Okike

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edited by onuora ossie enekwe

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Manuscripts should be in duplicate, typewriten, 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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Contents

Book Reviews/Review Essays

From the Editor

As announced in the February issue, the October 1996 edition will mark the Silver Jubilee of ***Okike***. The theme for this issue is **"Nigerian Literature in the Last Decade (1986-1996)".** (See inside back cover for details).

Contributors are once again reminded to send biographical notes. This is very important.

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We have taken significant steps to ensure that ***Okike*** is available worldwide. If you have advice or suggestions as to how to facilitate this objective, please, write.

Thanks for your continuing interest in ***Okike***.

ONUORA OSɔIE ENEKWE
Editor

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AYO MAMUDU

Harmattan

Bears on her billowy back
the season of harvests
mates past and future.

She stretches the tingling skin tight
to transmit impulses raining on mind,
the voice of cold-sharp vision.

Egrets return delivering parcels
to waiting souls
and children mark their white blessings on finger-nails

Cows flaunt the elegant burden
of the birds -
companions and dutiful valets

The eye puts new colours
on objects sifted through the bluish haze
which hangs down from skyrafters.

The call of the spirit
perched on the flowering branches of the soul
rebukes the year's slide

Even as on rising ashes
longings etherised rush beyond
swirls of dust storms.

Childhood Eggs

The colourful bird my childhood
re-acquaints mirthfully my afternoon
with catapults

The familiar long-forgotten tune flows
from its swollen throat into my afternoon
days parched beyond the touch of iced water;
on birdsong the years ebb;
flood-freight silting plant roots.

In the silted seabed flap-flops a fish,
disembowels herself and sets
her pouch of eggs my dreams on a rock slab

Between bird and fish, the dialogue
soon becomes warm
on questions of height and vista,
maturation and time.

I hear out
the weave and wash of their exchange,
my eyes blazing, hair smoking.

SOLA OSOFISAN

Eternity

He's been around for long
Forever,
He's been around forever,
Numerous footsteps invisible on windwaterwashed shores.
The creaks of his age,
The streaks of his days,
He wears no Rolex,
And because he alone dares to be timeless,
They call him Eternity

He was around when they manufactured history
And good children gathered the rumpled folds of curiousity
To spread at the knowing feet
Of yesterday's griots.
He outlives the insane songs that entomb,
The empty echo of bloodstained jackboots,
Knock-about babies,
The zombies of fear.
He seeps painstakingly through the millennia
To detonate mindless moments,
Assuring urchins hanging at the unacknowledged edges
Of courtyard celebrations
That homeless crumbs would always need a friend.
His is not the fickle affection of the bee for the pollen,
The vastness of every place is the forever of his love.
He is around in our longing for one to hold us today
As if tomorrow is just a mirage,
Around fleetingly in the alternate loins
Of couples hidden in the sweaty hasty grip
Of 'short time',
He was.

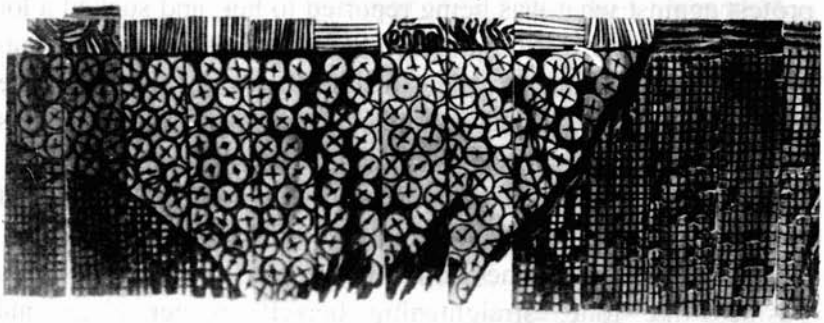
They called him Eternity.
He is .
They call him Eternity.

He was Eternity when moments had no name
And creatures had no place.
He was Eternity when Eve had no shame
And serpents hadn't lost face.
His voice is a querulous whistle
Asking 'whooooooooooo?',
Screaming around sudden corners in high places
Whittling leaves in woody passageways.
Sometimes he makes a restless home in the armpit
Of the wind,
And because he's been around for so many forgotten
Yesterdays,
They call him Eternity.

He's awake in the sleeping night,
Smoothening wrinkles with fingers of light,
Cradling the battered faces of battered babies,
Whispering 'everything will be alright'.
He is in the drumble as angry clouds grind their teeth,
The fatal whiplash of his signature tattoos the sky.
The faraway stars are fireflies in the tangled
Macroverse of his endless hair,
The cohesive sparkle in his daylight eyes.
He watches even as darkness haltingly deserts the sky,
A broken whore dragging her bruises to bed,
And because his mind never fails
And his limbs never ail,
They call him Eternity.

He's numbered the miserable moments at many graveside,
Deleting glowing names for whom only yesterday
He uncovered a fresh page.
That's when he feels he's been about for too long
And won't something delete him too?
And because he is the final eraser,
They call him Eternity.

And when they puff smoke in his gentle eyes
And when they pile dust in his waiting embrace
And when they empty curses in his lungs,
Still he speaks infinitely in the gargle of the waves,
Laughing his wild laughter above the tallest trees,
Tickling a neglected backside,
Fondling hair.
And though he be one of the galaxy of gods men pray,
Gods too seek his face,
For all need Time to do the undone,
Sing the unsung.
Time, winged bird poking caring beak into the nest
Of perpetual harvest...
Even the gods call him Eternity.



"Pata", 1990

ARTHUR GAKWANDI

A Man For One Season

The office cleaner, who had been staring through the open window for some time, suddenly stepped back and ducked towards the secretary's table. Half crouching, he gave her a naughty grin and whispered loudly: 'The Minister has come'!

The secretary gave him an indifferent side glance and continued with her long chat on the telephone. The cleaner snatched a rug from the window-sill, made mock gestures at dusting the typewriter in front of the secretary, was waved off with a gesture of the hand, at which he leapt through the doorway into the corridor.

Almost immediately there were rapid, half-audible verbal exchanges outside the door, a hurried shuffling of feet, slamming and opening of doors, and general commotion along the whole length of the corridor.

Inside the secretary's room, there was a clearing of throats, shy exchanges of glances and adjustments of neck-ties as a group of people straightened up themselves in their chairs in preparation for the minister's arrival. They all kept their anxious eyes at the secretary who, to their surprise, maintained her remote and indifferent composure as she gave out long drawn grunts of disapproval into the telephone, hissed in protest against what was being reported to her, and sucked a lot of air through her teeth in disgust. She did not pay any attention to the people who crowded inside the room because she regarded them as part of an endless stream of favour seekers whom she had come to view with contempt.

'A - ah! ah - ah!' she remonstrated with loud fist-banging of the table that made everybody in the room start.

'Well, anyway,' she said after a pause, switching to a business-like tone, straightening herself in her chair and

beginning to arrange the papers on her table with the hand that was not holding the receiver. 'I'll ring you later. I want to get the full details, but now I can't. Yes. O.K.' and she abruptly replaced the receiver.

She pulled out a notebook and a pencil from the drawer and placed them close to the edge of the table. She then started to arrange the paper trays, pads, and the little stationery objects on her table. She was not in a hurry because she knew that the minister would take some time to walk up to the fourth floor, the lift having broken down for the third time in a fortnight. The Minister had now given instruction that no more money should be wasted repairing the lift because he attributed the recurrent breakdowns to constant overloading and to the violent and persistent pushing of the button by impatient users each one of whom seemed to expect the lift to give him special priority.

'Let them go up on foot for some time,' Honourable Makanga, the minister had said when he heard about the latest breakdown. 'That may teach them to be responsible. In the meantime, of course, some of us will have to pay the price of being Ugandans,' he added, waving his hand dismissively.

The corridor, which had been deserted a few minutes earlier, now become crowded with people hurrying in all directions and some times colliding as they stepped aside to let the minister pass. None of them forgot to say 'good morning sir' as the minister hastened down the corridor with long measured strides, not looking either way. He shot past the entrance of his secretary's office by exactly two strides and made an about turn while the bodyguard who was close at his heels, opened the door just in time for him to enter.

Everybody except the secretary jumped up. The minister muttered a 'good morning everybody' as he crossed the room without looking at anybody's face. A discordant jumble of sibilants floated in the room in response to his greeting as he disappeared into his office. the bodyguard in police uniform

followed him closely, carrying a briefcase in one hand and a Chinese SMG in the other. The bodyguard returned almost immediately with the gun but without the briefcase, closed the door, and sat on a hard chair with his legs stretched out to block any entry into the office.

More people poured into the room and made a lot of noise as they jostled about the middle because all the chairs were already occupied. The secretary tried to cast reproachful glances at the people in order to restrain them from causing commotion but she made no impact because some of them were standing too close to her. She became irritated as things began to get rowdy. Those of you who cannot find chairs, please wait outside,' she ordered. 'The minister cannot see you all at the same time.'

The crowd did not pay any heed to her commands and continued to eddy around the middle of the room.

'Please give us space to work!' she shouted. A murmur of protest rippled through the crowd.

'Where is the bodyguard?' she yelled with irritation, as she turned round only to see that the policeman was already gently but firmly shoving the favour-seekers out of the room, using his gun as boy scouts use their staves to control spectators at school concerts. He was showing people out without allowing his weapon to come into contact with their bodies. You could see from the way he tilted his gun upward, the muzzle slightly above the people's heads, that he was following certain rules.

When there was no one left standing in the room, the policeman came back and sat in his chair next to the door of the minister's office. He waited for things to quieten, and then went out of the room.

'Yakobo, where are you?' the secretary called the messenger in a stern voice. The messenger often made himself invisible, but almost always surfaced when called. He now emerged from somewhere among the visitors and stood in front of the secretary. 'Bring forms for these people to fill.'

'Oh no!' someone groaned with irritation. The secretary suddenly turned round to see who had dared to voice a complaint but only met with a general growling and grunting that ended quickly as she searched their faces with her piercing eyes to determine the source of the noise.

'But this is not fair!' exploded someone who could not control his irritation. 'Some of us have been here for two hours! Why didn't you give us the forms earlier?' There was a general murmur of support for this man who had plucked up courage to make a verbal protest. Still no one else dared support him openly.

'She doesn't know that some of us come from up-country,' continued the man who now had nothing to lose and whom the others watched with silent admiration. He was a lean, middle-aged man with greying whiskers and stooping shoulders. Faced with someone whom she could not intimidate, the secretary looked the other way and stretched her naturally thick lips into a short menacing muzzle. The protester decided to address her directly. 'Madam, you have to learn to be fair to fellow Ugandans, even if they are not important.' He spoke in a quiet but defiant tone, trying to keep his irritation under control. There were murmurs of approval from all around the room.

Mrs. Wandera, the secretary, decided to maintain a fixed gaze at the wall in front of her and to re-mould her thick lips into little mounds that now assumed the shape of a half split pumpkin. She maintained that posture for some time but she was the one who finally broke the oppressive silence.

'The forms can't be distributed before we know whether the minister is coming or not and whether he is going to have time to see people,' she asserted in triumphant self-justification as she turned her cold stare on the group. The finality of her tone made people fidget and sigh as they struggled to contain their frustration.

For the past twenty years, Jovia Wandera, the senior personal secretary to the minister, had served in the same

ministry of Rural Development. She had worked for Commissioners, Directors, Permanent Secretaries, Deputy Ministers and Cabinet Ministers. She sometimes joked that the only senior government official she had not served under was the President; but she would quickly add that she had no intention of exposing herself to such a security risk. She had started her working life as a copy typist, climbed to the rank of stenographer in a period of three years and, after one year of in-service training, been promoted to the rank of personal secretary. Over the past five years she had carried the title which she knew would be the highest attainable in her profession: Senior Personal Secretary. Most of the people under whom she had served had either been retired in the public interest or due to old age or were dead. Some had fled into exile. The political turbulence of the seventies and the eighties had taken a heavy toll among them. But she, Jovia Wandera, had stayed on in the same ministry for twenty-five years.

The destruction of official records during the looting that followed the overthrow of two governments had conferred upon her additional importance since she was the only person in the ministry who could remember official decisions taken before 1979. She had come to be accepted as an indispensable element now, that she would outlive the present permanent secretary and the minister neither of whom she particularly liked. It was frustrating to know that she would never attain any higher status than that of a secretary but she went about her work with stoic patience, taking comfort in her secret sense of power, the power to outlast those who came swaggering into high office only to be humbled in a few years. Moreover, she regarded most of them as frauds who were beneficiaries of injustice. For as long as their intrigues and machinations placed them above her, she endured their follies and mischief, but she inwardly sneered at their expectation that she should serve them with loyalty and enthusiasm. She carried out their orders with

professional indifference but discreetly exposed their follies whenever she could do so without putting her job at risk.

'I have to catch a bus before one o'clock,' said a short pot-bellied man wringing his hands in apparent despair. He opened the collar of his red shirt and mopped sweat from his thick neck with a brownish handkerchief. All eyes turned to the corner where he was sitting, almost in tears; but this show of sympathy was suddenly interrupted when the messenger came into the room with the forms. There was a brief stampede as everybody jumped up and jostled to catch a copy of the form.

When all the forms had been collected, the secretary arranged them neatly and handed them to the messenger, saying: 'Take them to Mr. Nyondo.' A few people exchanged looks of bewilderment as the messenger disappeared into the room directly opposite the minister's office.

'And who is Mr. Nyondo, if I may ask?' inquired a man in an elegant blue safari suit and a maroon samsonite brief case. He spoke with slow, heavy sarcasm in a polished accent that set him apart from the rest of the waiting crowd. Mrs. Wandera turned towards him, fixed his face under her stern stare, and addressed him in a slow emphatic tone, trying to match his sarcasm:

'Mr. Nyondo is the Honourable Minister's Special Assistant.'

The telephone buzzed.

'Yes sir.'

Everybody strained their ears as if to catch what the minister was saying to his secretary in the receiver: but it was impossible to catch the words.

'His extension is not working sir. I'll go and call him, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.' She replaced the receiver, got up immediately and walked slowly across the room, consciously defying the hostile stare of the people and opened the door to Mr. Nyondo's office. She closed it behind her with a bang.

A few minutes afterwards Richard Nyondo emerged from his office. He was a lanky but vivacious young man in his late twenties. He swept into the room with the confident and pleasant smile of a salesman. He shook hands vigorously with a few people and bent down to receive whispers in his ear to which he replied loudly with, 'no problem! no problem!'

The telephone buzzed again and the secretary gave an automatic 'yes sir,' into the receiver. She replaced the receiver hurriedly and signalled Nyondo, adding 'The Minister wants us both, NOW!' Nyondo winked at her and she responded with a shrugging of shoulders and a knowing look. They went in quickly.

The Minister did not look in their faces. He kept his gaze below their mid-riffs, creating an uncomfortable suspense. However, he looked directly in the face of the messenger who at that moment brought in the day's paper which he deposited on the minister's table before sliding quietly behind and busying himself with files and papers in the far corner. The secretary crossed the room to the other side as if to take her legs out of the minister's gaze but he halted her with a gesture of his hand.

'You sit here,' he instructed in a low bored tone, looking up into her face for the first time. 'I want you to take a dictation.'

She approached the chair in front of his desk and managed to steal a quick glance at the weary expression on his face before she sat down.

'Now Nyondo,' he turned to the special assistant with a slight wave of the hand, 'I want you to tell the undersecretary of finance to replace my car radio TODAY.'

'Yes sir.'

'I missed something on the BBC on my way here because the radio was *coughing* and *sneezing*.' He emphasized the COUGHING and SNEEZING as someone reacting to offensive behaviour. 'This is the second time I have missed an important item of news.' His austere frown and the heavy twang on the

edges of his husky voice made it clear that this one was one of the orders which had to be carried out without any delay.

'Yes sir.'

'And tell the permanent secretary I'm travelling to the constituency this weekend.'

'Yes sir.'

'He should authorize allowances for four days.'

'O.k. sir.'

'The allowances for the driver and the bodyguard should be handed to me personally.'

'Yes sir.'

'I don't want this business of drinking the whole night before we travel,' he pronounced with impatient firmness.

'Yes sir.'

There was a moment of silence.

'And how far have you gone with processing the PER DIEM for the trip to India?'

'Sir, I understand the Prime Minister's office has queried the number of days.'

'And...?'

'I think the PS is handling it.'

'And why hasn't he consulted me?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Does he think he knows more about the trip than I do?'

'Well, sir, I think he will get in touch with you, sir.'

'It's not a question of getting in touch, it's a question of getting the work done!'

'O.K. sir. I shall remind him, sir.'

'Yes, you better do so right away. I don't want to arrive late at the seminar because YOU PEOPLE believe in doing everything at the last minute.'

'O.K. sir.'

Nyondo moved towards the door but as he grabbed the handle, the minister called him back.

'Ring the General Manager, Hima Factory, and ask him when he is delivering my cement. No. In fact ask him to ring me *personally* and tell me what he is doing with my money. Give him my direct number. I am tired of his evasive messages.'

'But sir, I understand the factory has been out of production for some weeks.'

'That's their usual story!'

'O.K. sir.'

'Whenever the black-market price comes down they close down for some time.'

'Well sir...'

'O.K. go.' Nyondo was waived off dismissively.

Ten minutes later, the secretary emerged from the minister's room, holding her notebook and a pencil. She pulled her chair and slowly sat down while keeping her eyes away from the anxious faces in the room. After arranging some things on her table, she turned to the waiting crowd and said in a loud flat voice:

'The Minister will not be able to see anybody in the next one hour. He says he has important work which he has to finish before he can see people.'

The tension deepened and turned into a low rumble that sent its vibration across the room; but the rumble slowly subsided into a dead silence of powerlessness. Suddenly, the secretary broke the silence with the rickety noise of her old manual typewriter which she banged and slammed with a mixture of frustration and pride that made her chair, the table, and the machine creek, squeak, vibrate, rock, and swing in a discordant rhythm of dilapidation.

There were whispers and low-tone exchanges within the group in the far corner. Already the shared ordeal in the room was beginning to foster some closeness among the vigil keepers. However, any break in the typing would cause the whispers to die down.

After a while, the same man who had first challenged the secretary said in a low tone to the person sitting next to him: 'These people will learn a lesson when multi-party elections come.' People strained to catch what the leading protester was saying and so the man raised his voice. 'This man; his father and I used to herd goats together!'

'Surely!' said the short, pot-bellied man with a red shirt as he opened his mouth and raised his empty palms above his head in an apparent appeal to heaven to intercede. The man sitting next to him gave him a little elbow jab and said: 'When elections come in two years' time, that's when these people will remember that we are also people.' The new speaker was a hairy, broad-chested man with only a thin ring of hair around his bald head.

'Aah, ah!' a thin, evidently underfed man of uncertain age exclaimed in a whisper. 'This one shouldn't even waste his time trying' he went on, shaking his head.

'Eh? Are you from his constituency?'

'Not constituency - same village!'

'So he is unpopular in his constituency?

'Worse than that. Everybody has lost confidence in him!'

The telephone rang and brought another pause to the rhythmic clatter of the typewriter.

'Yes sir? O.K. sir.'

'Yakobo!' Mrs. Wandera called the messenger soon after she replaced the receiver. 'The Minister wants yesterday's NEW VISION. You get it from among the heap in the newspaper cupboard over there and take it to him.'

'You see!' Someone whispered, 'he is going to read a newspaper!'

'This world!' exclaimed the hairy chested man with a bald head as he shook his head repeatedly. 'This man used to buy maize flour from my kiosk on credit.' The company turned inquisitive faces towards him.

'I was the one who used to give him posho, sugar, and powdered milk on credit during UNLF days; he even went into exile without settling his debt.' The man went on shaking his head slowly in disbelief. 'When the government changed, I got a shop from a UNLF soldier who had run away but now they want to take my shop away and this man can't help.'

'Surely!' said the short pot-bellied man with his empty palms pointing to heaven.

The secretary finished the letter which she was typing and took it to the minister for signature. Immediately the man with grey whiskers got up and announced his decision to leave.

'In fact, I was warned before I came here that the man would not help me but I refused to listen. Now I have wasted a whole morning. He was not like this before. It is money which is going to his head.'

'By the way, what did you want to see him for?' the hairy-chested man blurred out conspiratorially, with childish curiosity.

'My daughter has been given a place in Tororo Girls school. But how can a thirteen year-old girl travel by herself from Bushenyi to Tororo?'

'Especially in the Uganda of these days!' interjected the hairy-chested man in sympathy.

Everybody gazed sympathetically at the elderly man who remained standing by the door for a while, apparently undecided whether to leave or stay. He suddenly grabbed the door handle as if he had made a fresh resolve. 'It's better to find money and bribe a headmaster than go through all this humiliation,' he declared with resolve.

'Yes, if you have your two hundred thousand you can get a place in the best school just like that!' said the hairy-chested man with a loud click of his middle finger against his thumb. 'Yes!' he said with emphasis as he repeated the click, using both hands and producing a startling bang. At this, the man who

was holding the door handle turned it, swung the door open and left.

Someone who had so far not uttered a word got up, stretched his back, yawned, massaged his knees, and went out of the room. Another man followed him. A young couple quickly moved in from the corridor and occupied the seats.

****

Mr. Odongo, the Permanent Secretary (or PS as he was commonly referred to) walked into the room. He was dressed like an Englishman going for Sunday service. He strolled in with light, easy steps as if he didn't want to be noticed. His expression was of someone who is used to carrying the world's burdens on his face. He gave a half-friendly, half-condescending 'good morning, Mrs. Wandera' before he casually pushed open the door of the special assistant without knocking.

'Good morning Mr. Nyondo,' he said in a quiet, formal tone.

'Good morning sir!' replied Nyondo who immediately shot up. Yakobo, the messenger, slithered through the half-open door, past the permanent secretary's back and headed for the bookshelf in the far corner where he started to look for something among the newspapers and magazines.

'What is the minister doing?' the permanent secretary asked Nyondo in a conspiratorial tone.

'I don't know sir.'

'Tomorrow is Cabinet day and he has not yet given me his comments on the memo which I gave him two days ago.'

'Well, sir, I think it is better to talk to him directly.'

'I spoke to him on the phone and he said he hadn't had time to finish it.'

'Now sir, what can I do?'

'Well, just find a way of putting the memo on top of his papers.'

'I didn't see any papers on his desk.' There was a moment of silence during which the face of the permanent secretary tensed up, his forehead assuming contours that resembled the grooves of a finely woven basket.

'Is he in one of his moods?' he inquired between sighs of resignation.

'Well sir, IT IS DIFFICULT TO TELL.'

It was common knowledge in the ministry that the minister had recently become prone to varying and unpredictable moods. It was therefore thought prudent by those who interacted with him at work to check what mood he was in before entering his office. Mrs. Wandera was generally regarded as the best interpreter of these moods but the permanent secretary preferred to exchange such confidences only with the special assistant. He knew that there was a lot of gossip floating around the office on the subject but he let the special assistant pick up the gossip from drivers, bodyguards and secretaries so that he in turn could pick it up without having to be indiscreet.

'Anyhow, you find a way of reminding him about it.'

'O.K. sir.'

'I mean from time to time.' he said as he closed and opened his fists, trying to keep his frustration under control.

'O.K. sir.'

The permanent secretary turned and was slightly jolted when he noticed that the door behind him was not firmly closed. He tried to close it but Mrs. Wandera just managed to edge her way in and closed it for him. He ignored her and addressed Nyondo: 'And what is this story about a radio for the minister's car? I have a voucher for it on my desk.'

'Yes, this morning the minister said he had missed important news because the car radio was not clear.' The permanent secretary shook his head in frustration. He started pacing up and down the room and tightened his fists to stop

himself from wringing his hands. Mrs. Wandera got an opportunity to chip in:

'Sir, I had come to beg you to let me have the radio which they are going to take out of the minister's car.'

The permanent secretary looked at her with a blank expression, apparently having been taken by surprise.

'You see the radio in my little car collapsed a few years ago,' she went on hurriedly, 'and I have never had money to replace it.'

'So the radio is O.K.?' the permanent secretary asked with eagerness as if he was glad to find support to confirm the minister's wanton extravagance.

'Yes, the radio is very fine. I travelled in the car to take the minister's daughter to school last week and the radio was very loud and clear.' Mr. Odenyo struck the air with the back of his hand as if fending off an ugly fat fly.

'I think you better discuss this with the transport officer. It's better if I'm not directly involved,' he said making a great effort to maintain a dignified calmness.

'Oh, ho! that one!' Mrs. Wandera exclaimed, 'he may have sold the radio by now!'

'I don't think so. I haven't signed the voucher for its replacement yet.'

'Yes, but he is the one who provided the quotation and he may have sold the radio by telephone.'

'O.K. tell him to come and see me,' Mr. Odenyo said in apparent resignation. As he approached the door, he said in a half appealing voice: 'Nyondo, you pursue this matter of the cabinet memo URGENTLY.'

'Yes sir.'

Yakobo, the messenger was already approaching the door which he now opened for the big man. He followed him outside.

'You imagine!' began Nyondo, adopting an expression of martyrdom and letting his arms drop loosely on his sides in

feigned self-pity. 'The minister doesn't want to talk to the PS, so he sends me to tell the PS to do ABCD. The PS does not want to talk to the minister, so he asks me to convince him to do XYZ. What a ministry!'

'Yah, that's what it means to work for big people', answered PS.

'And what do I get for it? My colleagues spend only two hours in the office and spend the rest of the day ensuring their survival, while I can't move out of the office even for half an hour!'

'At least for you, you can get out when the minister is away, but a secretary! Honestly, its bad not to have a degree.'

'But what's a degree worth these days?' At least, you have a government house. I can't even get a house.'

'Ha! But I heard the minister promising to find a scholarship for you.'

'Ha! Really!' he exclaimed, his face beaming. If that works out, then I can say that my sacrifice has paid off. Then I can say to hell with your civil service.'

'Eh, you mean you won't come back after your M.A.?'

'Me? You must be joking. If I get my M.A., I shall go to Botswana or South Africa. Or if I can make it, I shall work as a night-watchman in America until I have got enough money to come and start some business of my own. Why should I come back here to die a pauper?'

The telephone started ringing and Mrs. Wandera ran back to her desk to answer it.

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It was well known in the ministry and in the wider circles of government service that the current minister of Rural Development did not get on well with his permanent secretary. This was not in any way unique to this ministry as there were several other such personal conflicts which provided gossip in Kampala club, the golf club and the National Assembly bar.

The most commonly expressed opinion about such conflicts was that the minister and his permanent secretary had failed to 'eat' together. Another often expressed opinion was that a particular minister wanted to get rid of his permanent secretary so that he could replace him with one from his own tribe. Occasionally, someone who wanted to sound advanced in his thinking would attribute the bad blood between a minister and his permanent secretary to the personal chemistry of the two individuals; but this was a line that was rarely pursued in high circle drinking places. Conversation would inevitably drift towards speculation on who had benefited from which government project.

Nyondo had heard all these opinions but none seemed to fit the situation in his ministry. All he could sense was that there was going to be a showdown at some point. He suspected that the permanent secretary would win because he was a seasoned bureaucrat who calculated every move and never did anything that was not covered by some government standing order. If there was anything that he wanted to do outside the rules he always found a way of getting one of his subordinates to do it, usually after a little inducement and a promise to cover up. And he had no shortage of inducements, since it was he who authorized both internal and external travel, and the use of government cars, not to mention his key role in transfers, promotions, and training opportunities.

Nyondo found the Minister more difficult to sum up, because he behaved erratically. He could be reasonable, informal, and very personal in a way that the permanent secretary could not. On the other hand, he could be openly churlish, self-indulgent, and inexplicably truculent. He could be friendly and charming on one occasion and behave as a vicious bully the next time you met him; and yet at another time, he would behave as if he did not know you. If he chose to work, he could produce impressive memos but most of the time he chose to do nothing. People who knew him during his student days

said he used to be very clever but that he lacked the discipline to pursue any career. He had attempted various courses in Britain, but abandoned them half way through. He had spent many years in Europe doing things that no one could give a name until he got elected on the executive of an opposition group in exile in Sweden. And from exile he had come back home as a hero along with many who had campaigned against the previous regime. And he had been rewarded by being appointed a Minster. That was why the permanent secretary regarded him as an upstart who had never held any other public job before becoming a minister.

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Nyondo re-emerged from the Minister's office into the secretary's room, leaned against the door and took a deep breath with his eyes closed. He then opened his eyes and, after some hesitation, started in the most humble and most brotherly tone that was full of appeal for understanding: 'I am really sorry, but the minister will NOT be able to see anybody today.' All the heads dropped, some in despair, some in disgust. 'And I'm sorry again,' Nyondo continued, 'tomorrow is cabinet day, so the minister will not be in his office.' There were gasps of exasperation and sucking of air through the teeth.

'And I'm even more sorry that on Friday the minister is traveling to his constituency.' People hissed in disgust. 'He is probably going to come back on Monday; therefore, Tuesday is the earliest he can see anybody.'

Several people got up and moved towards Nyondo, trying to engage him in a dialogue but he excused himself in the most humble manner possible and dashed out followed by the messenger who was trying to see which way he was going.

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There was a time during the sixties and early seventies when residents of Kampala eagerly looked to weekends as

times of relaxation, family visits, and trips to their village homes. But things had gradually changed so that during the eighties weekends came to be viewed as undesirable interruptions during which people did not know what to do with themselves and during which they could not use government offices to carry on their petty speculative businesses. Insecurity had driven decent people out of night clubs; home entertainment was beyond the means of the majority, and trips to the village had become a luxury for the very rich. This particular weekend was no exception. The Minister, as was often the case, got a full tank of petrol for his car, plus night allowances for himself, driver and bodyguard, and went to his village. The Permanent Secretary also got his car filled with petrol and went to his village. He did not claim allowances because his village could not be called a constituency.

On Tuesday, at 9 a.m., the following week, the minister, for the first time, in many weeks, took the initiative to call his permanent secretary on the telephone. 'Have you seen the newspaper story?' he growled with deep sarcasm.

'Yes sir, 'Odenyo replied in a voice that could have chilled milk into a tasteless yogurt.

There was silence on both sides. 'So you have nothing to say?' the minister went on sarcastically.

'But sir,' the permanent secretary started, 'the press has been publishing all sorts of damaging things against people and some of these things have no foundation.'

'But can *we* prove with concrete evidence that these things are not true?'

'Well, I'm sure I can get the accounts people to dig up vouchers, invoices and LPOs to show that the allegations are not true.'

'Can it be done to-day?'

'That would be difficult sir. Our system of keeping vouchers is not, is not really the best.'

'Why should that be so?' the minister snapped.

'Well, it's the caliber of the staff we have and, of course, the general situation in the country'.

'Well, you **are** the Accounting Officer and as far as I'm concerned you are the one to produce the evidence to refute these allegations.' He bellowed, 'This exercise takes precedence over everything else.'

'Yes sir.'

'And let me have the facts by tomorrow because I have to talk to the press before the end of tomorrow.'

'O.K., sir.'

'In the meantime, if reporters call at the office, tell them I am on urgent state duties and that I shall be out of the office until tomorrow.'

'O.K., sir.'

Around the time when coffee and tea are served in most government offices, Mrs. Wandera walked into her office with a sullen face. The room was deserted, except for Yakobo, the messenger, who was standing close to the window through which he peeped from time to time. She tried to open the door to Mr. Nyondo's office, but found it locked. 'Where is

Nyondo?' She inquired of Yakobo.

'He is in his office,' the messenger replied in a half whisper.

She tapped on the door gently, saying: 'It's me Jovia!'

The door opened and she went in followed by Yakobo. 'Here, that's what the permanent secretary has written,' she said handing him a circular. He read:

TO ALL SENIOR STAFF

You will all have read some misinformed and totally unfounded reports in some Kampala newspapers alleging that there have been financial irregularities in this ministry. My office is now collecting data so that these false reports which have been mainly leveled against the Hon. Minister can be refuted publicly. In this exercise, I shall need the co-operation of all members of staff. Accordingly, no member of the senior staff may leave his/her office today and

until further notice without my express personal permission. This instruction also applies to all junior and intermediate staff in the accounts department. Failure to abide by this instruction will lead to serious disciplinary action.

You are all reminded about paragraph *2 of section F-H of Chapter One* of the Uganda Govt. standing orders which forbids you all from talking to journalists about anything concerning the ministry without the express permission of the minister. Any violation of this order will equally lead to serious disciplinary action.

Julius Odenyo
Permanent Secretary

cc: Hon. Minister
Hon. Deputy Minister

'This is **very** unfair, 'Nyondo commented coldly as he tossed the circular on his table.

'Well, what do you expect?'

'I mean, why can't I be allowed to escape from these journalists who are hounding me? If the minister himself can't face them, why should I, especially when I'm told to say nothing to them?'

'As for me, I'm going to sit in the staff canteen. In case the PS wants me, that's where I'll be.'

'I can see those other two journalists coming back,' Yakobo whispered, as he ducked from the window.

'Let me run out!' Mrs. Wandera said as she hurried towards the door.

'Yakobo, you go and wait in the secretary's room. Tell everybody who looks like a journalist that you have no idea where I am, 'Nyondo said before showing the messenger out and locking the door.'

Yakobo sat in the secretary's chair and played with the typewriter while Ngoga, the driver of the minister's second car leaned against the window-sill and yawned repeatedly.

'But can't we have some tea?' Ngoga moaned.

'And where do you get the petty cash for buying milk and sugar?'

'Has the minister gone with the petty cash? What about those of us who have reported for duty?'

'My friend, you just don't count. Forget about tea, forget about petrol for your car and forget everything until the minister comes back.'

'Aaaa - ha!' Ngoga said shaking his head slowly.

'You lend me some money: I want to buy a soda for myself,' Yakobo said.

'You hear him! You've just said that I have no petrol in my car and you expect me to have money?'

'Ha! I wish someone could give me a car, even without petrol. I would not even ask for a salary!'

'And you would lose your job within one week!'

'How come you haven't lost yours all this while?'

'You also! But tell me, Yakobo, do you think the minister has *eaten* all this money?'

'Wheya? of course not! The money is all *eaten* by the PS and the Chief Accountant!'

'Enh!' Ngoga said pushing his head forward and backwards like a lizard, 'then where does the minister get the money for buying all these lorry-fulls of building materials?'

'He got all his money when he was the Minister of Lands. There is no money in this ministry as you know. This one is just a ministry in name!'

'And how does a minister in Lands get money?'

'Ah! There everybody is rich. Even a messenger can build a big house. Every time they allocate some land, the minister and the PS and the commissioner must each get a plot. And so a minister can easily get ten plots in one year. You work out how much money that is.

'Eh, but are they not afraid doing such things?'

'Oh, do you think they are fools? Do you think they use their own names? And that's where messengers come in!'

Some one entered without knocking. He had a camera slung over his shoulder. He was holding a notebook in one hand a pen in the other.

'I want to talk to the Minister of Rural Development,' the man said without any formalities.

'He is not here,' Yakobo replied guardedly.

'What about the minister's special assistant?'

He is also not here.'

'What about the personal secretary?'

'She is also not here.'

'Where are all these people?' the man demanded aggressively.

'I don't know, sir. They don't tell me where they are going. I am just a messenger.'

The man started writing in his notebook. Yakobo got frightened.

'Sir, if you write in a newspaper that I have talked to you, I shall be dismissed from my job,' Yakobo said in an appealing voice.

'O.K. then show me the PS's office,' the man said somewhat menacingly.

'But you can see I'm the only one in the office. I can't leave the place.'

'What about this man here?' the journalist pointed to Ngoga with his pen, threatening to write something.

'This man is my cousin. He is visiting me from up-country.'

The journalist turned away from the two frightened men and surveyed the room with contemptuous amusement. Then he sat down on a chair and started writing.

Yakobo and Ngoga watched in terror. The man was writing furiously with only an occasional glance around the room.

'But sir, I am not important in this office!'

'O.K., I shall write that!' The journalist remarked casually while increasing his writing speed.

'But if you mention my name I shall lose my job! Please sir, I have no father and I am paying school fees for my two brothers.'

'O.K., tell me where the minister is and I shall not mention your name,' the journalist said with his pen pointed directly at Yakobo.

'Sir, I am not supposed to talk to you,' Yakobo said with trembling hands. 'There is even a circular saying we should not talk to journalists,' Yakobo went on as he involuntarily picked the permanent secretary's circular which was lying in the tray and waved it in his trembling hand.

The journalist moved forward quickly, grabbed the circular and left the room without ceremony.

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Jovia Wandera could remember a time when she thought it beneath her dignity to drink beer in a Wandegeya bar. During the years when she was a student at Nakawa secretarial college she insisted on being taken out to fashionable bars along Kampala road by whoever dated her. When soon after graduation, she got married to a senior police officer, her social status suddenly changed so that even those open bars along Kampala Road became unworthy of her visits. During the early 70s, she only went out with her husband to big hotels or to official banquets. But she could not now remember when her standards had begun to fall. Even before her husband was murdered during an unsuccessful *coup d'etat*, they had started going out together to sit on hard stools and empty beer crates in sub-urban shops, because everybody was trying to keep a low profile for fear of being noticed by state agents of terror. She never thought about going back to those big hotels even after governments had changed and the secret service had ceased to be a source of terror. Somehow, to the disappointment of many things had not gone back to what they used to be. She had long ago abandoned herself to sitting on empty beer crates and

leaning against sacks of beans and maize flour in provision stores drinking warm beer with other widows who mainly talked about the good old days before General Idi Amin wrecked the economy and swept away decency.

On this particular Wednesday evening, Mrs. Wandera received endless offers of free beer from people who filled her regular nook and sat out on benches straining to catch every word she said.

'But can a minister be so naive? How can he take public money so openly?' someone asked in honest disbelief.

'But you know our Uganda journalists; they just write things anyhow without checking whether they are true', Mrs. Wandera commented with authority.

'But did he steal the money?' someone asked eagerly.

'No, not stealing. Some newspapers have completely distorted the whole thing!' Mrs. Wandera explained in a slow, grave tone.

'What is the issue then?'

'The issue is,' Mrs. Wandera went on, 'that the Public Accounts Committee has alleged that more than fifty percent of the whole ministry's budget was spent on the minister himself, either for his external travel or his internal travel or his entertainment,' she clarified.

'But is it possible for one individual in a whole ministry to do that?'

'Of course not,' Mrs. Wandera said. 'The problem with my boss is that he has been too conceited. He does not even know what goes on in his office. As long as his car is serviced and his travel allowances are paid, he imagines that he is on top of the world. But most of the money is *eaten* by the Permanent Secretary and the Chief Accountant.'

'By the way,' someone intervened, 'where is Makanga now?'

'Honestly!' Mrs. Wandera exclaimed with an air of disbelief. 'Some of these so-called ministers are so naive you

can't believe it. Instead of coming to work or facing the press, he is spending all his time trying to see the President.'

'To see the President! For what?'

'May be he wants to clear his name with the President.'

'And so what is happening in the ministry now?'

'Well, nothing is happening,' Mrs. Wandera explained. 'The Minister is in his house drinking and telephoning State House. I am told the President has been avoiding him. In the meantime, the Permanent Secretary and the Chief Accountant are busy destroying evidence. Makanga has never talked to anybody in the ministry; so he doesn't know what is going on. The man may lose his job for nothing - although, of course, I have no sympathy for him - while those who have eaten the money are strengthening their position.'

In an adjacent shop, within earshot of Mrs. Wandera's explanations, Yakobo was also enjoying a generous flow of free beers from a motley company of small businessmen, research assistants, taxi drivers and junior army officers, drivers and messengers. In low tones, he was explaining to his admiring beer companions who treated him as one of the most informed people who deserved a higher status than his current one that the whole entertainment vote in the minister's office had been spent by Mrs. Wandera herself. She often made requests for crates of beer and soda to entertain non-existent guests. Yakobo confirmed that he was the very person who lifted these crates and put them in the boot of Mrs. Wandera's car. In return he got a few free beers, kilos of sugar and a crate of soda once in a while.

On Friday at 9.00 a.m., after exactly one week of absence, Hon. Steven Makanga arrived at the ministry. He sauntered up the stairs looking on every side but seeing nobody. The corridor on the fourth floor was completely deserted and the secretary's room was empty, except for the messenger who seemed to be so busy cleaning the windows that he did not notice the arrival of the minister. Makanga stopped just before the door of his

office, his attention having been caught by his photograph on the front page of the *Monitor* lying on the secretary's desk and by the large letter headline which said:

STEVEN MAKANGA VOLUNTARILY RESIGNS

He grabbed the paper, turned quickly and collided with his bodyguard. The bodyguard moved away quickly in fright, while Makanga tried to keep his balance by resting his arm against the door of his office. During that moment, Yakobo had the time to observe how puffed and tired the minister's face had became. His complexion had changed from the rich dark brown colour of cooked beans to the dark grey colour of weather beaten pot shards. Makanga opened the door, entered and slammed it behind his back. He sat on the chair, his elbows resting on the table, his head in the palms of his hands. He did not pity himself: he just felt tired, bored, and lonely. Suddenly he was seized by an intense desire to talk intimately to somebody. He thought of his wife who had recently become bitter and estranged, he thought of his old school friends but could not remember how and where to contact them; he thought of his Cabinet colleagues who treated him with guarded correctness; and he thought of the numerous flatterers who had suddenly vanished from him. His desire to find someone to talk to became stronger and compelled him to get up from the chair and to move towards the window. From the elevation of the fourth floor, he saw human figures moving in the car park below. He did not strain to recognize anybody and he did not care if anyone recognized him.

From deep down in his soul he felt some strength welling up. He remembered that he had come to dead ends a couple of times before in his life and that he had pulled himself through each time by finding someone to talk to without inhibitions. There was only one way he could think of at this moment: to go to a bar in a poor suburb, sit at the counter and gossip freely about anything to someone who did not know him.

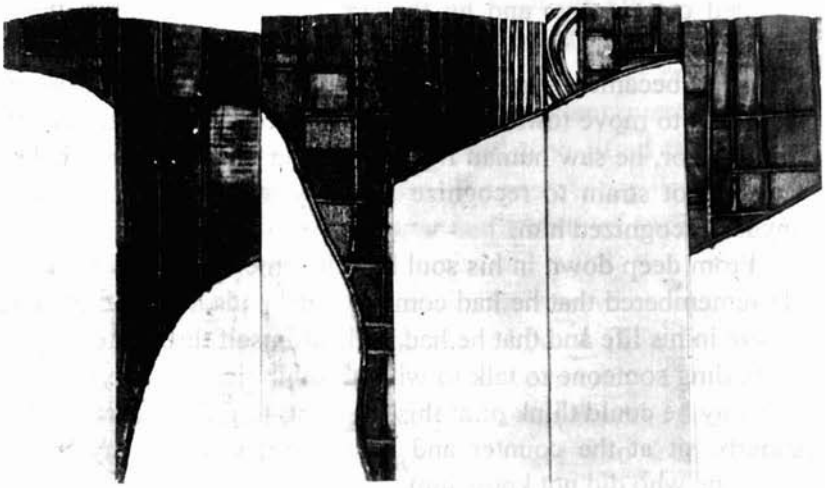
IDA OFFOR

Abuja Zuma Rock

Descending the Abuja hills
From south to north of Nigeria
The rock with human face and grey scalp
Swallows all that approach
Her mysterious territory of splendor.

The two arms of express road
Like black snakes bathing in the sun
Glide down the bowels of Zuma rock
The wind rushes by as we speed
Through arid and open countryside
Approaching with great expectation.

But just at the foot of Zuma
The roads veer away to the left
In pious fear
Lest we see into earth's bowels.



"Zuma" Re-arrangement II

OBI CHRISTOPHER AGOR

Sepulchral Gloom

I was there,
Hardly prepared for the jolt.
The night air caressed
While the Night-Fiends choked
And this sepulchral gloom shrouded my thoughts.

He lay there;
He that was once a man
A benefactor and a beacon
Among the famished minions
A semblance of the living
Gasping for air like a minnow, light-years from home
On the precipice,
To infinity.

Yes, a beacon indeed!
Eko mills him no more.
A vanquished soul in a vanished continuum
The lantern flickers in this sepulchral gloom
The advent of the reaper is nigh, give him room!

We resign, we ache with anguish;
The blood of the innocent runs cold -
And if I unveil the meaning of life in death,
May I reflect in my eyes, that sepulchral gloom
Which trails the faltering clock
And edges me into limbo.

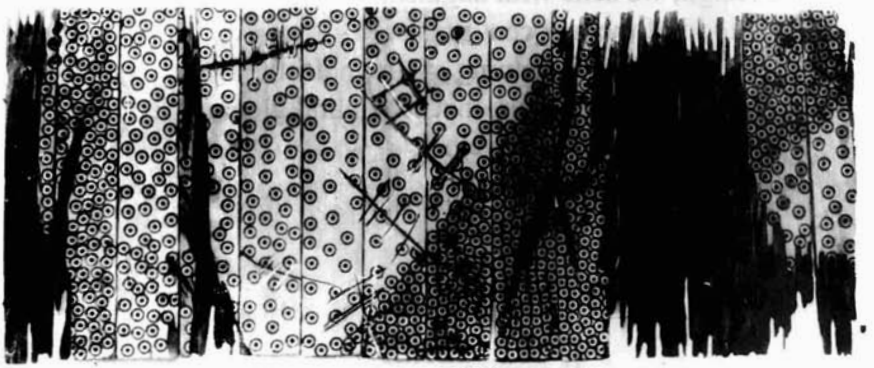
Dawn
PH NGR '89

Stir,
Stretch,
Focus,
Coalesce thoughts and forms,
Fresh in from millennia.

Reality, now palpable;
Like the beady, sweaty, seedy world
Steeped in sin, sorrow, and sadistic sentiments;
Do I dare to cross the threshold once more?

Yesterday was but a reality in a nightmare
Suffused with half-truths,
Uncertainties, which
Persist,
Until
We transcend the morass
Of thought, toil, and existence,
To the greater El Dorado.

Yes, stir,
Let not sultry sleep seduce you.



TV antennae on old lace. 1994

ONUORA OSSIE ENEKWE

Dance of Restoration*

Image One

(It is evening in Ozala. A little crowd of men, women, and young people is in front of the home of the Diribes who are expecting Tony Diribe who had not returned with other combatants from the Second World War. They are agog with excitement)

ADA: *(Coming through the door)* Welcome, my people. I am touched that after twenty months, you still care about my brother who has not returned from the war, but is awaited. If what I have heard is true, he will warm our hearts today.

ALL: Daughter of all, we greet you.

UNCLE: We have been praying God to wipe away our tears, to give us happiness. May today bring good things to this house.

ALL: *Ise*. Amen.

YOUNG MAN: Let Tony come home quickly, so we can enjoy what Ada has been denying us.

ADA: What are you talking about? I have not denied you anything.

YOUNG MAN: She knows what I mean, but pretends she doesn't. Have we tasted wine from in-laws? And she says she has not denied us anything. Didn't she say she would not marry until her brother returned? Now that he is returning home, when shall we drink and make merry?

UNCLE: As we wait to welcome our son, what have you brought for his entertainment? Or don't you know he will be dying to taste his people's palm wine?

YOUNG MAN: Let him return first, and he will see what I can do.

ADA: Well said. When Tony returns, you will see how strong the wine from our in-laws can be.

ALL: *(Speaking separately)*
Daughter of all, you have spoken well... You are a treasure... Let our in-laws get ready to come... Let them know that Ada is a jewel... A queen in gentle garbs. *(General clapping)*

ADA: *(Shyly)*
Oh my people, you flatter me. I'm no different from your other daughters.

UNCLE: We have heard you, gentle daughter. But, we assure you that what you heard came from sober tongues.

ADA: *(Suddenly, bends forward, placing her palm to her ear)*
I think I can hear the sound of a bus approaching. Can't you hear it?

ALL: *(Their palms to their ears; speaking separately)*
Yes... Oh yes, I can hear it... A bus is approaching... Tony is back indeed... *Ekene dili Chukwu*... Thanks be to God.

ADA: *(Smiling broadly, hands raised up in prayer)*

Thank God. I am so happy. *(She rushes downstage right, followed by the others. At the same time, Tony, dressed in army uniform and carrying a bag, approaches. He does not respond to the joy and excitement all about him).*

Welcome, brother. *(Offering to take his bag, but is pushed aside. The group becomes silent and retreats upstage left, murmuring and whispering. Ada, in dismay, watches her brother go into the house, shakes her head, and follows him).*

YOUNG GIRL: I couldn't have imagined that this type of thing could happen.

YOUNG MAN: It has happened.

YOUNG WOMAN: Do you know why?

YOUNG MAN: Maybe he is tired.

YOUNG WOMAN: Tired? Somebody returning home from war after so many years, years of sorrow, years of tears. If home does not restore him, what will?

YOUNG MAN: Maybe he's hungry.

YOUNG WOMAN: Hungry! Hungry for what?

YOUNG MAN: *(laughing)*

How would I know? Go and ask him.

Image Two

(Seated on a chair, Tony gazes vacantly at the wall. Ada brings a plate of food which he snatches and guzzles up, as Ada goes for a cup of water. Tony drops the empty plate of food, takes the cup and gulps down the water. He drops the cup on the floor also).

ADA: *(Bewildered, but persevering)*
Tony, how are you?

TONY: Because the train was late.

ADA: Are you sick?

TONY: Okay.

ADA: Where did you come from?

TONY: Yes.

ADA: *(frustrated, feels dizzy, and sits down)*
Oh my God, what have they done to him? He can't even answer my questions. I wonder what to do.

(Silent for a while, gazing at Tony with a combination of compassion and irritation. She shakes her head in despair, gets up, walks towards the door, but stops to talk to Tony again, just in case he will respond after all).

What did they do to you?

TONY: Burma.

ADA: Burma! What is Burma? What's the matter with you, Tony? Hm. What am I going to do?

(Ada starts to tidy the house, first removing the plate and cup on the floor).

TONY: Burma war.

(Ada is startled. Tony gazes forward, right, and left and jumps out of his seat).

Take cover.
(He dives to the floor and crawls about as if facing enemy fire. Ada is trembling with fear and apprehension).

Shoot.
(Aims at some enemy. Exhausted, he returns to his seat. A knock. Enter Grandma).

GRANDMA: Ada, my daughter. *(Embraces Ada)*

ADA: Grandma, I was just wishing for you to come.

GRANDMA: That means we will live long.
(Goes to Tony and embraces him).

Tony, my son, welcome. How are you?

TONY: Burma.

GRANDMA: So, it is true.

ADA: You heard about this?

GRANDMA: Yes, you know how news flies, especially if it is unpleasant... the ridicule from mouths of evil.

ADA: Nne, this is mockery. How can we bear it?

GRANDMA: *(Defiantly)*
But, we will not accept it, whatever it is.

ADA: What are you going to do?

GRANDMA: *(moves towards Ada)*
Not what I am going to do, but what we shall do, my child. No... no tears. We shall say no to evil... Now, listen.

ADA: Grandma, I am listening.

GRANDMA: What of the dance of your age mates?

ADA: I am not participating anymore. Why are you asking about the dance?

GRANDMA: I am just wondering. Why are you no longer participating?

ADA: How can I be dancing when I am faced with so many difficulties.

GRANDMA: My daughter, you must now begin to live your life, to restore it. Let the eagle and the kite perch. Who prevents the other shall lose its wings.

ADA: What do you mean?

GRANDMA: Go to your age mates right away, and tell them you wish to rejoin the dance.

ADA: Grandma, I can't abandon Tony. I have lost interest in....

GRANDMA: Ada.

ADA: Yes, Grandma.

GRANDMA: You must do as I say.

ADA: Yes, Grandma.

GRANDMA: Go to your age mates and tell them that I, their sponsor - she who brings rain with her feet invite them to perform here to day... right now

ADA *(Looking around the room, wondering if it is spacious enough).* But, Tony sits right there.

GRANDMA: Yes, why not? After all, the dance is for him. It's meant to welcome him.

ADA: He won't even enjoy it.

GRANDMA: Why worry about that now? Go and bring them.

(As Ada exits, Grandma goes over to Tony, pulls him to herself and hugs him affectionately).

GRANDMA: My son, what are you doing to us?

TONY: Fine.
(A knock. Enter Chief Agunze)

AGUNZE: What do I hear about Tony? Good evening. What do I hear about Tony?

GRANDMA: Here he sits like a statue.

AGUNZE: I know how you feel, but don't forget he is the son of all of us.

GRANDMA: Thanks for your concern.

AGUNZE: I shall find a healer.

GRANDMA: Thanks for your offer, but my son will heal himself. We shall settle this matter by ourselves.

AGUNZE: What do you intend to do?

GRANDMA: I don't know yet, but when we finish with Tony, he will either be alive or face his funeral.

AGUNZE: Hm. Good luck. But, if you need help, call me. Stay well.

GRANDMA: Go well.
(Exit Chief Agunze)
(Grandma goes to Tony and faces him directly)

GRANDMA: Now, listen. You have no right to do this to us. We have suffered enough on your account. This family has a name, and your sister has her own life to live. You have no right to spoil her future. You will either live or die. *(Pulls a chair and sits).*

For months, we waited for you to come home so we could receive a young man seeking to marry your sister. But, you return as a dead man, useless to everybody. In fact, you are worse than a dead man, for you suffocate us. We will not allow it. You hear. We will not allow it. You are warned. Restore yourself or be ready for the journey of the dead.

(As she is talking, sound of music is heard, increasing in volume as Ada and her age mates enter, singing and dancing).

ADA: Grandma, they are here.

GRANDMA: Welcome, my children. Thanks for answering my call, even though it was sudden. You seem to feel with me, or a frog does not run in the day for nothing. I want you to help me restore this child of ours back to life.

GRANDMA: *(Indicating the seats)*
Sit down, pretty ones. *(To Ada)* Get them something.

(Ada hurries off)
Look at him. He doesn't answer greetings or questions.

NGOZI: What do you want us to do?

GRANDMA: Bring him back with your dance.

NGOZI: How?

GRANDMA: Hah... Dance with seriousness. Dance purposefully. Dance with feeling. Let your dance be a prayer.

AMAKA: We have not even welcomed him.

GRANDMA: Then, do so.

AMAKA: *(Moving towards Tony)*
Welcome. How are you?

TONY: Nothing.

UZO: *(Moving towards Tony)*
How are you?

TONY: Just a little headache.

GRANDMA: Ah, my child, what did you do to him to get a straight-forward answer?

UZO: Nothing.

AMAKA: Tony, what is wrong with you?

TONY: Just a little headache.

ADA: *(As she enters, she hears them clapping)*
Why are you clapping?

AMAKA: Tony is getting better.

ADA: What makes you think so?

AMAKA: He answers questions directly.

ADA: Are you very sure?

NGOZI: Okay, let each of us ask him a different question.

AMAKA: Yes, let us do so.

NGOZI: Where are you coming from?

TONY: Just a little headache.

ADA: You see what I told you. It's hopeless.

GRANDMA: Stop talking like that. Give your mates what you brought for them. *(Ada takes the plate with apples in it around)*

ADA: Grandma, what are we going to do?

GRANDMA: We shall do what we must do.

(A knock. Enter Uncle with another man, dressed in a robe with red and white ribbons falling towards his knees).

UNCLE: *(Indicating a seat for the man)*
Greetings, great grandmother. I have brought this healer to help us save our son.

GRANDMA: Thanks.

UNCLE: See how he sits like a bird without wings. What is to be done?

HEALER: *(Confident)*
Leave it to me.
(Sits on the floor, his feet apart, towards Tony. Brings out his paraphernalia from his bag and lays them between his feet).

There is nothing that the sky has not seen. You can only gaze at a stalk of pepper, you don't climb it. Son of Diribe, talk and state what is holding you. Is it an evil spirit or a wizard? Talk.

TONY: Burma.

ADA: He has started saying Burma again.

HEALER: Leave him alone.
(Brings out a little container, pours the contents into his palm, and blows it into the air all around Tony. He returns to his position and picks up a small metal gong and a stick. Moving towards Tony, he peers into his eyes, at the same time hitting the gong. Suddenly, Tony grabs the gong, flings it to the ground and holds the man by the neck. It takes the combined force of Uncle, Grandma, Ada and her dancing mates to free the man from Tony's

grip. Healer starts packing his instruments quickly).

This one is beyond me.
(Turning to Uncle)

I am done. You can keep your money.
(Exit Healer)

GRANDMA: Ada, what are you waiting for. Bring a rope.
(Ada hurries off)

UNCLE: What are you doing with a rope?

GRANDMA: Ask Tony?

UNCLE: What is going on here? *(Takes a seat)*

ADA: Here is the rope.

GRANDMA. All of you, hold him, while I secure him with these threads.

(All except Uncle gather to hold Tony)

UNCLE: What are you trying to do?

GRANDMA: You have done yours. Let me do mine.

(After Tony has been secured to his seat)

Good. Now gun, fire yourself. Pay him no attention. Let us return to our dance. Show me how you do it.

NGOZI: Let us start.
(The girls line up for the dance. As they dance, Grandma moves about to observe each dancer closely, correcting them, whenever necessary).

GRANDMA: Well done, daughters. Now go and get yourselves ready for the main dance, as I prepare this babe for his rebirth.

(As they leave, she picks up an ogene and a stick, and goes towards Tony)

The time has come for your rebirth or burial. Take your *ogene* with which you will signal your readiness to rejoin your people.

(One by one, the girls return, dressed in their dancing uniform. As they enter, the sound of music rises gradually. As it rises steadily, the girls start dancing. Grandma draws a seat, sits and turns to observe Tony. After a while, Tony starts to shake his head to the rhythm of music and the dance. Soon after, he begins to hit the ogene with the stick. Grandma's face brightens up with joy. She unties the rope around her grandson, setting him free to join the dance. Noticing the transformation, the girls intensify their dancing. Tony embraces Grandma and Ada. Uncle gets up and joins the dance. The sound of music dies down).

TONY: Ada, my sister. How have you been?

ADA: Oh, Tony. Thank God.

TONY: Grandma, welcome.

GRANDMA: You are the one to be welcomed. You were awaited for so long.

UNCLE: We thank God for this. We shall now await our in-laws who will be here in due course.

GRANDMA: My daughters.

THE GIRLS: She who brings rain with her feet.

GRANDMA: Blessed daughters whose feet escort the wandering spirits back to their homes, I salute you. Now, let us dance for you.

(As they dance, she embraces them one by one. Young Man is seen coming in with a pot of

wine and cups which he distributes around, even as the dance goes on).

* First staged on 5 April 1992, in the Cultural Centre, Colgate University (New York State, United States of America), which provided a short fellowship that enabled the author to write and stage the play. The cast comprised students of the institution.

The drummers

C.E. EBOE-OSUJI

Anger

The blinding spark.
The thunderbolt,
The earth quakes,
Tick! And the deed is done,
The monument is built.

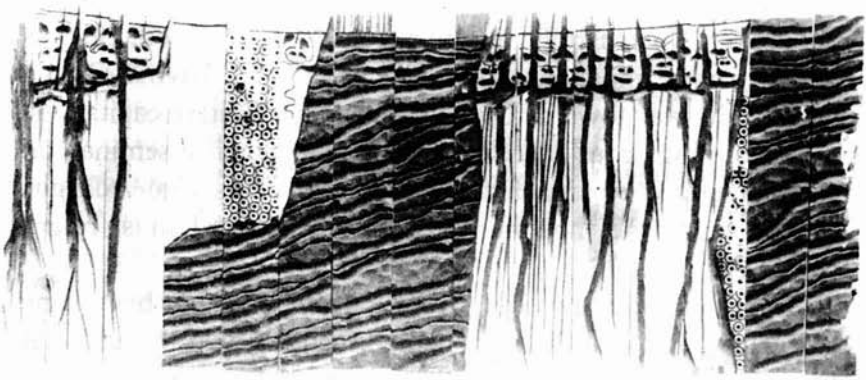
We Can Patch The Broken Pot

Who said a broken pot can't be patched?
Take a look at the tortoise shell.
The oil is spilt
But we can still save some
For tonight's soup.

Gather white brothers
Black sisters come together
Don't step on those pieces;
Pick everyone, the piece you find,
We can still patch it up
These shreds and rents of my skin would heal.
That red hue of brother's blood on your face
Can still be washed away.
We must not return to mother like this.
The shrill laughter of watchful neighbors
Would break her aged heart.
So come brother, give me your hand.
We can put the past behind.

Oriaku

These soft hands would bleed on touching a hoe,
This fair and waxen skin would melt in the sun
It is profanation to this diadem of hair to carry a basket
Love can't you see the difference?
Your sandpaper-hands were made from time
Your skin so dark and tough
To rebound the arrow
Your head was well fashioned
With a fitting pad for heavy load
What is yours and what is mine
Are yours to bear.



"Undercurrents", 1993

NATHAN NKALA

Dust, Tears, for Gold at Christmas

The land slept, coiled up in the grey blanket of the harmattan season. It was as if a Superman held the edges of the blanket firmly down lest the creatures of the cursed - or is it "blessed" - land stirred beyond its confines. Now and again waves of drumbeat rippled the surface of the blanket of grey, raised billows of random cheer here and there. At other times, wailing hands and clattering hearts from prayer houses scattered flashes of grace across the surface, did a gyroscopic dance across the sleeping surface of the grey land, dying as quickly as they began.

It was days before Christmas. Chike smiled to himself as the piquancy of the proverb struck him afresh. No man, his people said, covered the orifice of a loaded gun with his bare hand and pulled the trigger with the other hand. So compulsive and inexorable was the mood of Christmas. He crawled through the broken Niger Bridge and then sharply accelerated. He was burning with impatience. His air-conditioned Toyota Crown whizzed its way towards Ugwu-Obigada the Eastern capital. He was returning from Ibadan where he attended a seminar on "Computerized Approach to Petro-Naira". This Ugo Ada girl can be funny, he thought. Why did she insist I must return before Christmas?

Sam Uchendu, travelling from Lagos University by 'Ekene Dili Chukwu' luxury bus far behind, had his own thought that very moment. The vacation was short enough. He had no room for sharing. Ugo Ada must understand that, he swore.

As Philip Akoma, Senior Lecturer at Ibadan University, whizzed towards Ugwu-Obigada in his spacious Mercedes Benz, his mind was sweltering with whorls of thoughts. Under the strain of great expectation, his mind often played him this

trick of working in whorls of indefinable direction. Deliberately, he struck up the tune of "It's now or never", and crooned his way towards Ugwu-Obigada.

It was indeed the season of gifts and goodwill, and none of these men wished to miss the kindred spirit of the homeland capital. They were coming from Western Nigeria and Lagos, each hotly intent on his mission, eager to home-in on the capital with his gifts from the West, to deliver the gifts to the Baby before it became too late. It was the true spirit of the sour time that sent them with gifts from the West to the East. For the tide of the day - the days of biblical order when wise men went forth from the East bearing gifts to the Baby infant - yes, the tide of ancient days had started flowing in reverse direction. They knew. And none of them could stem the new tide.

And the three men made their separate ways underneath the nuisance of the harmattan veil, each loaded with his own thoughts, or no-thoughts. Unknown to them, their thoughts and expectations converged on one and the same person. It was someone whose own thoughts at that same moment hurtled down the one-dimension track of its present continuous, the one dimension of *receiving*. Pretty Ugo Ada was thinking, turning the prospects of the coming Christmas in her mind.... *I don't know why. But Christmas is my season of dreams. Not that I'll wake up and become Indira of Ghandi. Or even the Gold Meyer of Nairobi; or even Margaret Egret of Jerusalem. I'll not even transform into local Mrs Nkutu whose name was on every page of the newspapers in those days. Those days before I left school to start this clerk business, that is. Yet Christmas has been, ever since I left school, my season of dreams. Dreams of, let me remember her very phrase, "the vital place of womanhood in our body politic"...*

Ugo Ada was getting somewhat muddled up over the names of these international women leaders. They were always on the lips of their civics teacher, Mrs Lola Ma-Quis. For Ugo Ada, her *alma mater* had a glowing spot in her heart, and at the

centre of that warmth was Mrs Lola Ma-Quis. Years after leaving secondary school, she still modelled her life around this venerable lady and her teachings.

The phrase *lofty pinnacle* clung to Mrs Ma-Quis like a name-plate. She told the class that every girl should aspire to the "lofty pinnacle of grace" from whence you would radiate goodness to your husbands, your family and the entire society. Ugo Ada believed every word of her teacher like a living catechism - in her own way. Every girl, Ugo Ada reasoned, ascends the lofty pinnacle of grace in the Christmas season.

It is a season at which every girl not only brings forth the child Jesus, but, Ugo believed, becomes the Baby Infant on whom gifts descend from all corners of the globe. It has become the only season when every woman ascends the lofty pinnacle predicted by the venerable civics tutor, Mrs Lola Ma-Quis.

Ugo Ada adored her mother as much as she venerated Mrs Ma-Quis: both preached the same catechism in different words. All the daughters of Mama Ugo Ada were already happily married, except Ugo Ada her last-born. And Mama had decided her last-born must be married off to the topmost of tops of men. How else does a woman arrive at the "lofty pinnacle" except on the shoulders of a man? she reasoned.

Thus she has been searching desperately for such a man as the capping point of her maternal labours. Only such a man would be suitable for her last-born. Poor woman, after so many rejections by Ugo Ada herself she was beginning to despair.
But six months ago, she found him and summoned her to the village with a telegram: "MOTHER SERIOUSLY SICK X COME IMMEDIATELY'. When Ugo Ada's immediate boss in the office turned down her application for casual leave, she telephoned Chike who in turn telephoned his colleague, her bigger-bigger boss. Down came instruction from the top and off she went, full of fear over her mother's safety. Only to discover that she was at her game again. She had found him. This grand-

pa at home on leave, stirring the dust into the face of the village folks with his Mercedes Benz. He was a big boss at Ibadan in Western Nigeria. And was looking for a wife. *Chei! Ahushielam anya!* Just see the Sugar-Daddy - did he call himself Philip something? leading his marriage delegation into their house that same evening of her arrival. And the men and elders of her family descending on the house like hungry vultures.

"Ugo, my daughter, you'll not let us down today", her mother pleaded. Chei! she groaned in her heart, but kept back what she wanted to say. Poor fellows, she thought.

Well, she made the best of the situation. She had to get hold of some money, as it was the later part of the month. In fact she had borrowed her transport money from Chinwe, although Chike also gave her some money. So she had to play it cool. After all, the sugar-daddy said he had a lot of money. Why should she play the lizard and nod away the good things that God pushed into her mouth. So, she played it out. She did not give her consent there and then, nor did she reject him outright. That one sent him to heaven. For his ancient face oozed all over with happiness. He brought out a scented handkerchief and mopped away the beads of sweat shining on the half moon of his bald head. Not only did the wrinkles in his face melt away instantly, but even the crow's feet around his eyes danced like a twinkling star, the star of hope.

"But, Sir", Ugo Ada began, when on his invitation she was escorting him towards the car -

"Sir,... I... we have only met this once in all our lives. I think we should allow ourselves a little more time to learn more of each other", she pressed him.

"You see, my do..." (she thought he wanted to say "My daughter" and winced under the thought). "Time and tide wait for no one. I wanted to finish everything today and off to Ibadan we would go tomorrow. It's so easy for me to work out an inter-state transfer for you".

"Time and tide indeed" she said in her heart. She wanted to ask him where he left his time and tide all these years. But you see, she was ready for the game.

"Yes, I know Sir, but by Christmas time, that's only six months from now, I'll be able to give you my final word. I'm still so confused".

"Okay! That's okay, my dear. Cheer up", he agreed gleefully. And he really cheered her up as she expected. He pushed a bundle of twenty-naira notes into her hand. The exciting "Murtala" green back. When she had time to count, she found it was exactly five thousand naira.

"That's for your transport fare back to Ugwu-Obigada. You will expect something at Christmas", he said. "And, just drop me a line as soon as you get back. Between now and Christmas, you will expect something from me every month. Just to keep you in groovy tone all through..." he was saying further. "Thank you, Sir. Thanks a million times", she enthused.

Just fancy that. Five thousand naira for her transport fare! That was several times her monthly salary. Who says it's not good to play games with men? They are all more gullible than elephants, Ugo Ada thought.

Well, she had to keep up some correspondence with him without as yet giving *the word*, just to make sure she would count him among the worshippers of the Baby Infant at Christmas time, bringing at her feet the gifts of the season.

As for the question of marriage, it was a settled matter for Ugo Ada, Mama and her "pinnacle" not withstanding. She was for Sam and Sam was for her, for better or for worse. By the way, Sam was the medical student at the University of Lagos over whom Chike, her Daddy - longlegs and protector in the office, almost broke her head during the last long vacation. *Chei*, men are sweet and terrible creatures, she mused.

Sweet and terrible... Sweet but terrible... Ugo Ada kept muttering as she pursued her one-dimension track of thoughts. She looked at the table clock.

"*Chei!* only 7.30", she sighed and rolled herself more comfortably into her *adire* bed-cloth. It was too early for Sunday bed-rise. She soon floated into dreamland once more, her heart suffused with joyous expectation. And then Sam Uchendu came in without knocking and closed the door once more after him. He turned the lock to place.

****

The power-packed Toyota car, the gleam of its grenada red blurred by a coat of brown dust, whirred and lurched along the broken skin of the road. Chike sat behind the wheels, gritting his teeth in concentration and swearing twenty oaths in one breath against the stupid authorities that had sworn to break his car with these pot-holes.

Many more still lay ahead, gaping sores howling shame into the smudgy face of the harmattan veil. He thought of the heavy figure deducted from his last month's salary as "income and development taxes" and ground his teeth in powerless anger. Here was what his tax was to do for him. But it was not the "authorities" who sent him lurching along the broken surface of Asata Road; heading towards his destination the next evening, he arrived at the East Capital of Ugwu-Obigada.

Chike wiped his right hand on his trouser leg and then his left, for his palms had become clammy with sweat. It was as if the new train of thoughts that flooded his mind also flooded his body with the warm sweat of desire. The thoughts were of Ugo Ada, the sensuous butterfly of a girl he loved in a curious way. That is to say loved her next to Ifeoma his wife. Perhaps because Ugo had something which no other woman in his life had: she was too scrupulously clean. Above all, she blended coyishness and thievery in an ingenious manner. She knew how and when to go all out for whatever was her heart's desire. And got away with all the roguery. Chike smiled to himself at that thought. And yet what was it she had that sent him bumping his

way through the rugged roads of Asata immediately he reached the capital?

The scene at the Blue Sport the day before he left for Ibadan leaped into his mind's eye.

He lay flat on his back in the spacious bed, enjoying the dying minutes of their two-hour lease of the air-conditioned private room. Ugo lay in the crook of his right arm, hugging his shoulder with her two hands. She retrieved one hand and brushed off an invisible something on his cheek, lingering delicately over the operation. She nudged and tickled his ear with her lips, gave the ear a brisk bite of fondness and whispered -

"Darling, you are great! I'll be missing you so badly".

"Oh, it'll be for eight short days", Chike told her.

"But Chi-Chi, you haven't told me what to expect from you this Christmas season. You know this is the season of sharing".

Chike thought she said "shearing" and replied -

"You mean season of clean shaving, scalp clean. Like I've shaved my beard now?"

"Sharing with one another the goodwill of the Baby Infant. Stop being evasive", she said softly, kissing him once more. "Okay darling, let's not quarrel over it. You'll have something when I come back".

"You promise"?

"Sure"

"You are the greatest!" she enthused, biting the ear more fondly.

"But remember that after Christmas comes January". Chike added.

"Mmhh! What about it?" she asked as Chike rolled her over the side.

What about it! he thought and went into her once more.

****

He pushed Ugo's door gently, but found it locked. There were sounds and whispers inside. He knocked and waited, puffing hard at his pipe. And the smell of Erinmore tobacco oozed its way into the room. She understood and started trembling. When she opened the door, he stood there throwing dagger-loads of eyes at the boy in the bed, his face turned away toward the wall, a small part of his buttocks showing beneath the single loin-cloth he threw over himself hastily. Chike sniffed the air, a long draught of it. The sulphuric smell of burnt-out ardour filled his nostrils. Or so he imagined.

"Ugo, can you dress and see me out a bit?"

"So you are back already", she managed to ask. He did not answer. Silence. Silent rapid permutation of the most suitable punishment: he would not make a scene. But vengeance twinkled in his eyes.

"Please hurry, I'm waiting outside", Chike said, blowing a thick column of pipe smoke into the air as he left.
Sam looked at Ugo and smiled with understanding.

"So, this is the Daddy-longleg?"

"Easy, honey. Take it easy. I'll soon end all that", Sam reassured her, giving her a swift kiss as she trembled into her dress. From outside the door came two dry coughs of impatience.

"I'll be back now-now", she told Sam as she left.
"How soon is *Now-now*?" Chike asked her in a toneless voice.
She did not answer. They walked to the car in silence. He held the door open and motioned her inside. He walked round to his door and drove off, his face stolid and impenetrable. She cast a misty glance at the door of her house. Sam was at the window watching as they drove off. He said something with his head and she understood. The tears welled up and blurred her vision for a while, and then rolled down into her laps. Chike looked at the crystal balls of tears and patted the laps. Melting balls of tears for a Christmas gift, Chike thought. And the mischievous thought made him smile.

Perhaps she would be forgiven, Ugo thought, misreading the smile. Perhaps...

At the road intersection a large Mercedes Benz was showing the traffic signal, ready to branch into the road from which Chike was coming out. Sitting at the back seat were one woman and two other men. They were obviously from the village from their dresses. Wait a minute! Ugo looked again. It was her mother! Were those not members of her family? And was that not her bald-headed suitor, Philip Akoma, at the wheels?

"Na waoh!" Ugo Ada sighed, fearing afresh for Sam.

But Chike had entered the major road and zoomed off towards Blue Spot, leaving the Mercedes Benz enveloped in a veil of dust.

"We laid us on grandma's cloth," 1993

IROHA E. UDEH

The Dumb Sacrifice

8 a.m. Now that the last egg has been broken
Let us keep quiet and listen
Perhaps they are here now
Perhaps they are on the way;
Let us not offend them by whispering.

5 p.m. But the shadow has since shortened
And there are no signs yet,
The usual noises I cannot hear
Perhaps ... but I fear to think of it
Can they have rejected our offering?

Shh! Let us not speak hastily brother
Their ways are not our ways
Nor their seasons our seasons;
Let us wait a while, unless ...
But it cannot be ...
Let us not speak hastily.

6 a.m. Morning has since chased night away
Yet nothing, nothing...
I fear, brother.
Let us go over the rites again;
Perhaps we left out something.
Or perhaps our hands are defiled

Let us hasten to repeat it.
We must listen carefully
We cannot go back with news of rejection
Our mission is the last hope
We must listen well, but first bring the cock

5 p.m. A clattering laughter from the grove told them all
The seekers went away in sunken hopes and bent heads.

AMECHI AKWANYA

Ambiguous Signs: Disruption in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow Of God*

Apart from the fact that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are some of the foundation texts in the African literary tradition, and as such are assured unceasing critical visitations, there seems to be a need to rethink some of the conclusions reached early in our literary history concerning these very important works, which are being used in critical discussions almost as axioms. For example, in Bu-Buakei Jabbi's study of *Things Fall Apart*, it is said that the central concern of this work is the 'inevitability of change'.[1] It is suggested that change is a punctual and apocalyptic event, which takes the people wholly by surprise. This is confirmed by Wren, who shows from *external* history that there were 'pressures and circumstances unnoticed in *Things Fall Apart*'[2] which would have caused cultural change, with or without the interference of the colonists. As a result, the novel seems a reliving of the trauma of the subjugation of a static society and its incorporation into a colony, an event that must be held as the origin of the transformation that has produced a present so different from the cultural past. As Wren himself admits, this interpretive formula is carried over from elder criticism of Achebe, which Jabbi tells us is largely sociological and anthropological. But these very conclusions are employed in Jabbi's own study of Achebe's work, notwithstanding that he rejects the methods and modes of questioning that yielded up these answers.

The powerful influence of the contextual approach is reflected also in the readings that focus on character to the point that he and the community are related in a metonymic chain. We see this, for instance, in Weinstock and Ramadan's study of

Things Fall Apart.[3] This reductionism is sometimes employed as an expedient, as do Weinstock and Ramadan, in order to facilitate a moral project of reading, in order that the work may be experienced purely as an argumentative structure, judiciously setting aside the fictional mode which constitutes the work as literature. In the words of Jacques Derrida, this type of interpretation 'annuls reproduction and representation by making signs a modification of a simple presence'.[4] Intelligibility is achieved by making the order of signs, that is, the text, secondary, in order to keep in view the order of reference. But our task here is to restore *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* to their status as an order of signs, that is, as a system which conveys no more than ambiguous messages.[5] Surprisingly, Weinstock and Ramadan agree that this is the correct way to handle a text, for they tell us that 'a work of art speaks in many voices'.[6] and it would be something quite different unless the many voices are functioning in it. But the intention they express to cause some of the 'most interesting' of these voices, muffled all along in critical readings, to be heard for the first time, is quite an impossible task. For criticism is having to show at the same time that the text has a set of values it propagates. In letting the interesting voices be heard, that is, in letting their divergent values and roles become explicit, the critic must also demonstrate that the text, with all its different voices, is harmonious on the issue of meaning.

Communicative Utterance

The presupposition that has governed criticism up until quite recent times[7] is that texts are constituted to communicate. This view implies a subject of communication, which is often understood to be the *real* author, or in more recent forms of discourse analysis, the *implied* author. As far as the order of the text is concerned, however, the narrator is the subject who performs the communicative function. Generally, the narrator is treated in the criticism of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*

as a surrogate for the writer, to the point that he is often set aside in order to attain the real presence thought to be ill-disguised in the text.

Writing is also seen as an exercise of the intention to communicate, which takes place only by reason of a message or a meaning springing from the soul of the subject of communication. The two are quite different, but the attitudes that dominate Achebe criticism tend to treat the message deciphered in the unfolding of the text as the content of that intention, overlooking and suppressing the subjectivity involved in the very act of deciphering. This is in line with early theories of communication. For example, speech is treated in Saussure's theory of language as an 'attempt to bridge the gap between brains whose content is mutually unavailable'.[8] The certainty that this gap is actually bridged in a literary narrative is what confirms one critic in the view that the 'last word' in *Arrow of God* belongs, not to any of the viewpoints that form part of the text, but 'to the novelist who sees the story in its total historical context'.[9] Such a perception, which must be the novelist's for being total, is deciphered in the closing statement of the narrative that 'a deity who chose a moment such as this to chastise his priest ... was inciting people to take liberties' (p.230).

It goes without saying in this study of Achebe's texts as an order of signs, which is going to be broadly post-structuralist, that the privileged authorial viewpoint has no locus. Also accepted under this method of inquiry is the distinction between the intention to communicate and the message. In a literary work, the message alone is what shows that there was an intention to communicate. But determining a message is complicated in this mode, where signs are rarely used to refer 'in a definite way'.[10] Moreover, the very notion that utterances are constituted as vehicles for carrying messages is put in question by Torode and Silverman, who have argued that 'the point of communication is not the transmission from brain to

brain of theoretical concepts, but the mutual learning by practitioners of linguistic practices'.[11] This prescribes a dialogic relationship between the reader and the text, rather than a one-way flow of meaning from the text to the reader. And it is this dialogic model that will be used in what follows.

Things Fall Apart and *Arrow of God* are very important historical narratives centring on a moment of disruption; that is equally to say that they are acts of interpretation, and an attempt to grasp the confusions surrounding a humiliating collective memory by means of a code foreign to the memory itself. Since the historical genre invests narrative with the task of understanding a significant experience, it is like tragedy in as much as it focuses on a significant individual whose fate affects the whole community in a notable way. The hero of *Arrow of God* is such a significant individual. At the level of the action, he is the focus of hostility from a powerful section of his society. In fact, the narrative comprises two different episodes, the internal conflict of Umuaro, and the process of incorporation of Umuaro into the colonial system. Ezeulu is the hinge that connects these episodes. The clash between him and the Nwaka-Ezidemili faction which occurs before the actual time of the narrative draws in the colonial administration, just as the climactic one between him and the colonist rebounds upon Umuaro, and fairly destroys the hinge.

But the relationship between the character and society in *Things Fall Apart* is pursued to a grotesque length, when the District Commissioner orders his men to bring Okonkwo's corpse 'and all these people to the court' (p.147), as if the latter are to answer both for Okonkwo's death and the murder of the head messenger. Yet the tragic hero is not confused with his society, for the tragedy takes place by reason of the tension between him and that society. Both Okonkwo and Ezeulu are deeply lonely individuals, and are beleaguered in the narrator's very discourse, reified, and permitted no development at all. For example, Ezeulu is a self-assured and haughty high priest

from the beginning; what happens does not form him, it illustrates[12] him. In *Things Fall Apart*, the logic of reification causes a notable breach in the flow of meaning. Here we are led from the beginning to believe that fear is Okonkwo's tragic flaw. But the reversal in the character's fortune has little to do with it. Inadvertence, revenge, and even blind fate are what play a significant part in the change. At the killing of the court messenger, the emotion we observe in Okonkwo is hate (p.144). But the reference to fear as the reason for striking down Ikemefuna is hardly convincing, as the man has earlier taken the precaution to withdraw to the rear, obviously to be as far away from the scene of the killing as to make it impossible that he should be personally involved in it. But it is the narrator's explanation that is heard. Okonkwo does not even give a full account of his own to his friend Obierika.

In fact, an important aspect of the loneliness of Okonkwo and Ezeulu is their deep reticence. They do not communicate their deepest thoughts, nor does thinking by the body of the people, as Virginia Woolf would say, touch them in the least. Part of the last conversation Okonkwo has with Obierika reads as follows:

> 'Can you see him?' he asked Obierika.
> 'Who?'
> 'Egonwanne,' he said, his eyes roving from one corner of the huge market-place to the other...'
> 'No,' said Obierika, casting his eyes over the crowd. 'Yes, there he is, under the silk-cotton tree. Are you afraid he would convince us not to fight?'
> 'Afraid? I do not care what he does to *you*. I despise him and those who listen to him. I shall fight alone if I chose' (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 142).

Okonkwo's moral world is entirely in his thoughts, and just as he wishes his children to pick up the thread of his thinking from a word he utters, and rejoices that Ezinma is able to do this, he also wishes that between him and Obierika the necessity of conversation should not apply. But Obierika cannot reach him

across an impossible gap. In this conversation the desperate wish to be totally understood is brought into relation with the opposite value of self-sufficiency, which is the underlying motive of Okonkwo's pursuits. Achebe's historical narratives have this further point of resemblance with tragedy, that the outcome of the crisis is a personal and incommunicable reversal for the character.

Things Fall Apart and *Arrow of God* both have a tragic motif inserted in a wider process of social change. In Marxist terms, it is a change, first of all in the mode of production, and secondarily in the human social practices by which a people are conscious of themselves as a particular group. The narrative focus in *Things Fall Apart* is however on these secondary processes. For this reason, Okonkwo's quarrel is with the white man's religion and system of political control. The situation is more complex in *Arrow of God*; where the internal conflict is a struggle for power between two individuals, Ezeulu, the priest of the chief deity of Umuaro, and Ogbuefi Nwaka, protege of the priest of Idemili, a village deity. What we are looking at here is a symbolic act, in which two different ideologies are dissimulated. Ezeulu's prominence in the affairs of Umuaro derives from his hieratic function. But there also exists and aristocracy of wealth, equally culturally sanctioned in Umuaro. Nwaka is perhaps the wealthiest man in Umuaro. Of his five wives at the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves, we read that,

> Each of them wore ... two enormous rollers of ivory reaching from the ankle almost to the knee.... On top of all this the women were clad in many coloured velvets. Ivory and velvets were not new in Umuaro but never before had they been seen in such profusion from the house of one man (p. 68).

It is this great wealth that constitutes Nwaka's qualification to enter into a contest with Ezeulu for pre-eminence and power. Additionally he has the backing of Ezidemili, who is antagonistic towards Ezeulu for his own reasons, and tells Nwaka that 'in the days before Ulu the true leaders of each

village had been men of high title like Nwaka' himself (p. 41). If Ezidemili is to be believed, the coming of Ulu is an unsuccessful cultural revolution because the political system associated with it does not supplant the ancient social order, but only sets up another in competition with it.

In more senses than one, therefore, Umuaro is in a state of confusion (p.118) in the lead-up to the breakdown in its calendar. This confusion is in itself ground enough for a fresh revolution to redistribute power, to clarify the nature of political authority in Umuaro, and the conditions for the exercise of it. Consequently, the secularizing impulse is not subdued in the aftermath of the war with Okperi, which is neither a victory nor clearly a defeat. Nwaka treats it rather as an ambiguous sign, and continues to organize his supporters and to work for a final resolution. But Ezeulu fails signally to appreciate the power of a movement. Whereas Nwaka is mobilizing the people in his support, Ezeulu relies entirely on his close relationship with the deity. This recalls Okonkwo preparing to confront the white man's war machine:

> Before he went to bed he had brought down his war dress, which he had not touched since his return from exile. He had shaken out his smoked raffia shirt and examined his tall feather head-gear and his shield. The were all satisfactory, he thought (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 141).

The battle for which Okonkwo is preparing himself is very different from the one that actually confronts him. The blow he finally strikes is a revenge of some sort, as it eliminates the head messenger who has insulted and bullied him while ir captivity, but he hardly touches the enemy.

The loop, order-subversion, on which the first episode c *Arrow of God* develops is complemented in the second episode with contact and alignment. The initial understanding between Ezeulu and Winterbottom involves a form of exchange. Winterbottom publicly recognizes Ezeulu as 'a man of truth'; in return, Ezeulu agrees to send his son to the mission school. But

the deep level alignments, which will prove the undoing of the understanding between Ezeulu and Winterbottom, are on the one hand, Ezeulu's spiritual bond with his deity, and on the other, Winterbottom's allegiance to his monarch and the empire. When the test comes, it turns out that neither has shifted ground. Ezeulu's success in resisting Winterbottom's pressure to switch allegiance is spoilt by the fact that while in prison, his essential cultic duties have not been performed. This he hopes will be a weapon to use against his enemies at home. But what was to have been his triumphant return to Umuaro, in his full *ozo* regalia, is avalanched in the downpour that overtakes him on the way. The victory is hardly tasted before it turns bitter. When he uses the weapon itself, it brings about for him total isolation, and renders him non-functional as a hinge. The result is an inter-linkage and communication, without intermediary, becoming established between the agents of empire and the people of Umuaro.

Things Fall Apart does not have the same ambivalence over the source of power. The gods are like Idemili in *Arrow of God*. They are more or less forces of nature and fairly stand outside history. The central spiritual authority is the nine *egwugwu*, representing the nine villages of Umuofia. These jointly guarantee justice and internal security in the land. Apparently, the villages arrange to have the most powerful of their members as their representative in the *egwugwu*. As a result, this institution is a symbol with a double import. It brings together the spiritual and the human forces that constitute Umuofia: the dead fathers of the clan, and the living ones who distinguish themselves in arms and title as lords of the land. Clearly Umuofia and Umuaro are fundamentally different societies. But though there is no single deity who dominates history in Umuofia, the different deities are still systems of force, with rites and spheres of activity. Thus are two sources of order: the human and the divine, which may seem complementary, but do in fact give rise to some tension. Such is the uneasy relationship

between Okonkwo, a man of high title, as well as 'the greatest wrestler and warrior alive', and the Earth Goddess, Ani. But this tension does not develop into a dialectical, and therefore productive, relationship because as soon as a situation is defined as conflictual, and the hero finds that he is directly confronted with the power of the deity, for example in the breach of the Week of Peace, Okonkwo recognizes a superior force, and submits. Touching the reparation for the breach of the Week of Peace there is an element of ambiguity in the text itself. We read that,

> Okonkwo did as the priest said. He also took a pot of palm-wine. Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbours that he was in error. And so people said he had no respect for the gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi* (p. 22).

The reference to 'good fortune' is clearly in opposition to the form of power that belongs to the clan as such, and in which certain individuals participate. But the air of fairness which the narrator affects here is what causes ambiguity. Okonkwo is repentant, but the people do not believe it. The people's judgment will remain in the reader's mind, and will be ultimately reinforced by other judgments where the hero is seen in a poor light, especially the various references to challenging one's *chi*.

In *Arrow of God* there is a parallel ambiguity in the role of the narrator. He is even-handed in representing the cause of the conflict from Ezeulu's and Ezidemili's viewpoints. Evidently, Ezidemili is envious of Ezeulu, but he brings out interesting facts from Ezeulu's family history (pp. 41-42), which subliminally reinforce the insinuation that the Chief Priest is ambitious, though no overt act or speech of his suggests that this is so. That family history is remembered when the narrator, placing himself firmly on the side of the circumstances that

have broken and defeated the hero, abandons him 'in the haughty splendour of a demented high priest' (p.229).

In both narratives, the tragic sequence is undermined, and quite trivialized by the insinuation of foolhardiness in the characters. Given the examples of Abame and Mbanta, and the simple manoeuvre with which the arrest of Okonkwo and the elders is effected, Okonkwo's inability to grasp the complexity of the situation he is faced with finishes him off as a leader. The stripping away of his power really starts with the exile, and the loss of his place in the *egwugwu*. Similarly, Ezeulu letting it be seen 'that he intended to hit Umuaro in its most vulnerable point' (p. 201), after the deity himself has clearly instructed him to stand aside (p. 191), unveils a hiatus in thought. This breach in consciousness is already a form of madness. The characters' loss of symbolic status also doubles as a turning point in the narrative; after this, their actions produce effects quite different from the intention, and their very blows cut in opposite directions. But already their intentions are mixed. For Okonkwo, revenge is confused with the will to preserve the integrity of Umuofia; in the same way, it is impossible to say whether Ezeulu is carrying out the wishes of his deity, or only using the god's rites as subterfuge in taking his revenge.

Undecidable Signs

So far the discussion has focused on the linear patterns, which are usually included in the analysis of plot structure, and we have seen that these patterns incorporate elements that interrupt and scatter the flow of meaning. Distortion as a feature of narrative is familiar from structuralism, but it is a disruption that nevertheless preserves the intelligible order of the narrative.[13] Here the reconstruction of the intelligible order is frustrated because of the play of conflicting voices and narrative discontinuities.

What has made plot summary possible in the majority of readings of these works is the exercise of an editorial

intelligence as a result of which functions[14] and micro-sequences are grasped, without their correlates. Always these features occur as pairs or complexes in Achebe's text, of which one is a counter-statement to the other(s). For example, in our first encounter with Ezeulu, we find him questioning the reality of the powers he exercises as the Chief Priest of Ulu, which correlates with the question whether or not he should eat up the sacred yams as Anichebe Udeozo instructs him in the name of Umuaro. Since Ezeulu's mind is 'never content with shallow satisfactions' (p. 4), we may read the great crisis of his life as the realization of his unconscious wish to know the truth. But it is equally true that he is not free. Hence his answer to Anichebe Udeozo, 'But you cannot say: *do what is not done and we shall take the blame'* (p. 208). Using this tension between freedom and necessity as a starting point, we can organize various citations, as proverbs, and certain minor incidents into two series of opposed values, but which can be overridden in surface reading, as Ogbuefi Ofoka does when he reflects on the crisis: 'today [Ezeulu] would rather see the six villages ruined than eat two yams' (p. 212). Another pair is the series of citations reflecting human creativeness, on the one hand, and on the other, human destructiveness. This is still more problematic because the same identical acts frequently give rise to opposite interpretations.

For instance, the import of the coming of the white man is undecided between tragedy and comedy. Moses Unachukwu explains the matter:

> 'When Suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat left for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool. The white man is like that. Before any of you was old enough to tie a cloth between the legs I saw with my own eyes what the white man did to Abame. Then I knew there was no escape. As daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs. I know that as I say it now it passes by your ears, but it will happen' (*Arrow of God*, p. 84).

The speaker is on the side of 'daylight' against 'darkness'. Still 'daylight' is not for him a univocal sign. Not only does it chase away darkness, but it can turn peacefulness into terror and death: it is a sign of terror, a sign of darkness and death. Unachukwu's perception here is a live experience in *Things Fall Apart* (pp. 137-139), where the District Commissioner brings against Okonkwo and the elders of Umuofia the ruse Prince John and Westmoreland use against Hastings, York, and Mowbray in Act 4 of *Henry IV, Part 2*. After this, nothing the white man says has one assignable meaning. He instructs his messengers to treat the leaders of Umuofia with respect, but this turns out to be an invitation to ill-treat and humiliate them. The fine he imposes on Umuofia is two hundred bags of cowries, what is exacted is two hundred and fifty.

But Ezeulu's first encounter with Winterbottom leads him to consider a tactical accommodation with the new-comer because his spirit has told him 'that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow' (p. 46). This fully reflects his attitude that diversity is a good thing; with it, 'whatever tune you play in the compound of a great man there is always someone to dance to it' (p. 100). That this is the correct approach to life is separately confirmed by John Nwodika, Winterbottom's servant (pp. 169-170), and by Ogbuefi Ofoka (p. 212). Yet it doubles as a sign of disruption. We read that,

> People were asking: 'If the Chief Priest of Ulu could send his son among people who kill and eat the sacred python and commit other evils what did he expect ordinary men and women to do? The lizard who threw confusion into his mother's funeral rite did he expect outsiders to carry the burden of honouring his dead?' (p. 125).

The echoes of this sentiment reverberate throughout the narrative, and form a separate series. But what is significant is that this viewpoint as well as the one it develops from, and contradicts, are both 'correct'.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the effect of a unified viewpoint is stronger because of the narrative tone, which distances itself from the central consciousness through sarcasm. But the conflicting voices are there. Okonkwo's depression following the killing of Ikemefuna is by reason of an unhappy unconscious at being trapped in a 'fateful and inescapable'[15] circumstance. Obierika, in effect, tells him that he ought to have anticipated this, and not taken part in the killing, whether or not the Earth Goddess had ordered it. But this same unhappy unconscious overtakes Obierika himself after the storming of Okonkwo's compound to satisfy the will of the goddess:

> [He] sat down in his *obi* and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?... He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just the offender (p. 87).

He realizes that though the Goddess has not said that he, Obierika, should storm Okonkwo's compound, or throw away his twin children (compare p. 47), he has done these things. He has been in a trap all this time. There may in fact be two sides to a question, but does that necessarily imply that one has a choice?

Similarly, there are two opposite forces at work in Okonkwo, and two natures. He is at once a builder and preserver as well as a destroyer. He is likened to the founder of the clan who 'engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights' (p. 3). For the work of preserving the clan is quite as important as the original foundation. This instinct to save and preserve is reflected in his struggle against the first drought of the story:

> In the morning he went back to his farm and saw the withering tendrils. He had tried to protect them from the smouldering earth by making rings of thick sisal leaves around them. But by the end of the day the sisal rings were burnt dry and grey. He changed

> them every day, and prayed that the rain might fall in the night. But the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed (p. 17).

In this text, no sign has a fixed value. Here the earth *smoulders*; when the wished-for rain comes, it ruins by excess what has survived the preceding drought. The drought itself is a figure of *fire*, which it communicates to the earth.

Jabbi has brilliantly brought out the significance of the fire symbolism in *Things Fall Apart* in his essay already cited, as an element of Okonkwo's character. Hence he is often *praised* as a 'Roaring Flame', which leads him to use a comparable image of himself. He calls himself 'Living Fire' (p. 109); but it is a symbol with multiple reference: it is an object highly valued, yet destructive, and begets 'cold, impotent ash'. The very instinct to uphold and preserve the clan turns out to be destructive of the clan. This is suggested in the Ikemefuna episode (p. 46), and fully realized in the killing of the court messenger.

Conclusion

The influence of sociological and historical readings of Achebe seems to me to have led to treating his works purely as discursive writing. The result is grave distortions in critical reading. The best we can say is that *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are imaginative reconstructions of the history of distruption in Umuofia and Umuaro, and the experience of being caught up in a tragic process of disruption. But the moral orientation or argumentative structure that is often presupposed can hardly stand up in a close reading, since it implies an overall consistency and purposefulness. This consistency is precisely what the two texts lack. The argumentative structure, that is, the function that incorporates the signs, incidents, and citations making up the fine grain of the narrative, proves with these texts self-deconstructing, in as much as the signs, incidents, and citations disrupt the very function that

incorporates them. *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are not well-made stories in the conventional sense of being cohesive and totally intelligible. They are rather strong texts, in as much as they withstand the clash of their diverse voices.

Notes

1. Bu-Buakei Jabbi, 'Fire and Transition in *Things Fall Apart*', in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, edited by C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (London: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 135-147 (pp. 136, 143).
2. Robert Wren, *Achebe's World* (Harlow: Longman, 1981), p. 75.
3. Donald J. Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan, 'Symbolic Structure in *Things Fall Apart*', in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, pp. 126-134 (p. 132).
4. Jacques Derrida, *Spech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 51.
5. Julia Kristeva. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 40.
6. Donald J. Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan, 'Symbolic Structure in *Things Fall Apart*, pp 126-127.
7. Susan R. Suleiman, 'Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism', in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 3-45 (p. 40).
8. David Silverman and Brian Torode, *The Material Word* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 5.
9. Emmanuel Obiechina, 'The Human Dimension of History in *Arrow of God*', in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, pp. 170-179 (p. 178).
10. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), p. 90.
11. David Silverman and Brian Torode, *The Material Word*, p. 6.
12. Roland Barthes, *Image - Music - Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 105n.
13. Roland Barthes, *Image -Music - Text*, p. 118.
14. Roland Barthes, *Image - Music - Text*, p. 88.
15. Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, edited by Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 360.

A.C. OBUNSE

Sunset

The sun sets in the sky,
darkness drowns the hues of dusk
and cattle egrets fly homewards
singing songs of a dying day.

The sun sets in the sky

And my sun sets too,
deep into a dark abyss
where my journey began.

Cyclic journey,
cyclic journey of Life
from the unknown into an unknown.

The sun sets in the sky;
my sun sets too
and my heart is filled
with sorrowful thoughts.

The Land Eats People

The land eats people.
It has eaten many
down at the home of our fathers.
Akosa, Ojini, and Nsenu are all victims.
The land has eaten them all.

The land eats people at home,
It has eaten Mazeli too.
Now he lies dead
in the land's cold belly.

Yet green bile embitter tongues,
hatred blind visions
and brothers caught in a clash of arms,
turn our portion into graves.

Lord, Lord.
Let your approaching light
dissolve this darkness in our eyes.
Let the fierce anger burning in our throats,
die down like live ashes beaten by dews.
Let love twinkle in our eyes
like stars in the dark skies.

The Land eats people.
It has eaten many heads.
And many more are yet to go
into its cold belly.

The Man in Black

The man in black
is the dreaded disease
that has infected the land
wasting robust men into walking corpses
turning the land into a land of woe.

A bandit
crouching under the shadow of the law
terrorizing innocent souls
with the nozzle of a gun.

Men have turned into creatures of fear
trembling at the sight
of your black khaki clothes.

Man in black
you fill me with fright too:
oppressed men and I take careful note
as you stand all day long at your road blocks,
collecting tolls from hungry men.

"Back of Front", 1990

NADEZDA OBRADOVIC

The White Woman in African Literature

The figure of the white woman is often encountered in African narratives as a main character. She is usually a European or an American, whose relationship with an African character functions as a theme. Infrequently, she is the focus of unlimited attraction and longing on the part of the African character. This woman on a pedestal contrasts with her anti-type, which is the focus of vengeance, and permits the self-assertion of the black males. The bodies of these women are often visited with extraordinary violence. They suffer beatings, humiliations, and sometimes witness the killing of their offspring, apparently as atonement for four centuries of colonization of Africa.

In the handful of African works, where the relationship is non-conflicting, it is clearly because a symbolic revenge is not part of the motivation. We see this, for instance, in the Cameroonian, Mbella Sonne Dipoko's long poem, *Black and White in Love*. Here the speaker describes his encounter with an American girl in Paris, and the ensuing love relationship, which is tender and even romantic. The pair travel across Europe, sleeping on benches. Both are vegetarians, both believe in life after death. They are so utterly compatible, and their mutual understanding so complete, that they seem as if made for each other. We read:

> Darling,
> We were drunk of each other.

There are no hints of race clashes in the entire poem, nor interference from the social environment. Once the speaker confesses to having entertained a worry about the racial implications of this relationship:

> I kept on saying to myself
> If only you were black
> Ore at least red;
> But white and bourgeois?
> I loved you in present

But white and bourgeois?
I loved you in present
And hated you in the future...

Finally, it is for lack of money, and the girl departing to San Francisco, that the romance is brought to an end. And the speaker retires to the Moroccan beaches, where he attempts to set himself up, and to try and make sense of life without her.

This mixed couple is presented on an equal footing. But the European woman we see in Mouloud Feraoun's *La terre et le sang* ('Earth and Blood') is quite different. Feraoun's French woman, Marie, is a poor and miserable being, who sees salvation for herself in her relationship with Amer, a young Algerian. The latter is despised and deprived of his rights in France; and Marie does not see it as a failure or in any way demeaning to follow him home to a remote Algerian village, his birthplace. She quite willingly begins life there as an Algerian woman, more or less secluded in the house, and finds among a strange people peace and love, and the happiness she never had in her motherland. All this is made possible by her husband, her mother-in-law, and neighbours, who have welcomed and accepted her with joy. Marie has clearly been responding to the impulses of love which have come from her African rescuers.

But the unredeemable European woman is seen in Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah's *Why Are We so Blest*? Modin, the protagonist, is shown early to be opposed to mixed marriages. Nevertheless, he marries Aimee, a white female student he has met abroad. There is nothing good in Aimee: she is a bitch, frigid, sexually perverted, egocentric, narcissistic, cruel, promiscuous, and totally without any gentle feelings. Her use of sexuality is purely in order to kill boredom, and the man she relates with is accounted of worth only to the extent to which he can excite her. She, however, could not attain an orgasm.

Aimee is the embodiment of everything aggressive, individualistic, and destructive in the West. In vain she tries to

experience something in numerous sexual relationships. It is this emotional and sexual incapability in Aimee that destroys all the illusions the man has harboured; and it first of all demoralizes him, before he is led to his death at the hands of three white soldiers in the Algerian Sahara. These soldiers rape Aimee, while he is looking on; then they castrate him, and leave him to die on the hot sand and the intense heat of the sun. Indeed, Modin is her victim, as has been clearly brought out by A.P.A. Busia in his study of Armah's novels:

> It is with Aimee that Modin finally travels to North African in search of a revolution to purge his soul, a journey which, for her, is just another radical exercise to find an escape from boredom. The relationship between them destroys Modin spiritually and he loses his sense of individual identity. The journey they jointly undertake leads only to his death in vengeance for his association with her ('Parasites and Prophets: the Use of Women in Ayi Kwei Armah's Novels').

The roles are reversed in Kole Omotoso's *The Edifice*. Here, as in Armah's work, the relationship between the black man and the white woman is purely fortuitous. Omotoso's hero finds white women unattractive, and even ugly, but he ends up marrying one. When they return to Africa, however, he deliberately humiliates her by beating her, and sleeping with other women in their matrimonial bed. She had hoped that the birth of a child would improve the situation, but the child is killed in a ritual murder by the mother-in-law.

In a great many African works, mixed marriages involving white women and black men often end in a catastrophe. In Mariama Ba's *Le chant ecarlate*, we read of a French woman, who braves all obstacles because of her African love. But having married him in a culturally strange setting in Africa, she discovers that she cannot stand a polygamous marriage, and becomes mad. In one of her episodes, she kills her son, the 'symbol of her failed marriage'. But it is the man that becomes emotionally unbalanced in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. The protagonist, Mustafar Saieed, is a well

educated Sudanese, and so handsome that he catches the eye of many an English woman. Finally, Jean Morris, a strange and elusive woman falls in love with him, but she provokes him unceasingly, to make him jealous. Her acceptance to marry him does not improve the situation; and it is with a blade lodged between her breasts, which slowly presses into her body under his weight in a love embrace that he puts an end to his nightmare.

As is to be expected, several stories of this sort have also been coming out of Southern Africa. Some of these reflect the segregatory laws associated with the apartheid system. But others, like the Zimbabwean, Dambudzo Marechera's 'Thought Tracks in the Snow' seem to come from the same mill as *Why Are We so Blest* and *Le chant ecarlate*. Here an African student falls in love with a white girl, but his happiness lasts only five days, as she begins a love affair with another black boy whom he teaches. She becomes pregnant, but in the end returns to her husband.

This motif of the fickle European woman has been remarked upon by Adewale Maja-Pearce in his paper entitled 'The House of Slavery' (*Women in African Literature Today*, 1987); and he observes:

> What is striking about all the women in these novels is their immaturity. None of them can be considered fully adult. This is part and parcel of the writer's own immature handling of the theme, and their inability, or unwillingness, to confront the real problem squarely, namely that of their relation to their history, and to the people they hold responsible for it.

I do not agree with Maja-Pearce, however, especially on the point of the 'immature handling of the theme'. For it is primarily the experienced writers who are mostly concerned, some of them having already written many literary works. For example, K. Armah is the author of five novels, and Kole Omotoso is a recognized playwright.

Do the poor and miserable African students have opportunities to form relationships only with white women who

are on the margins of society, with perverted and distorted ideas? Or is it only these kinds of character that attract the African writers? We cannot avoid the impression that such female figures are artificial creations of the writers, their paper dolls, targets and sex-objects to be got at by these writers via their heroes. These women are not allowed to present themselves; they are rather used to carry an author's statements about himself and his nausea. As if this opinion were shared by A.D. Pearce, commenting on Omotoso's heroine:

> [H]as she been created purely in order to be destroyed? There is nothing real about her. It is as if a vengeance is being exacted upon her for the four centuries of European history in Africa: and to be destroyed Daisy must first be possessed, which is why Dele must marry her despite his protestations that he hates white women. And he does hate them. But this is not a simple hatred. He also loves them with the twisted love of the victim who has believed everything his oppressor has told him about himself. His hatred is a complex hatred, in other words, a complex, at last because it is self-hatred. He despises himself, he believes himself to be inferior, and so he must prove to himself and to the world that this is not so: and how more completely can he prove it than by having one of them say to him, as Daisy does after he has deliberately and willfully humiliated her: 'I am half-crazy all for the love of you'.

One wonders why all these writers do not find better tools than the phaluses of their protagonists to vindicate themselves over the four hundred years of slavery. Or is it a way of contesting the notion instilled in them by the oppressor that they are intellectually inferior to the white race, such that by humiliating and mistreating their white heroines they may achieve a sense of equality. We cannot help but feel sorry for these white "immature' and naive students, falling prey so easily to the ambitious, burdened, and vindictive young black men, who become the heroes of many an African literary work.

Are there counter-examples in the literature? Hardly - as far as the present writer knows. Not even the relationship of Hima and her English husband in Hazel Mugot's *Cold, Cold World* is such a counter-example. Having married the white ethnologist,

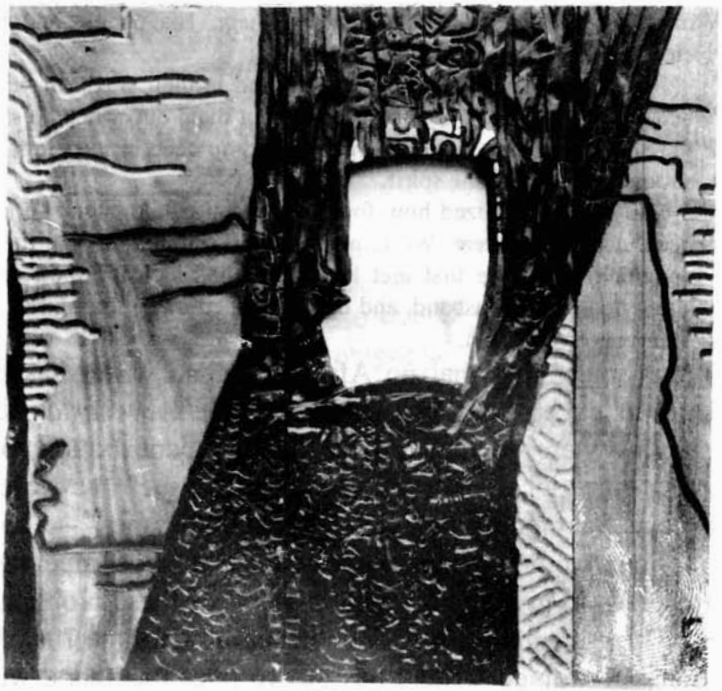
and moved with him to London, the girl from Seychelles feels that her colour has rendered her especially conspicuous in the streets of London, and that a glance at her dark skin causes her parents-in-law to fall sick. And in that cold white world, in that English winter, the very warmth of her colour seems to count against her. And her husband increasingly distances himself from her. We read:

> She began to feel even further removed from these strange people. Her dark skin seemed even more obvious now. More people turned round to stare.
>
> Those ghastly winter clothes and boots were such a burden. And all those hard cold faces. Now people had even less time to stop and chat, especially when a bitter wind cut through the very bones.
>
> Only he and she in the room. From day to day. Yet a thousand nameless people had come between them. His people and his customs, her people and her customs.
>
> They were present in their words, and in their ways. In years and years of the past. Cy had tried to shut them out, when he shut the door, forgetting that they were locked up deep inside. In those submerged parts of the spirit.
>
> He had not realized how foreign Hima was, although she had been careful to wear Western dress. His mother had a fit of coughing when she first met Hima. She had to leave the room, supported by her husband, and they remained away for the rest of their visit to the town.

It is interesting that no African woman writer has treated this topic, except Mariama Ba in her *Le chant ecarlate*. It was as if they were content only to make a contribution towards solving the local women's problems, such as initiation, marriage for money, polygamy, and childlessness - which for an African woman means non-existence. They compete among themselves in giving a 'woman's view' of these problems in a field where the male writers dominated up until the 70s. But the number of women writers has grown over the years, with the greater majority emphasizing that women's problems can only be meaningfully addressed by women. But will their stance change when mixed love and marriage connections come to the

fore? Will they see in white women only victims who must pay for the experience of domination by the white race? Or will they see them as rivals?

It bears repeating, in conclusion, that African literature reflects two approaches to the white women: she is either idealized as an inaccessible, attractive creature, or thrown to the ground to be treaded upon. The second mode of representation is more widespread, and encountered in the literature of all parts of Africa. The stance of the African female writers is yet to be seen, since there are very few white heroines in their works. Future literary creations will provide answers to such questions.



"Mirror object from Africa's history", 1989

EZENWA-OHAETO

On The Street at Night

Histories hoisted everywhere,

I have seen the eyes on the streets
Glow with the drug of despair,

Each tattered mind trails
the flotsam of its brain debris,

Neither Mohammed nor Jesus
seeps into their starving a-religion,

they went through Universities
angling for dregs of average joys,

dripping soggy with sampled sex
Insatiable with videos of violence
they live vicarious foreign lives
burning hopes in application forms
listening to the staccato of discos,
waste dumps consume their hopes,
they helled their minds each night
hallucinating of painted paradise,

Nightmares jostle in their nights
they wake to endless alcohol hazes,

Chained to denied endless titillation's
they bear grudges for just and unjust,

I have seen the eyes on the streets
Glow with the drugs of despair
till their brains bleached morals.

They scream the rage of the age
a wasted generation of wastrels,

Lost in the Labyrinths of Lagos
seeking dreams on Abuja streets
wandering round circuses
hungry, hurrying and lonely
wandering, wondering, whimpering,
they breakdown at guarded gates
Intoxicated with wines of wariness,

they stare at hoisted histories.

At sunset the girls tumble out
Waiting to snatch before sunrise
dreams on shifting sands
copulating with dollars and sterling
catching sunrise on high-rise apartments
sometimes dragged away howling
waving undressed wind-washed genitals,

I have seen the eyes on the streets
glow with the drugs of despair
till their brain bleached morals,

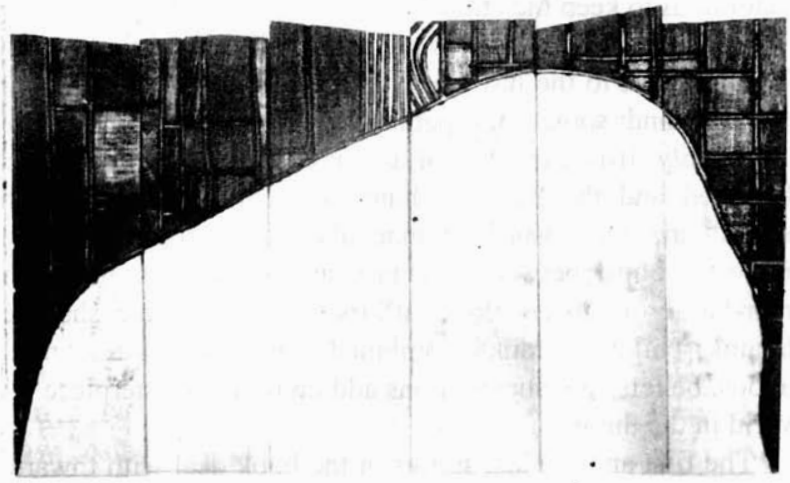
Their blood dripping like poems
scream the rage of their age.
Even as hands write on walls
the graffiti of grievous grief,
they write obscenities with blood.
They read horrors in their minds,

The eyes with fire in their depths
seek life in wombs of terror.
The palpable heat closes in,
timing their dripping tears.

They curse the scenes in alcohol
kicking crashed hoisted histories.

They have seen blind politics
lead blind leaders into blind alleys.

They now jump onto the streets
carrying the rage of the age.
Their eyes glow with drugs of despair.



"Zuma", 1985

CHINYERE NGONEBU

The Rainmaker's Daughter and Other Stories

The Rainmaker's Daughter and other Stories is a collection of a dozen stories centered on life in Apa, at the heart of Idomaland, the writer's hometown. In this collection, Ada Ugah exhibits some of his greatest talents - making a clear, detailed, and poignant account of the world of this predominantly rural community, in a language that is so lucid, rich, explicit, and pictorial as to keep the reader enthralled till the last page.

The theme of the book is life in an African agrarian society. From the first to the last story, Ada Ugah gives us interesting, exciting, and sometimes pathetic glimpses into life in this community. It is a life full of activities, full of joys and pains, the good and the bad, the humourous and the solemn, the normal and the absurd. Human aberration, clashes between interest groups, between tradition and modernity, intra- and inter-family conflicts, love affairs, dashed hopes, shattered dreams, childish pranks combined with local lores, myth, taboos, beliefs, and superstitions add up to this masterpiece of a world in the throes of change.

The first and the last stories in the book deal with thwarted love. "The Bashful Suitor", the first in the series, is about Okopi whose over-zealousness at cutting a good image for himself before his would-be in-laws leads to a shameful incident that wrecks the proposed marriage.

In the last story, "The Rainmaker's Daughter", the split between the lovers arises from differences of outlook. The rainmaker will not let his daughter, Onyechi, marry Acheme, the catechist's son. Onyechi consequently elopes with Acheme. In anger, the rainmaker sends a fierce thunderstorm on the town, which disrupts the solemnization of the marriage of the headstrong couple.

The law of nemesis is strong in this society, and evil is instantly and adequately punished. In "A Canopy in the Sun", "Night Scorpion", "Spring Memories", we see a society that is intolerant of evil. "A Canopy in the Sun" is a woeful tale about Ikwu, a wizard, who gives his only son, Adache, to be eaten by a secret cult. When Adache's death is investigated and the devilish act exposed, Ikwu and his accomplice are made to pay with their lives.

"Night Scorpion" is an ingenious detective operation, resulting in the Apa vigilante, under the leadership of Ogbu Achadu, tracking down and eliminating a thief. "Spring Memories" is a pathetic case of incest. Ene-Ogiri seduces her step-son, and both pay with their lives. Ada Ugah lampoons a fortune teller who, in "Medium of the Gods", mercilessly and hypocritically manipulates the people.

Another theme is evident in "Spittle in the Sand". It is a story of Christian and Moslem fanatics fomenting trouble in the land, and how King Ochapa brings the fanaticism under control. In this story, criticism is focused on the blatant disregard of the local cultural heritage and the ethics of love in favour of foreign ones.

In "Igweye's Pot of Soup", a woman dreams of her mother-in-law losing her sanity during a period of famine. Family squabbles are the focus of the next story, "The Exhibit". The story is presented from the viewpoint of children, thereby giving it a humorous undertone. In the next story, "Guardians of the Salt Lake", the protagonist makes a journey into a strange land, and the outcome leaves everybody in a dilemma over the genealogy of Apa.

"The last Temptation of the Village Cathechist" is a funny tale of religious coup in which Obo, a village belle, takes revenge on the catechist for shunning her advances. Ugah introduces a feminist theme in "Daughters of Apa". In this story, the women of Apa, angered by their husbands' flirtation and high-handedness, embark on a strike. Eventually, the

women succeed in re-asserting their importance and indispensability and in getting from the men promises of a change of behaviour. The story highlights present-day women liberation movements and the call for women to rally against male domination and exploitation.

Ada Ugah has achieved a lot in this book of 97 pages. Apart from its careful and bold recreation of the past - as is portrayed in the malevolent activities of the fortune teller in "The Medium of the gods", the wizards in "A Canopy in the Sun", and traditional detection and punishment patterns in "Night Scorpion", for example - there is also much that is appealing in the simple language, apt metaphors, and the eye for detail in the description of events and situations. Take this instance of Enekole's fall in "Daughters of Apa":

> The giant woman lay prostrate on the ground made wet and slippery by the thick mist and the early morning dew like a huge branch of 'Aha' tree torn off from its trunk and blown across the road by a storm (p. 64).

Or the following from 'Night Scorpion':

> Elders of Apa say that a barren housewife does not welcome the frequent visits of an ambitious mother-in-law who brings gifts to his future grand-children (p.77).

And in the same story, a sharp simile shows the King's decisiveness:

> When his men had gathered he went straight to the issue at stake like an arrow shot from the bow of an anxious archer (p. 78).

The sentences too are powerfully structured. In page 85 ("Spring Memories"), there is a succession of nine similar NP + VP patterns (Noun Phrase + Verb Phrase), each starting with "I saw..." They give us an instance of this writer's deft manipulation of syntactic structures for particular thematic and aesthetic effects. Consequently, within this passage, there is a gradual progression towards a climax which suggests a heightening of the protagonist's loneliness and inner turmoil.

The *Rainmaker's Daughter and Other Stories* is a book that will interest readers of varied cultures and ages.

IROHA E. UDEH

Pariah Earth and Other Stories

Professor Anezi Okoro's collection of short stories, *Pariah Earth and other Stories* is appropriately dedicated, not only to the author's children but to "all the world's children to whom tomorrow belongs." At the end of the reading experience one is no longer in doubt why such a dedication is made. In all, there are five stories in the collection - "Pariah Earth", "Great Flood II", "Melanona", "Sammy and Sally" and "Wood Spirit". According to the blurb, these are a "collection of futuristic and thought provoking tales ... linked by common themes, addressing contemporary ecological problems and man's destruction of the planet and wastefulness of natural resources." The stories are indeed thought-provoking.

Perhaps the thesis of the first story, "Pariah Earth", could be located within the following statement made by Jupiter when confronted by Sun on why all the planets declared war against Earth, their brother:

> We declared this war, Father, because Earth had by his mindless acquiescence in the excesses of modern man reduced us to dumping grounds for modern man's scientific pollution, hunting grounds for his avaricious appetite for precious metals and other resources, and camping and settlement grounds for his uncontrollable population (p. 49).

The planets who are all personified in this story, with many of them holding respectable positions in government, have earlier summoned a cabinet meeting to discuss man's recent assault upon their brother, Pluto. No longer satisfied with his occasional trips into space to explore for precious metals, man has suddenly towed away one of the twin planets to earth for full-time extraction of resources. The story opens with Pluto's desperate appeal to Jupiter, who is the President, to save him from collapse because man has suddenly towed away Charon

with whom he has co-existed for "half-billion years as double planets." An attempt to track down the space ship that has towed Charon away, Gaea 7, proves abortive. It is, therefore, in a state of heightened anger that the planets convene a cabinet meeting, with Prime Minister Saturn presiding.

At the meeting, man's assault on the planets is discussed. The planets accuse their brother, Earth, as being solely accountable for man's crimes against them because he has made himself comfortable for man to exist on. Neptune, for instance, deposes that

> "If Earth had not so shamefully allowed modern man to trample him underfoot, he would not have had the base from which to launch his bid for the conquest, domination and exploitation of the planets and outer space" (p. 24).

Earth is consequently tried and found guilty. Not even his legitimate argument that he too is a victim, in fact, the most wounded and disgraced by man's destructive activities in the planets could save him. While accepting this argument as true, his brother planets still maintain that he fraternizes with man; hence he has failed to make his environment inhospitable to man. Why can't he make man extinct in his planet? they ask. The solution, therefore, is to destroy both him and man. The case is consequently closed: Earth and Man will be destroyed as soon as possible.

Earth, to save himself, appeals to their father, Sun, to save him:

> Father', Earth called in a tremulous voice, "Please hear my cry. Your third orbit son is in a mortal and immediate danger. Save me, father. Save me. Save me" (p. 47).

As a result, Sum summons Jupiter and asks him:

> "What is this about eight of you ganging up and declaring war gainst your brother, Earth?" (p. 49).

We have already quoted Jupiter's answer, arguing that it contains the theme of the story. Man has, over the years, polluted his planet, the earth, making it uninhabitable to his children. And as Sun later tells Jupiter, man in his self-delusion,

thinks he is an intelligent being, whereas he is still millennia away from attaining real intelligence.

Jupiter is to call off the plan to destroy Earth and man, since "pollution is also part of the intelligence deficiency syndrome modern man still suffers from" (p. 53). Sun explains that he is using man as his representative in the competition between Stars in the stellar system and other galaxies. This is an experiment with organic life for "the development of intelligence and the striving to win the race for super-intelligence" (p. 53). Earth and man are, therefore, spared. But the "thought-provoking" question here is, will man be able to develop that required 'intelligence' and 'super-intelligence' to preserve himself, his children and his planet? The other stories give further illustration of the consequences of man's activities, we will, therefore, give them less space here.

"Great Flood II", presents the ecological problem of ice caps which melt and threaten to swallow up all the major cities of the world. According to the story,

> We caused this disaster by our reckless production over the past 300 years of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, which led to the global overheating, which resulted in the melting of the Antarctic and Arctic ice sheets and Greenland, which resulted in Great Flood II (p. 103).

There is an implicit appeal to man to device methods for the neutralization of the present level of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere if he wishes to save his children from a future great flood disaster.

"Melanoma," is the story of a very beautiful girl, Miss Langelinie Larsen who dies "from malignant melanoma as a result of exposure to ultraviolet rays flooding in through ozone holes in the atmosphere." Again, man is blamed for creating the holes. Hence we read that

> She dies because she was born at the Wrong time. What made the time of her birth Wrong? Holes had been busted in the ozone layer by chlorofluorocarbons or CFCs and other ozone-destroying

> chemicals thrown into the atmosphere by our chemicals manufacturers (p. 131).

In the fourth story "Sammy and Sally" two salmon die as a result of poison from toxic wastes poured into the river from factories. Nor are the forests spared by man's destructive activities. This is the focus of the last story in the collection. Entitled 'Wood Spirit', a giant Iroko tells the story of his life as a giant of the rainforest and how he was disgracefully felled by man and ultimately reduced to the undignified role of a kitchen stool. In a statement carefully designed to warn man against the danger of deforestation, the Iroko speaks thus:

> But men seemed to know nothing of the feelings of trees. Would they even replace me by planting an iroko or other tree seedling? Men never forget to replace their dead with new births. But for our kind, do they care? Do they care about the desertification they are causing as long as deforestation serves their mindless economic purpose? (p. 214).

On the whole, *Pariah Earth and Other Stories* is a timely prophetic book of warnings to a world whose quest for technological development has blinded it from taking adequate measures to save itself beyond the present. The book alerts the present generation to the dangerous and uncertain future they are likely to bequeath to their children if they do not temper their overzealous quest for technological development with a corresponding zeal to retain the natural culture of the planets. The book should be a must for everyone that wants our world and children to survive the future. One reservation I have for the book though is that although the language is lucid, full of adept metaphors, symbolism and imagery, the narrative may be somewhat difficult for readers who do not have a sound science background.

Notes on the Contributors

Amechi Nicholas AKWANYA holds a Ph.D of the National University of Ireland and teaches in the Department of English, UNN. He has published poems, and articles in language, and contributed in book projects. His new book, *Semantics and Discourse: Theories of Meaning and Textual Analysis*, Enugu: ACENA, 1996, is an experiment in Applied Linguistics. He is also author of *Orimili* (novel) published by Heinemann, Oxford, 1991.

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