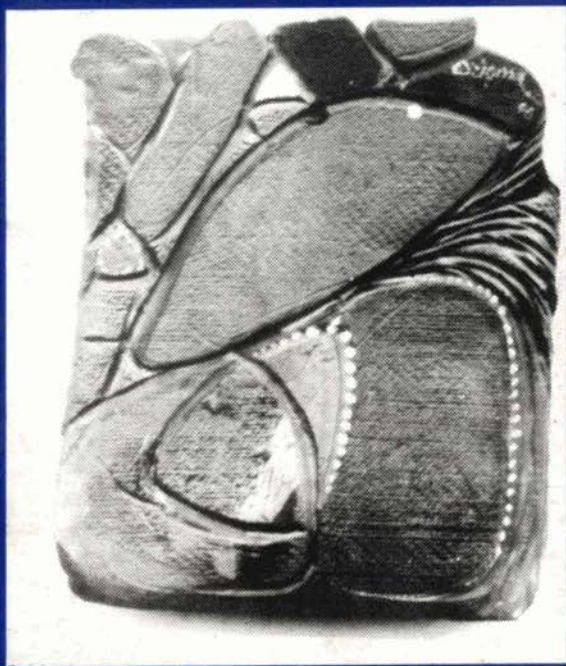




OKike

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



40

OKIKE
An African Journal of New Writing
NUMBER 40, OCTOBER 1998

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

CHIDI ONYEIWU

My Fatherland

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

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

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

IRO AGHEDO

A Strangled June

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

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

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

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

Endless Cycle

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

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

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

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

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

Time is the umpire
Of this infinite duel

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

A Dirge for Fatherland

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

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

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

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

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

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

+ A Hausa word for thief

Aghedo

... Cataclysmic deaths
Trails of blood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

PATIENCE JUNE URHIAFE-ESAN

A Heathen's Niche

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His voice thickened with emotion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"An oath," Oscar said with a chuckle.

Celia took in a sharp breath.

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

He averted his gaze, avoiding her pleading eyes.

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

and then mine too."

Celia peered into his face, her disapproval obvious.

"Then we will mix our blood..."

"That's all?"

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

"Blood." Celia groaned revealing all her agony.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nacet razor blade cut clean into her fleshy thumb.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

YUSUF M. ADAMU

Almajiri

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

Almajiri: literally a Quaranic school pupil

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

Professional Beggars

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

OBI NWAKANMA

A Straw in the Light

THE LOOP of the rope is the sign of the road

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

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

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

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

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

He chose the death of the pagan

Ebenebe ...

He sang and there was none to listen

Ebenebe ...

He screamed and the world merely grinned

Ebenebe ...

He shook the entrails of the river

Ebenebe ...

He carried the offal and drowned it in the rainbow

Ebenebe ...

He chose death, the death of the pagan

Ebenebe ...

And all the waters of creation flowed downhill at his funeral.

Among them, the greying leopard

pounced, he did, upon the road, where the signs multiply:

The loop of the rope is the sign of the greying road:

yesterday we mourned the death of the Elephant

today, we have cleared the path for a new throne:

The sun crowns the hills, laughing

the drums wander into the orbit tremulous ...

Between I, and the smouldering see, the rope becomes

a bond: says, we are like the towering rocks,

naked at midnight and the straw in the light

burning bright until nothing is left:

We saw the groom approach,

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

But the drums wander into the world quaking ...

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

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

Whoever says the sea is dry

let him dare a step: the exiles return to the land

Wearing amulets ...

For it is the play of dogs: each one leans on one and the world
flows, incessant like the river ...

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

CHUKWUMA OKOYE

The Town Crier

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

O, friend
Not these tones,
We frowned.

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

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

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

O, man
Not these tones,

We warned.

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

Homage to Life: Whitman

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

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

IROHA UDEH

I Mourn for Onome

I mourn for Onome.

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

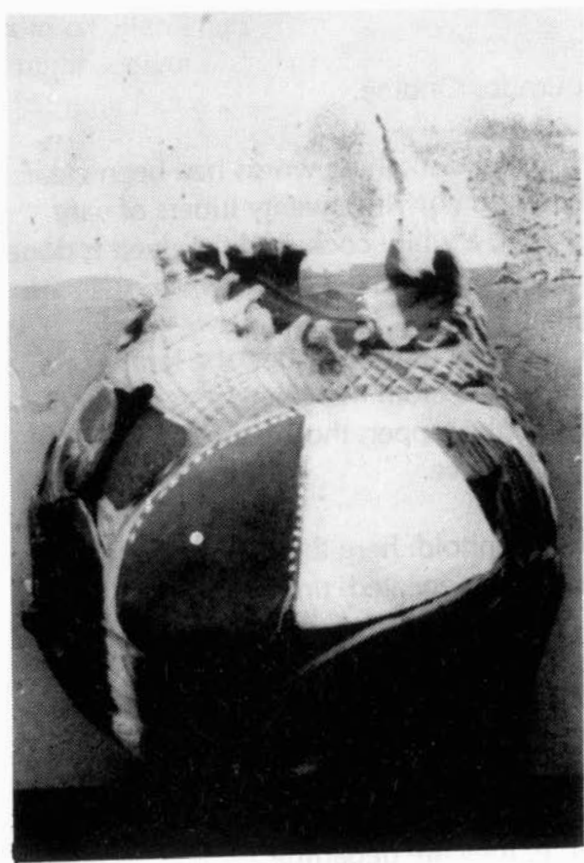
Just let her live:
 To Obote the money-lender, the family farmland
 To Oshia the cloth merchant, seven wrappers
 To Osifo the tapper, the ancestral palm trees
 Just let her live.

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

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

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

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



EBELE OSEYE

Someone at the Gate

A man.

Opens the gate as though he is on familiar ground.

His walk is straight. He doesn't even look around.

I don't know that face.

He is not the Plumber

Who came yesterday, his Okada

Reving and beeping, his lean form neat in tight beige leisure suit.

His fine hips bouncing in place.

(I rushed to the gate.)

He is not the Carpenter, aged and underfed and mumbling,
displaying his bent nails

Complaining that he has not been paid, then

Smiling. He has. It's just a game he plays . . .

He is not the Christian Thieves who have planted on my rented
land

Slipped through the rear to drop their seeds, pretending great
surprise

at my protest.

First they dress and go to church then come

To greet me in their Christian clothes explaining their deceit as
courtesy.

They did not want to interrupt my peace by requesting
permission

from me . . .

He is not the Electrician with missing front teeth, tall and flexible

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

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

*"NEPA" Nigerian Electrical Power Association

Night in Nigeria

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

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

I Will Be Brief

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

Your Mother Is Larger than the April Sun

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

Death Does Not Honour Your Battle Fronts

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

Racists Are Not Normal

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

OBIOMA NNAEMEKA**Literary Criticism as Disciplinary Failure:
Rereading Mariama Bâ's Novels****Introduction**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Feminism, Speech, and Silence (d)

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

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

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

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

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

In its engagement with the "Third World," Western feminism operates on a system of indirect rule in which a select group of "Third World" women (either studying or working in the West or operating from the "Third World" countries) are *authenticated*, naturalized and installed as mediating forces. The feminist dilemma noted above is complicated for the legitimized *authentic* voice/woman from the "Third World" by the angst she feels for doing what she is called upon to do - that is, speak for the rest of "Third World" women "victims." The *authentic* voice is faced with the dilemma of producing a counterdiscourse to Eurocentric discourse without monopolizing her own sisters' discursive field. Peter Hitchcock⁴ rightly notes that this "reobjectification" of the African women is an epistemological one: "[t]he epistemological question here is how to counteract the 'all-seeing I' of Eurocentric discourse without assuming the position, as guarantor, of the alternative knowledge that may be at issue." The *authentic* voice from the "Third World" feels uneasy as she executes her assignment: "she feels like such a fake, albeit enmeshed in varying degrees of complicity with social and educational privilege."⁵ Not only that, the *authentic* "Third World" feminist finds herself paradoxically sandwiched between speech and silence; she speaks for her "victimized" sisters but at the same time, she is silenced and spoken for by her Western feminist collaborators. As Huma Ibrahim concludes from Audre Lorde's May 6, 1979 letter to Mary Daly that Lorde turned into an open letter "to the community of women" after four months of no response from Ms. Daly,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

