost all they have, but cannot accept the reality of that loss as being terminal. They forever live illusory lives. The play is thus full of symbols of people and events.

The language of the play is simple and explicit. Ngugi's appropriate use of mime in some scenes reinforces the message of the play. A good example is the demonstration of the importance of unity by the old man using his bundle of sticks. This musical, in its simple folklorist form, its bold use of symbolism and direct historical evidence, represents the last stage of Ngugi's fight for the dignity and freedom from injustice of his people. It is unique in Ngugi's canon. Its neatness of form is reflected in Ngugi's careful structuration. Specific themes are dealt with in specific acts. The final impression, thus, is that the acts reinforce one another. And we have a work that makes effective and bold statements. With the likely effect of this powerful work, Ngugi may yet remain in exile for a while more.

Reference

1 Ingrid Bjorkman, *Mother, Sing for Me: People's Theatre in Kenya* (London: Zeb Books Ltd., 1989), p.62.

2. *Mother, Sing for Me*, p.62.

3. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (London: Heinemann 1976), p.4.

4. Ingrid Bjorman, *Mother Sing for Me: People's Theatre in Kenya*, p. vii.

5. *Mother, Sing for Me*, p. 63.

6. p. 63

7. Ibid., p. 64.

8. Ibid., p.66.

9. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. "Mau, Violence and Culture," in Homecoming (London: Heinemann, 19&2), p.28.

10. Ibid., p. 29.

11. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Mother, Sing for Me*, p.72.

12. Ibid., p. 66.

13. Carl Rosberg Jr. and Hojn Hothingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Kenya* (London: Frederick A Praeger Publishers, 1966), p.260.

14. *Mother. Sing for Me*, p. 62.

15. Ibid., p. 70.

16. Ibid., p. 66.

MICHAEL IDOKO

The Lost Vision

The darkened sun
    trudges its elliptical way
down the cold grove:
    my love with it drifts;
files away my sharp affinity
    as angry waves on the coast.
As pebbles seaward rush
    with the riotous backwash
Into the water crypt,
    my friend, in a rushed journey,
trudged, pushed, pulled, forced
    into the cold bosom
Of the dark vault.

The voice lost in the ethereal abyss.
the village singer lost in the cold cave,
the root cut where no ceremony
awaits the untriumphant return
of the defeated ancestors.
The soil mourns the footprints lost
and I search for the glow in vain.

All is lost, still
My ears pick the echo of his voice
that questions the rude stroke
which cut the cord
In mid throb.

DAVID ODINAKA NWAMADI

The Vanishing Aura Of Grey Hairs

I

A poet is the ripest person
To tongue the dreadful
Questions of a dying century.
If a statement is true, only an
Incapacity arising from a dozen
Ripe boils on this very mouth
Can stop me from uttering it.
Our widened flanks for countering
Tomorrow's volcano will come through
Awareness that history is full of
Real scars that cannot be cured by
Plucking out the tongue of the poet.
We must master the uncanny
Ritual of loosening a bundle
Tied by a left-handed man,
For it is the boast of a villain
That he will confoundedly pile
His worldly acre with shit before
His feet hits the ancestral range.
The anaemic stars swarming the sky
Are no fit bodies for panegyrics.
We can't enter the glittering
Archways of greatness by splashing
Gloss on putrescent heaps.
Because I wear no illusive lenses
While I voyage on the wide sea
Of life, I see no dazzling array
Of roses screening our dunghills,

Or well-formed fingers sprouting
From the insensate stumps left
By leprosy; nor do I notice any
Glamour in the gait of the baboon.

II

Far from impeaching Achebe's fears
For the banana suckers that will
Assume the place of the old trees,
My task is to widen the scope
Of the doubt and re-inforce the
Critical barrel, for the old are
Hardly viable to nourish the new.
We should blame the dog that brazenly
Eats the umbilical chords of its
Puppies for tacitly teaching the
Principle of every one to himself.
Far from boasting sprightly notes
And pitches, choruses led by toads
Are studies in elegiac intensity.
The owls that stun us with
Vocal energy are merely keeping
Faith with the scientific truisim
That nature abhors vacuum, for
Music died when maize and alligator
Pepper aborted the transporting grace
Of Beethoven's loftiest symphonies
In the throats of priests and choirs
Afflicted by dietary indiscipline.
Before our pots of paradoxes boiled
Over, and the chickens developed strange
Appetite for the bones of dogs; when
The tree-tops were mere extensions
Of the squirrel's ground, the sage's

Sublime doubt would have brooked
No modulation. But because those
Below have tumbled and crushed
Those above, because today's co-hunter
Sees similarities between his colleague's
Legs and those of a game, yesterday's
Certitudes now bear rethinking.

No length of years confers adequate
Pith to the stem of the papaya, so
Tennyson's stirring and lofty musing
Of crossing the Bar is not for all.
Knowing that green and grey are
Integral phases of life's colour matrix,
I do not blow the bugle of
Generational warfare. Nor do I pity
The sloven man that gets a call
From the mother-in-law to come over
And pound fufu for her.

The weighty history bearing on us
Is the verminous legacy of oldies
That tickle the nipples of baseness.
Pits and cactus fences are your
Anchor when you are hooked to
A muddled pathfinder. Misprision
Of mission bedarkens the morrow
And fattens the register
Of spiritual exiles. That we follow
In the wake of people that had gone
Before us, and still grow wet
From dew that falls on
The grasses that border the
Paths points to their carelessness.

III

They that foster a grandiose elegiac
Ambience turn a poet's heart chordophonic.
Our elections are devil's bazaar
Conducted in the language of mayhem
With skulls flooding the stands.
They're occasions for the long and
Stout creatures of the forests to test
Their mangling and mauling modalities
Amidst quenchless eructation of treachery.
Brooded by a mass of shit, viable
Seeds die of aerobic disaster.
There's no talking the snake
Out of its tortuous motion.

After watching a defecating elephant,
A little bird compared his diminutive
Size with the mountainous shit left
By his fellow animal, and screamed
That forests are replete with
Boundless and unsettling mysteries.

Thanks to a diseased religiousity,
Some knighted villains of the church
Have fortified themselves with
A pseudo-divine camouflage
For peddling their new-fangled
Pharisaism of titles and trumpeted
Donations to destitutes whose
Destitutions sustain their property.
If the poor souls knew that
Flowing gowns only shield scrotal
Tumour, but can never cure it,
They would not be wearing visages
As undependable as a funeral oration.
So long as their purchased knighthood
Casts hawks in the mould of doves
In the dust-ridden public eye,

Distant hills and valleys
The echo of pattering feet
Will rock the snails
In their hibernating corners.

IV

Fruits of memory abound
For harvesting on the theme.
One day in Jos where I gobbled
The ceaseless spring that wells
From the elevated rocks to
Secure my residency permit
In the boundless wood of books,
An old man chanced on the street.
Coughing like the engine of a taxi
Ruined by SAP, his alcoholic
Breath trapped the proverbial
Cold mind. With ribs ruined
By excess, he muttered
Incoherent complaints about a son
That preferred burukutu to books.
I kept mum and tore myself away
From the pervasive stench. Being
The living, I spoke of the living
And allowed the dead to bury their
Dead. Makes me recall the story
Of one wholly nude lunatic
Woman that kicked the air
With one leg just as lightning
Struck, and screamed that fire
Had answered fire. A tortoise
Takes in to beget yet another

Tortoise, just as a snake
Must bring forth long siblings.

An overmastering desire for atonement
Should dog the mention of Hiroshima.
But for one shrunken toughie, his
Distant taste of action in Burma
When Hitlerite die-hardism
Threatened his brother whites'
Sanctioned code of territorial plunder,
Crowns him a village terror.
Licensed to kill and be killed
In a spatially and spiritually
Distant land, the contagious
Germ of acquisition that quickened
The flame in the West infected him.
Thoughts of that sea of blood
That blights the face of history
And makes minds mellower are
Lost on this queer specimen
Whose sagging jaws speak
Of a constitution coming apart.

V

The cramp that prevents a man from
Tending his Ikenga declares his
Penis a superfluous appendage.
The aura of grey hairs vanish when
As youths the challenge of warding off
Evil spirits is left to us. Yet
It is our nimble limbs that march
To where the rhythms of life

And death achieve a delicate mesh.
Old age should provide a vitalizing
Pot of wisdom from which the youth
Will drink. But a vile old man
Poses the danger of leaving
A house that will take the survivors
A whole life span to purge.

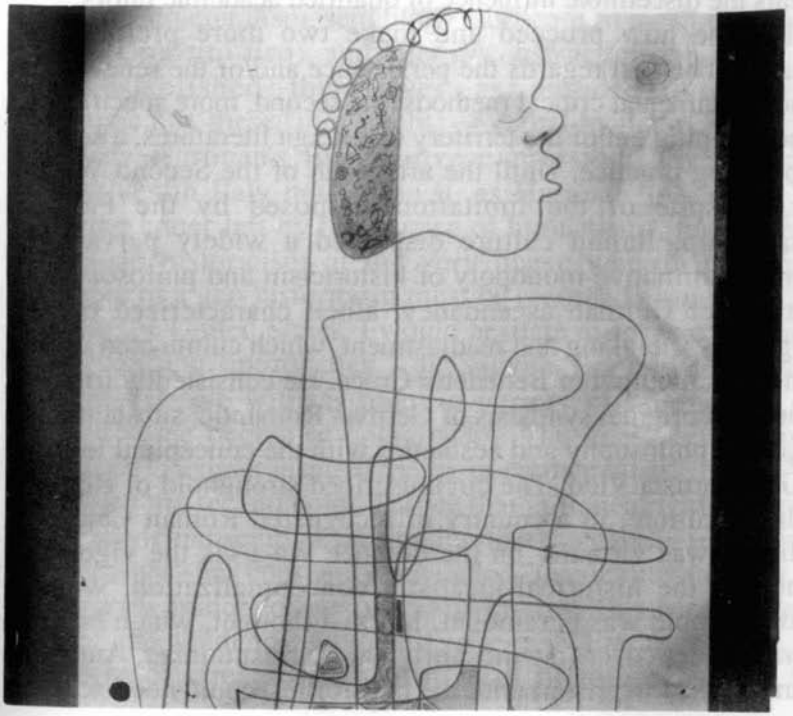
O pray for our supposed guardians
Of ancient values clamouring for fanta
And chocolates; tethering their scions
To the dollar over gin and tobacco.
That the undisciplined throat of a greedy
Old man will plunge him into deeds
That mock his grey hairs is a certitude.
Though food is the unchallengeable
Deity in the land of faithless
And greedy men, the shadows
Cast by lipstick values never last
Addiction to the glittering gains of today
Brews the fever that prepares the bones
As an offertory unto the red earth.
Should the frail state of his limbs
Become an issue for street lore
Debate, the grand-dad hankering
For teenage girls shouldn't caomplain,
For he is a leveller of sorts. Those
Whose appetites subvert their dignity
Must experience a flowering of meanness
In their days. Dissolute men in search
Of holy children are like Lucifer
Hankering for a place in heaven.

VI

More jokes than serious business
Marred the lambing season, leaving us
With premature births every so often.
A man may survive conditions
Which leave course marks on him,
Not these once that find
Expression in dessicated balls.
Our forefathers, do not nibble
The finger of indecision for the crying
Shame of our enemies counting our ribs
With spears will rebound on you
We prayed that every war would
Find our hearts throbbing and
Bubbling with vigour to prove that
Having three balls is not even
Enough to justify a man breathing
Down another man's shoulders. But
Considering the damp walls of history
On which we learn, our foes may
Enjoy an eye-wink quickness in
Fashioning drumsticks out of our bones.
They might even swagger home
With our skulls and conclude
Their boasts atop our women.

We may come down and explore
The architectural value of straws
For the timbers we marked out
For roofing have rotted and are broken.
Some have procured ruins and
Roped in the names of the gods
In their elaborate schemes of blame.

Long-drawn seasons of storms
Spur a diseased ovulation. Every
Error of today is a veritable
Faggot for tomorrow's fire. And
Were I to harbour all the fountains
Of pity, no drop would go
To the sailors that bartered their
Compasses at midsea and dumped
The crew in the darksome confines
Of cryptanalysis. Still they cry, old
Folks cry and blame the Young ones
For the vanishing horizons of order,
The erosion of honour, the hurricane
Of distrust twisting the boughs of affections
And drop **their heads** in pitiful resignation.



CLAUDIO GORLIER

Nigerian Literature in the Groves of Italian Academe

The title of this paper may inappropriately suggest that I intend to place a premium on the function of Italian universities in the multiple perspective of research, teaching, and the definition of suitable literary theories. I am adopting this vantage point for my present purposes, in that I take it for granted that in Italy, for better or for worse, universities still represent the epitome of literary scholarship at large, to such a degree that even extensive sectors of militant criticism somehow accrue from the academic model. Finally, the editorial policy of most publishing houses reveals the discernible influence of qualified academic tutors.

Let me now proceed and make two more preliminary remarks. The first regards the persistence and/or the renewal of some fundamental critical methods; the second, more specifically is the mapping out of the territory of foreign literatures, a sort of pinpointing practice. Until the aftermath of the Second World war, in spite of the limitations imposed by the Fascist dictatorship, Italian culture displayed a widely pervasive, strongly normative monopoly of historicism and philosophical idealism of German ascendancy, albeit characterized by an indigenous rethinking and readjustment, which culminated in the monumental output of Benedetto Croce. He consistently tried to achieve an original synthesis of German Romantic, substantially Hegelian, philosophy and aesthetics with the conceptual legacy of Giambattista Vico. The circumscribed stronghold of Roman Catholic culture, in a country of recognized Roman Catholic tradition, was virtually on the defence vis-a-vis the vigorous stance of the historical-idealistic conceptualization, whose academic hold was paramount. Marxist thought, which had to operate under cover (the most original Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, died in prison) until the mid-forties, could not disclaim

an ostensible indebtedness to the Italian version of historicism and philosophical idealism. Since the end of the war, the cultural hegemony of historicism has been increasingly questioned. Social sciences, psychoanalysis, anthropology, which had been so to speak quarantined under the combined pressure of Fascist propaganda, Catholic hostility and supercilious neglect on the part of Croce and his followers, gained momentum and reached a considerable level of scholarship. Marxism became a decisive factor in historiography, the social sciences and literature, notably from the fifties to the eighties, stemming principally from the ideological categories formulated by Gramsci, the source of numerous literary and social conceptualizations at successive stages and in diverse contests down to recent times, as for instance in the work of Edward Said. (In Nigeria, Gramsci's categories frequently permeate theoretical debates in books and in journals, *Positive Review* and *Saiwa* being good cases in point.) In the specific area of literary theory and literary criticism, structuralism, semiology (suffice it to recall the crucial role of Umberto Eco), and later deconstruction, emerged and then established themselves as authoritative trends. Paradoxically, these "movements of verbal hygiene", to borrow Geoffrey Hartman's imaginative expression, have asserted themselves in Italy not so much, as Hartman speculates, "to mark the crater left by the demise of humanism", but rather to supersede historicism at the very phase when a comeback precisely of a neo-historicism must be recorded elsewhere, first of all in the United States. I would hesitate to speak of "a Babel of contending approaches," as Sacvan Bercovitch puts it; nonetheless, we witness today a variety of approaches not without some degree of antagonism. The latest development relates the Gadamer inspired theory of hermeneutics.

As for the second point, I argue that in Italy a rigid hierarchy in the academic setup of foreign literatures - clearly reflected in the curricula - has constantly privileged "major" literatures at the expense of "minor" or peripheral literatures. This is particularly true of the tendency to identify English literature with the literature of Great Britain. American literature was, in this

respect, a latecomer, although, in the publishing industry and, understandably, in book reviewing, American literature exerts an indisputable primacy, only momentarily imperiled by the wave of South American fiction: here the laws of market and fashion coincide in literature, in the cinema, in television and, why not? in computer science. This hierarchy accounted for the indifference toward African literature, more than the subcultural acceptance of a colonialist bias. The phenomenon I call ragged Italian colonialism only marginally affects the individual or collective memory and consciusness in Italy. While in the field of anthropology, ethnology and sociology African studies show a long record, Africa was simply not credited with possessing a distinctive body of literature.

Quite singularly, Nigerian literature surfaced in Italy in the late seventies due to the initiative of a small publisher in Milan, with a pseudo-English logo, Jaca Book, which brought out in 1977 Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, then *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, *Arrow of God*; and in 1979, Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*, followed by a three volume selection of his plays, and alongside Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 's novels, all in uneven or poor translations. Jaca Book benefited from no advice from the academic circles. At the time of publication, African literature was totally absent from University curricula and virtually ignored by the Italian press. The venture, however, can be easily explained, if one only keeps in mind the publisher's ownership and its consequent editorial policy. Jaca is presently controlled by some fundamentalist fringes of the Roman church, theologically strict and politically sympathetic to a brand of populism with marked religious overtones and a professed sense of the commitment to the advancement of the underdeveloped countries, with special emphasis on post colonial nations. To designate this position, a word has been coined in Italian, *Terzomondismo*, in paraphrase, a peculiar attention to the problems and to the predicaments of the Third World, which encompasses a political option, a sense of

Christian brotherhood and an implied, firm vocation to proselitizing, not necessarily related to the ambiguous tenets of *Negritude*. No wonder if these groups vehemently condemned the U.S. attack on Iraq, with the indirect support of the Pope. At the time when Achebe's and Soyinka's books were published, Jaca Book already leaned toward Roman Catholic fundamentalism, and a first hand knowledge of Nigerian literature came through missionary channels. The venture resulted in a commercial failure owing to mediocre promotion and distribution. The sale of Soyinka's books soared only when he was awarded the Nobel Prize. Two years ago, the biggest Italian publisher, Mondadori, took over from Jaca and launched the books in paperback. So far *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* (under the same cover) and *Arrow of God* have come out, the last with an introduction provided by the author of this paper. Needless to say, the publication has propitiated an unprecedented reception in the press.

Let me go back to the groves of academe. African literature had gradually stepped into the classroom, even if as a part of the English or of the French curricula. I happen to be the only university professor in Italy fortunate enough to hold a chair of "Literatures of the English Speaking Countries" (so the title reads) of which African literature in English is an important component. Lamentably so, no attention is devoted to Nigerian literatures in African languages, with the exception of some rare translations into English, when available. But that is another story.

The state of the art seems reasonably encouraging. Nigerian text-books appear in the curricula of at least fifteen Italian universities. In 1989, Amos Tutuola spent two months at the University of Palermo as a Visiting Professor. Increasing numbers of dissertations are being written by university students on Nigeria authors - a wide spectrum of which does not necessarily conform to a fixed canon, in that it ranges from Achebe to Omotoso, to Ben Okri - or on Nigerian themes.

One of my students is completing an impressive dissertation on the figure of the trickster in Nigerian literature. A vital impulse is provided by the activity of a special committee set up by the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNR), a government agency, to foster and to co-ordinate research on the literature of the "emerging" countries. The committee presides over the publication, at least once a year, of collections of critical essays resulting from the various aspects of research. Personally, I am the editor of the section on the literatures in English. Contributions have appeared on Achebe, Ekwensi, Okara and Soyinka. An interview with Okri by one of my students is forthcoming at this date. Among the critical contributions in book form, I wish to mention Itala Vivan's *Interpreti rituali* (Ritual Interpreters), a study of the African novel in English, and Jamile Morsiani's book on Ola Rotimi.

Other events are well worth mentioning. In 1987 and 1988, two festivals of African theatre took place in Italy, originating in Turin and then moving to Milan, Rome, Naples and Palermo. The Lagos National Theatre produced Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis* and Ben Tomoloju's *Jankariwo*. The plays came out in print in a bilingual collection published by Einaudi, with an Introduction by Ruggero Bianchi and an afterword by myself. Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka were awarded the prestigious Grinzane prize. Soyinka also won the famed Mondello International Award and the Mattei Award, funded by AGIP.

What are the predominant patterns in teaching and in scholarship? To put it frankly, the danger of Eurocentric misappropriation and of a patronizing complicity, which must be resolutely rejected. I would be tempted to say exorcised. Nevertheless, I might assert that we are generally immune from any gross act of larsony. On the contrary, we concentrate our efforts to avoid an ultimate dependence on a Western oriented approach. The names of Abiola Irele, Emmanuel Obiechina, Emmanuel Ngara, Ernest Emenyonu, Theo Vincent, Chinweizu, and Sunday Anozie to quote just a few, are familiar both to

Italian scholars and students. A confluence of topical issues, a combination of paradigms, becomes inevitable and even desirable. The sheer fact that English is a second language to us and that we must come to terms with the typicality of a culture and of a distant, if not remote, civilization, enhances the fertile discussion of the crucial problems of interface and of interlanguage, of the identifiable differences, studied from a variety of viewpoints, scrutinized as such, but also in the light of Derrida's notion of *difference*. In this context, the relevance of the debate on fiction and on narratology acquires special importance, with obvious emphasis on the function of orality, on the relationship between realism, symbolism and allegory (aptly underscored by Omotoso) on the epic dimension, on the coordinates of time, on the plight of the individual within the dynamics of history and of society. Poetry calls for corresponding attention, where the study of interface (Okara's drum and piano) should be brought to bear on the interconnection between tradition and experiment in the procedure of fixing an African literary statute. Nigerian drama exacts an exegetical effort capable of challenging ingrained Western habits of evaluation and of grasping, in the text, but above all, in the performance, the re-emergence of tragedy, the re-enactment of myth, of ritual, the play as sanction and representation of communal life, the interchange between word, sound and mask. I must stress that it has conquered a distinctive space in our studies, although it seems utopian to foresee a future for Nigerian plays in Italian repertories. Instead, we tend to invite African companies to perform in Italy as often as possible.

The issue of national literature, of hegemonic and subaltern cultures, of committed literature, which substantiated a vivacious exchange throughout the fifties and the sixties, affected the approach to African literature, but they seem less stringently pursued than in the past decades. Rather, the paradigms of localism and of multicuturalism retain a sizeable impact in a

country with a comparatively recent history as a nation, with a still deeply rooted, differentiated regionalism, with several dialects matching the national language, with solid areas of orality.

A further step has to be taken to strengthen and rationalize the translations of African books, which our publishers are still reluctant to undertake other than sporadically. A good translation of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* has just come out, in October 1991; Okara's *The Voice* was published a few years ago with my introduction; a selection of Okigbo's poems was produced by a small publisher in Venice. Early in 1991, we managed to have the rights of Okri's new novel secured by Bompinai, one of the major publishing firms in Italy, and the awarding of the Booker Prize to the Nigerian writer sounds as a felicitous reward. However, we cannot declare ourselves fully satisfied. One of the main tasks ahead consists in bridging the gap between the scholar and the common reader.

MICHAEL TONFELD

When Europe Sneezes We Catch Pneumonia In Africa: Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo

From 27th June until 7th July 1993, the Third International Meeting of writers INTERLIT 3 took place in Erlangen, Germany. Mia Couto from Mozambique, Lesego Rampolokeng from Soweto in Azania, the Nigerians Odia Ofeimun und Niyi Osundare and Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana presented African literature. Under the mainstream "New Metropolis" the meeting was separated into seven symposia and dealt mostly with the conflicts between the cities and the rural areas discussing also writers' problems in Europe as well as in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A lot of readings were organized in Erlangen, Nuremberg and Furth. Our correspondent used the possibility to interview Ama Ata Aidoo at the conference.

Question: Auntie, you are the most famous female Ghanian writer abroad, you have travelled to a lot of countries, and have not been based at home for ten years. Whenever you go for readings in Aburokyire do you face difficulties in understanding your ideas?

Answer: First of all I would like us to sort one or two things out. I think I am one of Africa's best known writers - not only women. I would like to say that. And then I am not based abroad, because I like you to know that for the last ten years I have been in Zimbabwe. I have only lived in the United States for the past ten months. I started teaching there last August.

Question: Do you regard feminists in Aburokyire as colleagues of the African women?

Answer: Well, I think they are women. So then invariably they have to be. I don't know about colleagues. If you are an African woman you got at least two troubles if not more. If you are an African woman with some education, a certain level of survival you have at least two problems. One is, the whole thing the way society has brought women up to be second class citizens - the whole issue of gender - sexual oppression. When you come out to the West, you also have the problem of racism - I mean this is clear. So I think that Western feminists can only come with us so far and not further. When we are talking about gender and oppression, sure, we are colleagues. But sometimes when you find your own so-called white sisters are discriminating against you as a woman, then you perfectly know that you can never be sisters. And I think until this issue is understood clearly and resolved, there are always these contradictions.

Question: Are the roots of our matrilineal societies also a chance for Buroni women to come back to their own olden days?

Answer: Yeah, but may be 'yes' or 'no' in the sense that you look at the matrilineages as a kind of more primitive societal pattern as against patrilineages. Then they can look at it in that way 'oh, white woman can look at matrilineages that it is what used to be'. My contention is that matrilineages are as contemporary as patrilineages. Some societies simply refused to be partilineal. On the other hand if the sociologists and anthropologists are saying that a long time ago all societies were matrilineal then fine they can look at us and say, so that is how it used to be - not so down, down, down, down. It is a way for them to look at a certain way of being. But then you know perfectly well that even the Akans of Ghana and Cote d' Ivoire who have held on to the

matrilineal system, their system has been under so much pressure from everybody to go patrilineal, that in some cases as in Ghana some men had actually tried - especially when they made a lot of money - to inherit their fathers. I mean they tried in a very reasoned mind and the process is still going on as expected of course I mean, it's been resisted. But it's hard, because all the world is patrilineal.

Question: There is a great influence because of the TV programs from Aburokyire. Sometimes I suspect young girls give up our culture. In mind the foufou doesn't taste sweeter if I chop by spoon instead of using my hand. Where is the bridge from our tradition to the modern way of life?

Answer: Well, the thing is that, again if you are talking of eating pattern for instance, I am not so sure that using forks and knives is any more modern than using our hand or using your hand is less modern. Sometimes it is the way the whole issue is posed. As if everything that is African is traditional, is older, is primitive, and everything Western is modern. We have learned to look at the data very carefully. And from the other point of view, we are talking about food and eating. Let's look at the world how people are eating. The Indians use their hands; they have used their hands for thousands of years. The Chinese use their chop sticks, they have done it and they have had it for thousands of years. So my point is, obviously there is a point to everybody eating the way their ancestors ate. If I really want to enjoy my foufou, frankly I won't use a spoon. There is no way, right? On the other hand, if I am in a hurry - I am a working woman - to go to work in the afternoon, I am not sitting leisurely to pick up my rice with my hands, I am going to use a fork and eat quickly. I generally think it is a question of time, ically economics - the whole lot: I don't **think** it is

modernity against tradition. If I am in a hurry, I am not going to eat foufou anyway, because foufou is the meal of my soul. It's my soul food, so I want to sit and relax. If I am alone and I am simply going to eat something, I am eating with my hands - doing my bit. If I am in a hurry I am going to use a fork and a spoon, but in the afternoon, when you are eating with your hands, there is a whole process of washing the hands. Then after eating, washing your hands - it's a process. So that's how I see it. I don't see the fork and the knife as necessarily replacing the hand as I am eating too in my home. Naturally one is appreciative of the fact that, because we have been conquered by the West, we have access to some of your patterns. In certain circumstances there is nothing more useful, more practical than a fork and a knife. But in other circumstances they are just clumsy instruments.

Question: The Buroni are quite different in Africa from the Buroni on average in their county. Do you remark such a difference if you reflect on the Africans abroad?

Answer: When we are at home we are more relaxed. There are certain things you cannot get a Ghanaian to do in Ghana for all the gold in Obuasi, right? And yet the same person will do the same thing - would, like a shot, in Hamburg. First of all he gains by being a stranger. When you are in your home there are so many things you take for granted. If you are an African from Ghana you can almost close your eyes and say "Tomorrow the sun is going to come up". You can't guarantee that here. So I think environmentally, societally, politically, economically above all people change. In fact many Ghanaians occassionally remark among themselves, "You won't recognize him or her, she is so different; that is not how she was in Ghana".

Question: Germany is still the paradise of your countrywomen and men. They don't want to stop to realize their dream in settling in this cold country. How do you think about it? Is it a result of the limited education of the newcomers, a typical run after quick money?

Answer: I think the question is unfair on several counts. First of all, it is not people with limited education, only. People have migrated. It is not quick money - it is survival. People do not come here because they like quick money. People like to come here because they have to survive - whether the money is quick or slow. If we say that they are here because of quick money then we are more or less implying that they could make a living at home, and make a decent living, only more slowly. As far as they are concerned - never mind what you or I feel - they are here because they could not survive at home at all. They may be wrong, but that is their perception. Listen - it is the usual thing to do. Why do people migrate? Apart from the black slaves who were taken from Africa to be damned in the New World, why does the USA still have 150 million people from all over the world? People define their lives the way they see best. And out of that definition, they make an impose. They say: this is no good. I would rather put together - I would rather borrow from Mr. Snake, as we say in Akan, and go to Germany. People are making this calculation they did for education in the first place. Let us sell our family gold, let us go and put this as a security with the rich man so that we can send our child to school. Now it is enough. You have put more money together to send them to Germany, to England, to Holland. My answer is, I don't know why - all I know is that people decide they have to leave. And whether we like it or not, whether we think it makes sense or not, at least, the least we can do is to understand them, and not to

make it into a moral jugdement. It is not because they are corrupt; it is not because they are stupid. Why people do that? Because they think they don't have opportunities at home. I mean it doesn't make sense to me. But I think we have to understand why people do that. If you want me to preach to Ghanaians in Germany to go back home, you got the wrong candidate. I mean, I think they should. But what have I got for them? If I say: I beg all Ghanaians in Germany to go back home because here is no life, they will say, "Aha, that's Ama Ata Aidoo. She is mad again". They will say: "She can travel all she wants because she is a writer, because she is a university professor, because, because, because..., but she doesn't want us to be here". The way they were saying I wanted to ruin education when I was minister - because I wanted the boarding schools to collapse because they were killing education in Ghana - but you can't make people understand. They will say: You went to 'Welsley Girls', you had the best education, but you don't want us to have the same education". And you can't say: "But the times have changed. At the time I went to 'Welsley Girls', the boarding schools were meaningful. Now they are no more". But people will say, "Aha, she is crazy".

People will have to understand these things. Germany is making it now a little bit more difficult for them to come. So maybe they will stop coming like they came, when you didn't have the visa wahala. So the time is over. But to actually convince them that they shouldn't come is not going to be possible because they make these decisions out of an understanding of their own lives.

Question: Can a novel tell our people the truth about Aburokyire: in a way - like for instance - the former Osofo Dadzie show?

Answer: But we are doing that all the time. The only thing of course is that a TV show, like theatre, has an immediacy of impact which reading does not have. My book *Kill joy* was telling the truth about it. - So that's a problem. That's what we do most of the time, if we write about Aburokyire at all. But as I say people have to pick a novel, sit in a corner and read. Whereas TV has immediate impact, so in this sense TV and all other forms of drama and living theatre, have always been ahead of the reading material. People hopefully are always going to read. A book is a book, but the impacts are different.

Question: Literature in school - a big problem at home. The publishing houses are suffering. Formerly parents had to pay for the books. In those days the Ghanaian book production was the No.1 in West Africa. Now you enter one of the few bookshops which have not been closed and you mostly find only English or American publications. You as a former minister of education know about the backgrounds. So let me ask you: have you any suggestion to change the bad situation of the Ghanaian book publishing?

Answer: Yes and no. The thing is, that it doesn't really matter what good ideas you have got. You are not in the government. You have no power for suggesting anything. So what does it matter if I have good ideas? I would like to go back to a sentence earlier when you said the publishers are suffering. What do you mean by 'the publishers are suffering'? The publishers are not suffering in fact. And I don't mind saying this to the world. The publishers are responsible for the situation we are in. They get their allocation for making books is Ghana. And they find it easier to use foreign exchage - instead of bringing in necessary materials for publishing books locally - to order a few books and other things which are not even books from abroad. So in what way are they

suffering? You answer my question! What have publishers in Ghana told you about publishing which makes you say they are suffering? The Ghana Book Development Council says: "In former times the publishers got their money from the parents and now the ministry took over - but the government has not paid..." But that's a ridiculous lie. Ghana for a so-called Third World country has one of the biggest percentages of budget allocated to education. Very few countries in the world - and now I'm speaking as a former minister of education - very few countries in the world allocate as much of the GNP to education as Ghana does. So why is the situation like this? Listen! If we are going really into this book situation in Ghana, it's a very complicated issue. Let me just say simply that the publishers and the Ghana Book Development Council, these two agencies are very much a part of our problem. That's all I can say. They are part of the reason why the book situation in Ghana is the way it is. So they don't have a right to talk. I generally think that with the kind of support Ghanaian governments have been giving to publishers in the country, the situation should be better than it is. So don't mind them if they go complaining. They are part of the problem. They are certainly not part of the solution as the situation is. And you ask me as a former minister of education.

Question: The new political situation in Germany formed by the collapse of communism in the East was a dilemma for the German writers - the Western ones as well as for the Eastern. Freelance writers find it very difficult to survive. Most of them had even to search for jobs. For African writers, it is unknown that writing could feed an author or even his family. Nevertheless do you believe the change in the Western hemisphere will touch the Ghanaian writers, too, or do you

expect a better future for the reception of our literature at home?

Answer: The thing is that the African writer has always been in some kind of a crunch. You have already mentioned the situation of production of books, even text books at home. African writers have never really had the encouragement for publishing at home, never really as we know we deserve and we have a right to look forward to. As we all jokingly declare, when Europe sneezes we catch pneumonia out there in Africa. So, whatever happens to you of an adverse nature economically is bound to affect us. I cannot pretend that this is not so. However, what I hope is that instead of sitting down and saying, "My God, now the Europeans are in trouble, what will happen to us', we would be trying to overcome some of our problems independent of you. I think this whole business of linking ourselves or allowing the linking between us and the Eropeans is generally killing us slowly. For when you are in trouble, we are in even deeper trouble. But I hope that we will not let this kind of situation depress our spirit. But, you know, I tried for ten years this September to survive completely as a writer on the earnings of my books. Well, I don't want to depress any would-be-writer, but at the end of the decade I have to give up on it. I mean - I think - at least as a means of survival, because after ten years and the kind of horrors I have gone through over money with publishers, with editors, with agents, it is just too much. I am not despairing. It is just a game like all the battles one has to fight in this world. I have realized you can't do it on your own. One writer trying to swim against the tide is too much. So now, I am returning to teaching - at least to survive. It, of course, means I am going to write less. But then that's the situation one faces. As you were saying, even Europe-based writers are

finding it now difficult to survive. I tried in Africa for ten years. But that doesn't mean I'm giving up on writing. It is just that I'm trying to encourage myself to see as everybody had always tried to convince me, 'reality'. The reality being you simply cannot survive on your writing.

Question: African literature seems to be a forum for insiders in Germany. There are many reasons why Germans are not interested in it. Firstly the German language. Readers, really keen on African books, will buy the original English, French, Portuguese or Spanish first edition. The short time of German colonialism in Africa let the Southern continent appear like a white spot on the world map of this country. Now the population is confronted with African immigrants. People are learning to accept Hi-life music and even talking drums. But whenever African writers appear in Germany, the political contents of their work are missed. Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* came out five years later than the publishing house had announced it. Who will believe Awoonor is the same author like our delegate at the United Nations? Thirty years have gone and Ghana really changed. Of course , in Germany there is a lack of professional translators with experience in African backgrounds of for instance Ashanti, Dagomba, Ewe, Frafra, Ga, Hausa, Infanti, and so on, the whole heritage.

Answer: You have already answered the question. That is almost impossible in the sense they have to come to us. German readers come to African literature through other European languages. In the meantime, they probably are more interested in European writers in those languages. First of all, you deal with France, you have to deal with France, you have to deal with England, and not to mention Portugal, on the first level. We are from the margins. By the time you get to African books - apart from even racial prejudices

and things like that - the interest is very low. Do I have any solution for promoting African books better in Germany? Frankly you will have to find somebody who would have the money and the enthusiasm to actually campaign to get this going. You have to have a publishing house. I have ideas! If you got a publishing house in Germany that is committed to getting German editions of African books out, then that publishing house becomes the focal point for specific activities. Also Heinemann did that in England. People will go to Heinemann knowing perfectly well that they will get the African educational books. Something like that, or even more committed than what Heinemann did, is always required - a publishing house that is known to be interested in African materials, whether from the English, the French, from the Portuguese, the Arabic, whatever. In less than five years, people will be talking, because books are books, if the publishing house is well funded so it could advertise, not hide the books. Part of our problem in the West is that sometimes, even the publishers who want to publish us are not convinced about the sellability of our books. And you go to a publishing house and they pack the African books in some crazy corner. We don't want that. Some publishing houses will hear that somebody is talking about some books, so they will also publish. But then they are not so convinced and then do not publicize the book, the book doesn't sell. And then they say, "Ah you see, African books do not sell in Germany". It is an incredible vicious circle. I don't know who is to do it frankly. My answer is: if you want to know what I think, it is that we need a publishing house in Germany that is committed to African literature - not for charity! Who knows, if they do the publications well, then they will sell and they will make money.

The publishing house will have to look at African books as a current commercial venture. But they know they will have to push the books as they push any other book. And in a few years, people will know. I know, I don't have the money.

Question: INTERLIT is a place to communicate from writer to writer, from continent to continent. But the market should be in Frankfurt - the greatest book fair in the world. Every year, the Ghana Book Development Council is presenting the country's books - books from the beginnings to the present. A small limited stand for a few specialists to buy books there directly. Not the location it should be - the market to sell copyrights to German editors. Do you have any idea to promote our literature here in Germany in a more effective way? Furthermore, are small German publishing houses an alternative for Ghanaian writers to buy copyrights directly from Ghana or should they try to contact Heinemann or Longman?

Answer: If a publishing house - like I see in my mind - were in operation here, I don't see why they shouldn't try to get the books directly from Ghanainas. And then let the English publishers, if they are interested, buy the right from the original editions here. One of my stories - a story I wrote some years ago, called "Lies" - was published at first in Swedish before the original in English was published by "West Africa". Frankly, I don't see why not! Then the German publisher becomes the joint holder of the rights and can sell the rights to other people. I don't see why - if a publishing house is operating in that way - it should always wait until the books have been published in English before buying the rights from an English publisher. They can go straight to Ghana and say, "Do you have an interesting manuscript"? Of course, if they are published in Germany, then it is as if they are

publishing houses. But then, if they have been active out there in Ghana, there is no reason why they should hear of a Ghanaian book published in Germany before they look for it.

Question: How could the image come about, the PNDC refused to give you the allowance to visit INTERLIT 1 in Cologne, a fact which is still carried from portrait to portrait in each German article? It is funny to read you were banned to travel to Germany in 1980, but a year after, you became the Minister of Education in the same PNDC government. How could it be corrected?

Answer: Actually, as I explained, this was a misreading of the whole situation. To begin with there was no PNDC in 1980. The PNDC did not come into being until December 31st 1981. So the PNDC was not even in existence at the time I was invited. So that's one. Two, I don't even remember the Cologne invitation. In 1980, I was invited here, to Erlangen. Whatever it was, the ticket was messed up. The ticket did not come . And I thought since I had been invited by the Germans that the ticket would be with Lufthansa. So I contacted Lufthansa and Lufthansa said they had not received the ticket for me. And then the following week, there was a postal strike. Express letters were not coming. When the postal strike was over, I received a postal notification from Swissair asking me to go to Accra to collect my ticket. That is really what happened. I mean I have had some political problems in my life. But that's not one of them. This one was not any government stopping me from travelling. No, it was a pure mess-up between computers and airlines...it was not a political problem, no, no.

Question: Step by step the PAWA is going forward. Of course without help from the Ghanaian government, this great idea could not exist. Do you have any personal

wishes that the PAWA could do for you or for the African women in literature?

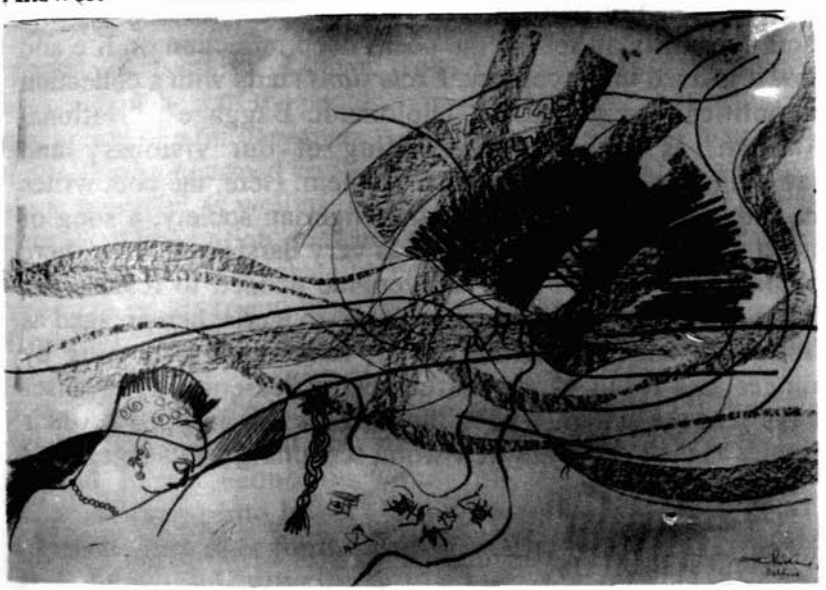
Answer: PAWA - I don't know. For any kind of writer, any association that tries to promote writers' interest is good. As I keep saying I haven't been to Ghana for some time. For the last PAWA congress, the invitation came too late and I could not attend. So what PAWA can do for me immediately, I don't know. But I think that we do as writers - not only women writers, but as writers on the African continent - have really great problems. We have discussed quite a number of them: problems in getting published at home and abroad, of surviving on one's writing. I generally think that these are some of the areas PAWA could help: in terms of mediating with publishers and agents on our behalf and at least keeping an alert awareness about what is happening to writers. For women, if PAWA could help us so that we are not discriminated against as authors, that would be wonderful. I have not had too much trouble getting published. But I can't say that is the same for every writer or every woman writer on the continent. So these are some of the areas that PAWA could help. Oh, we need PAWA. But it has to be a little more organized than it is at the moment.

Question: Afi Yakubu is the founder and president of the AWIFAV - the Pan African Association of 'African Women in Film and Video'. Although the members of our Ghanaian Chapter of AWIFAV are organized in the Film Guild, they felt obliged to create their own female professionals union. This year, women magazine AWO started once more. Ghanaian women in the arts are waking up. Do you think a publishing house for female writers could help the women or do you think there are no difficulties between men and women in finding a local possibility for their publications?

Answer: I have already answered half of the question. I think even in an environment where there are problems of getting one's works published, as a writer, there is even a more serious difficulty for a woman. If you put two manuscripts on a table and one is clearly from a man and one is clearly from a woman, we know the one which will get read first. So I think we need a publishing house for women. People are thinking definitely in terms of some kind of a woman-run publishing house to highlight the work of women. And I think some of us have definitely started looking at the possibilities. I don't know how fast we can move. But it wouldn't hurt women in Ghana to get our own publishing house, no! I think it would do us a great deal of good.

Question: From the *Dilemma of a Ghost* until *Changes - A Love Story* the protagonists of your work are mostly Ghanaians, the scene is Ghana. Do you intend to settle at home in future?

Answer: Of course!



CHINYELU NZEWI

Book Review

Title: *Excursions*
Poet: OBU UDEOZO
Publisher: Fab Educational Books, Jos, Nigeria.

Born a Nigerian and also living in Nigeria, Obuekwe Udeozo, in his work *Excursions*, is a man with a message, a very heavy and urgent message. From the inside of a nation that has lost its vision and is groping about in the dark, a nation peopled by gaunt, sunken frames, this shrill voice cries out. Here, contemporary Nigerian society and its multitude of problems are effectively mirrored and their obvious and implied causes are not left out.

Poetry has once been described as a drop of word emanating from an ocean of thought. The rich metaphors of Udeozo and their versatility all reflect the poet's deep reflection on life and how it is lived in his country. *Excursions* starts with a collection of political poems called "Diplomatic Baggage". "National Anthem" is probably a rewriting of our visionary and determination-oriented National Anthem. Here, the poet writes an anthem that truly portrays the Nigerian society, a song of lament. The economic condition is very harsh, and "rain" here becomes a symbol of the deliverance needed to restore our "Muddy crawling and undressed naira". Nigeria, here imaged as Goliath, a once powerful country, is reduced to nothing by hunger as a result of the citizens being "ex-convicts of wiser ways". In the poem "SAP", the citizens are stripped of their dignity as their shoes are well-worn, screaming for change:

The lips
Of her shoes
Confess the

Health of Nigeria

"SAP" is a very short poem of four lines, but very powerful and message laden. The shoes here which grow lips, symbolise the extreme hardship in the country today. In a situation where keeping the stomach oiled is becoming increasingly impossible, changing of appearances becomes a forgone issue. Thus, shoes grow lips due to over use.

"A December Feast" is a long poem also reporting on the political and economic situation in the country. Here, the poet portrays the country as having been in a feast before the demise of the economy. Before the collapse, oil money was our passport to the good life. It was mismanaged and mis-appropraited. Men, Women and children all frolicked on top of the naira before it lost its power.

Mama Sammy
Shuttled endlessly
Her nylon bags pregnant

Even the nightguards all had a wild time before the defeat of the naira. In "Power", Udeozo marvellously describes power in eighteen lines. Power becomes a mountain which towers above shrubs and valleys. Like a barn, it always authoritatively harvests the best of the people. The poet interprets power in the perception of a military man. A military man, the only man with a gun among unarmed civilians, is like a god, the one and only. He is powerful as well as dangerous, his "frogs as lethal as the cobras". The civilian does not protest under his autocracy, he can only respond consistently, nodding like the lizard. Everyone strives to be his friend by giving him "ship-loads of rum". The same situation is portrayed in "Marvellous it Works". Another beautiful and descriptive piece of Udeozo's, this poem goes ahead to elaborate on the master-servant relationship that exists between the people and their ruler under military rule. Here, the present harsh economic condition in the country has metamorphosed into bribery and corruption. The 'Rock', here becomes a metaphor for the army man who is constantly fed by "fat, unofficial envelopes", while his people suffer.

Paradoxically, though it is a very unrefined manner of obtaining things, it's still marvellous that it works.

In "Why Weep For Mandela", Udeozo exhibits his articulation of the problems on the international scene when he comments on the situation in South Africa and other African countries.

> Liberated, independent, and freed
> blacks are today more crude and severe
> than any whites would have dreamt

Black man fights black man, even in Soweto. There is "insurgency, insurrection, militia men, rebel troops". "The violence blacks/inflict upon one another, /is fuelled by greed and ignorance". According to him, marginalisation, dichotomy, nepotism, polarization all characterize African societies. Thus, without the influence of whites "there's apartheid even here."

In the second section of the book, Udeozo diverts from the political and tends towards the psychological. Here, most of the poems take their themes from madness. In "Neurosis," the poet portrays every human as having a trace of madness which waits for a consequence in order to manifest. In the poem "Epilepsy", he decries the evils of epilepsy in a highly metaphoric construction. Epilepsy is a disease which grinds hard on human dignity as it strikes the sufferer at very odd places. Here, the poet says of the disease: "your cinema flourshes best in public places", and the sufferer, unable to control the fits, is always disgraced "like used toilet paper".

Udeozo also touches on the subject of AIDS in the poem "For Better For Worse", and on the subject of love in the section titled " "Moon lights". Love affairs, as portrayed by the poet, have not been very successful. His love poems are fatalistic in nature, and are replete with laments of his rejection. This can be seen in such poems as "Critical", "Reciprocal", "Mad at you Once", and "Celina". Where the poems are not lamenting love and rejection, they are sexual. "A kiss Again" and "For Love's Sake" are filled with sexual scenes and expressions.

As a social commentator, Udeozo's mouth is full of messages. He displays a marvellous articulation of the problem

in his beloved country and minces no words in expressing them. Like a concerned citizen, and a committed writer, he decries the harsh economic condition, with a view to effecting change. But, though message laden, Udeozo's poetry tends towards being a conglomerate of discordant metaphors and symbols. His images and metaphors sometimes tend to be mathematical or scientific and, more often than not, he tends to wander too far away from home and conventions in cultivating his symbols. This is seen in the poem "Why Weep for Mandela". His scientific symbols and metaphors are numerous, as can be seen in the poem "Roots", where binoculars are used for harvest and in the poem "Critical" where "Nicodemus", a religious image is tied in with "photo-tropic sunlight". This stringing together of discordant symbols and metaphors has an adverse effect on language - it tends to mystify the language.

Though Udeozo claims to be revolutionary in his style, he communicates better when his poems somehow conform to convention, as in "Power", "SAP", "Authority", "Neurosis" and some others. He needs to tighten up a little more, especially in his longer poems, like "Why Weep for Mandela" and "Common Rain". There are also stylistic echoes of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land". In the poem "Common Rain", Udeozo is good, though. With a little discipline as an artist, he is likely to become a voice which all generations of art lovers will listen to, preserve and respect.

OZIOMA IZUORA

Title: *Dear Ramatoulaye*
Author: Ndubisi Umunnakwe
Publisher: Alphabet Nigerian Publisher, 1994

Dear Ramatoulaye, Ndubisi Umunnakwe's debut in novel writing, was published in 1994, as a reply to Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, which itself, is a reply from Ramatoulaye to her friend, Aissatou. An introduction by I.N.C. Aniebo, hails the work as inevitable and timely. According to him, the epistolary nature of *So Long a Letter* 'makes it sound more like fact than fiction, which effect he laments, is 'unfortunate' as a tool of 'teaching the youths' who more than ever, are reading it both at O-levels and in early part of undergraduate studies. He feels that 'a counter-letter' such as this work by Umunnakwe is desirable in order to 'balance the equation and restore the status quo - that men are not worse than women in the long run.

This forms the theme of *Dear Ramatoulaye* almost exclusively:

> 'Is it our lot - we die and women live to enjoy the booty?
> ... you want me to regret that I am a man ...
> 'Why did Ramatoulaye not die of cardiac arrest? Did Jude not break your heart by marrying a second wife?
> So women do not die of heart attack?
> *Dear Ramatoulaye*, p. 103

In this novel, Andrew, elder brother of Ramatoulaye's dead husband (Tamsir), rather than Aissatou, replies to the letter, which was supposed to have been given to him by his wife, Miriam, to whom, it had been sent by Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's childhood friend, confidante and benefactress (Neither the relationship of Aissatou to Miriam nor the reason for the sending of the letter is canvassed in the novel).

Andrew is aggrieved that his brother's widow had written a 'distorted' version of her life with his brother Jude (Modou Fall), and sets out in twenty-eight parts, to reply to Ramatoulaye's twenty-seven part reply by, in the words of one Mohammed Umar, returning 'in rocks the pebbles thrown at members of his family' (See blurb of *Dear Ramatoulaye*).

Rather than in Muslim Senegal, Umunnakwe's novel is set in the Christian part of Nigeria. A lot of contrast is made between life in urban centres like Lagos and life in the rural areas, among one's kit and kin. But like *So Long a Letter*, it presents a society in transition from the traditional, where polygamy is the way of life, to one where, because of education and modernization, women are emancipated. While Mariama Ba in her novel works hard to uphold that a woman has a right to determine which type of marriage she wants to contract and the right to expect a man to keep to his end of that bargain, Umunnakwe stubbornly holds on to polygamy as the only way to a stable marriage, a means of making sure that 'spinsters are few in the streets and crime is at bay'! Ironically, both authors hold these views in spite of their avowed religious leanings. (One is irked by Umunnakwe's unfirm grounds, revealed in the later part of his novel, when he claims he saw the light but would not send his other wives away because that would not be fair to them. He seems to forget at that point, as indeed, he does many times in this novel, that everything that goes into a letter has already happened and that even though one could include recent events like the birth of a baby in the family, one could not in one breath claim that polygmay is the only time-honoured way to live and in another that he would not have gone into polygamy if he had seen the 'light').

Because of his ardent desire to create and sustain the "persecuted male" syndrome, Umunnakwe portrays Andrew, who in the opinion of this writer, represents the crop of men who would alternately uphold both Christian and traditional precepts, depending on which one serves their immediate purposes. To his credit, men like that exist! Andrew extols polygamy as the traditional way of life. He has, himself, married

four women, the fourth being his dead brother's second wife, Binetou, the way tradition prescribes.

From Andrew's letter, one understands that he runs this family efficiently with his first wife, Miriam, as his second-in-command and chief adviser (since this novel echoes the 'Better Life' programme of Nigeria's Babangida era, one wonders if a pun is intended!) There exists in his house, mutual respect, peace and harmony. All the wives have children who are all well-looked after, except Binetou, the last, who is expecting a child. His first wife Miriam is a graduate (graduated before Andrew married her and before he went to study further), but she is not anything like Ramatoulaye. In fact, his wives seem to be a special stock of women, imported from out of this world!

Andrew's long reply which spills from the end of one week to the middle of another - precisely, a Wednesday, is made one year after the death of his brother (*Dear Ramatoulaye* p. 139) The original letter of *So Long a Letter...* had been written all through a mourning/confinement period of forty days. It can be argued that a reply should be easier to write, especially if one is replying almost word for word, part for part, distortion for reality (!) as does Andrew, a noisome male gossip and tale-bearer, - worse than any female village gossip ever created - for the detailed garbage, which in spite of his preference for living in his village 'knows' about Ramatoulaye, her children, relatives and friends from all sorts of contrived sources!

Because the aim of the letter is to 'correct' distortions in Ramatoulaye's letter to her friend, its content is significantly different form the scenario painted by Ramatoulaye. Jude Modou Fall, had been helped through school by his elder brother, Andrew, up to the university level. He had done earlier schooling with Andrew, being only two years younger. Jude was then to set Andrew up in some kind of trade after graduating and getting a job. On graduating, however, Jude marries Ramatoulaye, a Senegalese muslim, whom he had met at a dance at the end of his school career. He then lived in Lagos with his wife and Andrew for ten years. These ten years were what had given Andrew the opportunity to study Ramatoulaye. He had

done this so thoroughly that he had come to know even the ... her schem... devilish mind worked.

Andrew's experience at Ramatoulaye's hands was bitter. She had concocted a story about how Andrew had raped one o... er daughters, Awa, causing Jude to send Andrew packing f... n Lagos where he swears he would never return. Andrew's plans had, therefore, been aborted, and he had had to build himself up in the village.

His experience was one of the many scandalous schemes Ramatoulaye had engineered. She is portrayed as not better than Jezebel, excluding Jude's relations from her house and keeping Jude estranged from his people, among whom, Andrew claims, he was much loved. Even the fact that Jude had no house in the village was blamed on his wife's evil machinations. Jude would spend up to two weeks in the village if he travelled home alone, but would leave hurriedly in no more than three days, if accompanied by Ramatoulaye, who, according to Andrew, had no love for her husband's people. Even among her own people, Ramatoulaye was no angel either. She it was who had broken up her brother's engagement, forcing the boy to vow never to come her way again. Among other things too dirty to mention, Ramatoulaye was an immoral woman, who kept men friends both before and after her husband's death, sharing these occasionally with her daughters, aiding and abetting all sorts of evils, including aiding the faking of virginity by one of her daughters to her fiance. She was supposed to have caused the death of a nine-year old girl whom Jude had picked up as a baby and adopted. Even Jude's death was caused by the poison that Ramatoulaye had given his office boy to put in his tea.

Her friend, Aissatou, described by Andrew as better than Ramatoulaye, more positively liberated and educated, had aided one of Ramatoulaye's daughters in procuring an abortion. Also, she was involved in all sorts of shady deals, reminiscent of the Nigerian experience of '419'. Andrew mentions a few other women in his letter, but has nothing good to say about many of them - except for his dumb, always smiling, homely wives!

Ramatoulaye is an obnoxious character in Umunnakwe's novel. At first, Jude had admired her and thought her beautiful, if short, with a smooth glassy face, but after the break-up, she seemed to have made herself secure by turning from one evil to more vile ones. Her bad character and the fact that she gave Jude no peace of mind formed the justification, apart from tradition, for his marrying another wife. Andrew claims to have made the arrangements by getting Binetou to penetrate Modou's lack of enthusiasm, posing as Daba's best friend. How Andrew, who lived in the East got to know a girl with such a name is not told. Ramatoulaye was then left in the house where she lived with Jude, who himself had moved into a new house he had built, with Binetou, leaving Ramatoulaye with all her children. Andrew justifies this desertion by portraying her children as wayward and useless, guided as they were by their evil mother.

One must acknowledge the herculian task undertaken by this young author, to uproot, transport, and re-order a work the NOMA Award for Literature, 1980, and the succeeding years of critical reviews have acclaimed as a masterpiece of sensitive portrayal of the plight of widows in a muslim society (Senegal) to an Igbo traditional society which has a lot of Christian influence. An enormous task, indeed!

He has tackled this problem, first by playing with names, creating situations with the hope of filling in gaps which would work for him in the impossible task of justifying the dead man of *So Long a Letter*. His reply is the typical reaction of greedy, malevolent relations who are in the habit of demonizing women by distorting situations and spreading tales that make saints and heroes of their dead men while their wives come out as Jezebel incarnate. Such is the lot of widows! Funnily, Umunnakwe had set out to show that men were not so bad!

In this attempt, for instance, Umunnakwe has named Modou, Jude. To his credit, Modou comes out to mean in Igbo, "God exists', but as part of her evil, domineering nature, Ramatoulaye is written off for having renamed the dead man 'Fall'. Unwittingly, by this assertion, Andrew has admitted that his brother is absolutely spineless! A [illegible] would

resist any such addition to his name unless he chose to do so himself. It is not unimaginable for Igbo Christian men to turn muslim, but it does not ring true that Ramatoulaye, a muslim, would alternately claim to be a born-again Christian and a muslim, since she is presented as never having become a Christian. But then, of course, it may be the case, as is hinted by Aniebo in the Introduction, that a novel need no longer sound factual.

How, for instance, did Tamsir in *So Long a Letter* become 'Andrew' in Umunnakwe's novel? Is the fact that they were born in Senegal enough? How far is one supposed to suspend disbelief? In trying to fill in gaps to Ramatoulaye's detriment, Umunnakwe has also made many terrible blunders. Modou in *So Long a Letter* had died after thirty years of marriage to Ramatoulaye and five years to Benitou (p. 4). Ramatoulaye's last child in *So Long a Letter* is six (p. 1); yet Andrew gives a full account of what has become of the children in middle age, at forty-four, forty-five, etc. (Chapter 4). How could he know all this if he was writing only one year after his bother's burial (Chapter 27)?

One wonders if Andrew's sentiments are not as a result of unrequited love? In many places he is full of insult for Ramatoulaye, and, indeed, anyone connected to her, but in the same breath, he urges her to come home and see how developed their town is becoming, implying that one did not need to go to Lagos to enjoy life.

> Your people need you now - you and all your children ... Come home Ramatoulaye! Come and join us in the on-going crusade to save our institutions for posterity (*Dear Ramatoulaye*, pp. 31/32).

Inconsistently later,

> Sincerely, I am glad that my wife's name is not Ramatoulaye.
>
> I would have sent her home ...
>
> Yours is a dangerous name ...
>
> My daughters would [sic] never take your name. Your name is despised in our village today.

But later still in chapter twenty-five (pp. 85-86):

> I told you that our family has been blessed with another child.
>
> It is so good looking. It has your kind of nose, I am afraid ... because it is a girl and looks like you ... I am making my child ... your namesake. ... to prove that the fault is not in your name but in yourself (pp.130-131).

The language of the novel remains pedestrian, and cliche-ridden. The choice of the name, Andrew, picked from the MAMSER advertisement of Nigeria's Babangida era, will soon need a separate commentary to even Nigerians. There are echoes of Shakespeare here and there as in 'We had no art to see the construction of your dark heart in your face (p.17), while a crude vindictive use has been made of an echo from a local high life of the early 60's in

> forty-four, chest forty-four, waist forty-four. She has no friend ...(p.19).

Not the least inconsistent with the tradition which Umunnakwe propounds, is the fact that Binetou is credited with a highly poetic funeral oration at her husband's funeral. Binetou, who has been portrayed as submissive, naive, etc? In Igboland!

It seems as if Umunnakwe has intended all this effort as a literary joke. One would wish to submit, however, that it is in very bad taste, base, obscene and absolutely insensitive. One would expect that masculine reaction to such a cry from the heart, which Mariama Ba's novel really is, would not be an attempt at justifying obvious evils by twisting, distorting and abusing the spirit of amendement which is really intended. Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba's novel, rather than paint herself as faultless and the perfect mother and wife, does admit her limitations as embodied in Ibrahima Sall's story, which Umunnakwe's Andrew viciously portrays as Ramatoulaye's connivance with her daughter's evils.

It was an impossible task that Umunnakwe set out to achieve. This novel is not a reply to Mariama Ba's novel. Far from it. The author would do himself a lot of service if he would stick to his own story and leave out all references to *So Long a*

Letter. One suspects that this author has intentionally stuck to Mariama Ba's novel so that people would buy his work by default. One submits that this is a cheap ploy, and is not one that will likely make for a successful career as a writer because once beaten, they say, twice shy.

As for his Andrew and his stated aim of setting' the records straight for posterity', one can only say that that is tantamount to crying wolf!

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