



OKike

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43

O K I K E
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Okike

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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*

TUNJI FATILEWA***Wake up Africa***

For how long shall we scavenge
the wastes of our goldmines?
For how long shall we inhabit the
river and wash with spittle?
For how long shall we scramble with
glee for the rejects of our tormentors?

Must we remain marooned in this
murky waters of dogma?
Aren't we tired of wearing this
ash of mourning?
Are there no clear-headed submarines to
crane us out of this murk?
Their poisoned drippings have taken the
wind off our mental sails, and our
dignity droop like the aged palm frond
in shameful disequilibrium

Let us not prostrate for aid
to paint our pains
but remonstrate for pay, for the raid
that left the linen of our psyche perforated

Let us jettison our protest songs, for
they merely rub off their concrete walls
while they peep scornfully at our nakedness
Let us bunch together and dig
firm our feet
Wash away the ash from our skin, burn
our mourning cloak and insulate our

consciousness with bowls of fresh palm oil
Let us web our fibre to seal these yawning
gaps and recall our dignity

Let us from the mounds of our endowment,
fire our clay and with our potters
fingers fabricate a great and impregnable
future

The cock of a new dawn has flapped it's feathers
The engine of the next millennium roars for
take-off

Immuned from the infections of the past centuries
Let us seize a vantage position on the great
machine

Poisoned minds and hounded lackeys have no
place on board!

The Child Soldier

There he stands, a battered sight
Dwarfed by the annihilator, thrust on his
innocent shoulders by lunatics rampaging the
land of their fathers, like demented hunter
dogs

The child soldier, Africa's cross
His face, plastic
His eyes, red hot like metal in the furnace
Constipated by the sight of horror and genocide
recede in bewilderment into
the recesses of their chambers
The child soldier, blackman's pain!

The spirit of sacrilegious mating
caught in the snarl bared byxds3
the African warlord.
Denied books to shape his future, but
forced into tattered jungle boots that
haunch his tomorrow.

The child soldier, humanity's shame!
A virgin defiled by a lunatic whose
imbecile offspring shall devastate us
like a thousand famished lions
unleashed on a shepherd-less flock

Like a foetus snatched from the womb,
the child soldier is a tragic tragedy!

The Good Old Days

Danladi, Uche and I, were three of
scores of children who played in the
sands, heard moonlight tales and
shared our mats at night
Our names were no more than
a means of identification.

Though our tongues differ, we learnt
each others language with enthusiasm
and love
Our fathers went to the farms at
dawn, set traps and shared game together
They played draughts, drank fresh palm wine
from same calabash and laughed at
one another's jokes

Our mothers raised us together, went
to the stream, cooked over same
fire and we ate from the same pot
Sometimes we stepped on each other's
toes
Tempers rose with the sun, but we
held hands at moonlight

Our mothers did have their squabbles
but our fathers doused the fire
Our fathers sometimes had one calabash
too many and threatened the serenity
of the village
The Mogajis were always at hand
to call them to order
The Mogajis flexed muscles too, but

Baales enforced discipline
When Baales locked horns, the
Kabiyesi pronounced judgement and
the matter was laid to rest
That was before the coming of the
men of fame and fortune
The double-faced and double-tongued
merchants of mischief

The power hungry merchants
poisoned our pots and broke our
chain of brotherhood
They bruised our psyche
Our tongues became taboo and our
names a stigma
They burnt our mats and put
hate in our eyes

How I long for those good old days
How I await the re-enactment of
those scenes of love
care and sharing
My skin longs for the gentle, peaceful
breeze that sways the flowers and
inspires the birds to sing

Wait a minute!
Aren't we all dummies
to have swallowed the
insidious bait of these
savages without a thought?

ANIETIE ISONG**"In Times Like This"**

'You think we're going to win?'

'Huh? What?'

'You think the Golden Eagles are going to win the Cup?'

'They will,' Michael told him, yawning, wanting to fall asleep. He wished the driver would stop blatting; right then he cared little about sports, about anything; all he wanted to do was get some rest. The driver, sensing his indifference, bridled his tongue and concentrated on his work.

The 'kabu-kabu' bent with age, snailed along the Obalende Road and rattled to a halt at Odo Street.

'Why are you stopping here?' Michael asked the driver. 'I told you Ajeniya Street.'

'Ajeniya Street has been blocked.'

Michael glared ahead. Hedonists had hijacked Ajeniya. Giant canopies were mounted in the middle of the street. Celebration was at its peak, for many people were partying there.

'It baffles me,' Michael confessed, 'how some individual can take over a whole street.'

'That's Lagos,' the driver commented.

'But this is wrong. Absolutely wrong! Why should government allow this? Now how am I to get to my destination?'

'You get down here and walk,' the driver suggested.

Michael scowled. 'Walk.'

'You don't expect me to drive through the party, did you?'

Michael shuddered at the notion of trudging along the street, past the party people, with a sack of garri.

'So?' the driver inquired. 'Time na money!'

Michael struggled to alight. The door, naked, robbed of upholstery, would not budge.

'I can't open your door.'

The driver rendered his services. He detached an almost invisible bolt from the lock. The door whined and gave way.

'The boot. Come and open it.'

The boot was less difficult to open. Michael paid the driver.

'How are you carrying the bag?'

'I don't know,' Michael confessed. 'Perhaps I'd carry it on my head.'

The driver adjusted the bag on Michael's bald head. He entered his vehicle, spurring the cab into motion.

The bag was heavier than Michael had thought. It slowed his steps.

"If you see my mama

Hossana

Tell am say-o

Hossana

I dey for ghetto

Hossana

I no get problem

Hossana"

Showkey's lyrics trajected the merry makers into a tizzy. Many wallowed to the tune. Michael shoved at one that was blocking his way.

'What's biting you?' the man demanded with a drunken vituperation.

Michael ignored the fellow. He never bothered with drunks. They were as babies; helpless, ruled by feebleness. He crossed the canopy. The reverberation from the speakers worried his tympanic membrane. He hurried on. The party hadn't obstructed Victor's abode. Michael was pleased. The house was an old storey building. Victor occupied a room in the ground floor. Michael was only too glad to relieve his head of the burden. Sweat soaked him.

'Michael!'

Victor had sighted him from his window. The two friends embraced.

'I almost thought you wouldn't come anymore,'
Victor said.

'Why wouldn't I?'

Victor's room was a mere sleeping ground.
His wearied six-spring mattress had no bed frame.
It was spread on the old linoleum carpet (which a former occupant
of the room had munificently "left him").
A stool and a three-legged classroom desk constituted his entire
furniture..

'So how is Mama?'

'Fine,' Michael replied. "She sends her greetings and this
bag of garri.'

'Oh, God bless her!'

Michael rolled on the foam. 'I'm surprised you have light.'

'NEPA has promised us continuous power supply'

'Because of NIGERIA '99?'

'Sure.'

'Have you cooked?' Michael suddenly asked.

'No. Are you hungry?'

'I'm famished.'

Victor smiled. 'I have food.'

He produced a bowl of steaming, fried rice.

'You bought these?'

'Why should I?' Victor replied, 'when there's free "wack" at
my door?'

Michael laughed. 'You mean . . . the party . . .'

'That's the price they've got to pay for disturbing my peace.
Now, eat.'

* * * *

The morning sunlight crept into the room, painting the
carpet with its first orange warmth. Victor sat up.
He shook Michael.

'Wake up.'

'Hmm.'

'My friend, get up.'

'What time is it?'

'I don't have a clock. Get up or we'll be late for the interview.'

'Is the bathroom occupied?'

'Go and check.'

He went out. Later, when they were leaving, he asked; 'is that the key you use in locking the door?'

'Yes.'

'It is rather flimsy.'

Flimsy indeed, Victor mocked. 'What do I have in the room. Let's go!'

The heat in the room smothered Michael. His hands were folded on the lap of his frayed coat. Victor was pleading with the messenger.

'Please, help us now. We've been waiting for . . .'

'What do you want me to do?' the man snapped.

'I've told you oga is busy. So you should wait!'

Victor retired to his cushioned seat. The messenger's insolence irked him.

'Should we leave?' Michael asked.

'No.'

A door opened and a lanky man entered the general office. The two friends rose to their feet.

'Good afternoon sir,'

'Afternoon. Are you waiting to see me?'

'Yes sir.'

The man glanced at his watch. 'I could spare some minutes. Come in.'

The office was fairly comfortable. Michael and Victor were offered seats.

'So what can I do for you?'

Victor spoke: 'Sir, we're from Alhaji Dada. He ...'

The man waved his hands. 'The job. Isn't it?'

'Yes, sir,'

What followed was a volley of questions which Victor found slightly unnerving. He thought Alhaji's influence would have saved them these.

'Are you graduates?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What did you study?'

'I'm a graduate of Biology,' Victor informed him.

The man turned to Michael. 'And you?'

'I read philosophy.'

The man focussed his watery eyes on some files.

Victor was apprehensive. Not looking up, the man interrogated: 'Since you left the University, what have you been doing?'

Victor was the first to answer. 'I worked in a laboratory. My boss went into politics and the business folded. Since, I've been doing odd jobs, trying to make ends meet.'

'And you?'

'I've been teaching,' Michael replied, 'in a local school.'

The man looked up. 'so why do you need this job?'

'Sir, we've not been paid our salaries for four months, so we embarked on a strike.'

'I see.'

The man's eyes roved the walls as if anticipating an intruder. 'Normally, I don't employ strangers. But Alhaji is my close friend. He has never disappointed me. So, I'll give you guys a trial'

Victor stared at Michael. Their eyes communicated.

'Apart from English which other language do you understand?' the man suddenly asked Victor.

'Okobo'.

The man started. 'What is that?'

'A dialect of Akwa Ibom State.'

'Akwa Ibom indeed,' the man sneered.

'I mean an international language. Do you speak the French language?'

'No, sir.'

'German?'

'No, sir.'

'Italian?'

'No, sir.'

'Spanish?'

'No, sir.'

'And your friend, can he speak any of these languages?'

Michael answered, 'No sir.'

'There you are!' concluded the man. 'The job I have is for one with a vast knowledge of languages.'

Victor saw his casual employment going up in the wind.

'But sir, we can do...'

'Our stands are strategically located in Lagos metropolis,' the man interrupted. 'We're hosting the world, not Akwa Ibom, not Lagos! That's why, I need people who are fluent in international languages to sell my tickets.'

'Sir...'

The man waved his hand. 'I don't give a damn about Nigerian spectators. I'm targetting the foreigners!'

Michael's temper was almost exploding. To keep it in check, he sealed his lips.

'He put on large spectacles (which Michael had erroneously believed to be a souvenir).

'I'm sorry guys, we have nothing more to discuss. My apologies to Alhaji.'

* * * *

Michael's shoes squeaked on the thoroughfare.

'You should have told the man you spoke Spanish.'

Michael trotted on. 'But I don't know a word of Spanish.'

'But you could've lied.'

'What if he asked me...'

'The idiot knows not a word of Spanish. That would have shown him up.'

They walked to a kiosk. Michael was thirsty. The trek had drained his throat of fluid. Victor called out to the sales girl.

'What do you want to drink?'

Michael eyed her lustfully. 'Two bottles of coke.'

The girl sauntered behind the counter. Victor nudged his friend. 'You like her?'

Michael nodded.

'Better watch it. Some of these girls are carriers.'

The girl placed the order on the men's table, 'That's, fifty naira.'

'Fifty naira?'

'Yes,' the girl replied.

'You must be joking,' Michael told her. 'That means twenty-five naira for a 35 cl bottle of soft drink?'

'You're correct,' said the girl.

'You're crazy,' bellowed Victor. 'Is this Sheraton?'

An old man, a lone occupant of a table adjacent to theirs, waded into the issue.

'That's the amount I paid for mine,' he announced.

Michael and Victor turned to the man, noticing him for the first time.

'You mean, you bought a bottle of coke here for twenty five naira?'

'Yes.'

'If you're foolish enough to do that,' Michael retorted, 'I'm not.'

The old man was not offended by Michael's tone.

'My son, don't you know the cause of this?'

Michael smirked. 'There's no cause. This is exploitation ...'

'Precipitated by greed,' Victor concluded. 'The manufacturers of coke have not altered the price. Why should the retailers?'

The old man laughed. Victor resisted the urge to whack the man's creased head.

'NIGERIA '99' the old man disclosed, 'is the reason. In times like this, everybody wants to make quick money. That's why there is a general hike in the price of almost every commodity.'

Victor grasped the logic in the man's talk. The recent

renovations of many inns in the metropolis had initially surprised him. It was later that he realised that the proprietors were trying to make the most of the international sporting want. Even, Even Window Hotel, a place he had thought to be on its last leg! They too had put up a notice welcoming the tourists foreigners.

'It's a sad situation,' he commented.

'A pathetic situation,' Victor amended.

'Even the price of pure water has gone up,' the man informed them.

Victor turned to the girl. 'How much is a bottle of pure water?'

'Ten naira.'

'Ten naira?'

Michael flared up, 'This is exploitation of the highest order! Pure water that is sold for five naira?'

The sales girl went behind the counter with her bottles. But the men raved on, displeased at the whole situation.

'Hosting the world indeed,' Victor sneered. 'They are all hosting their pockets!'

Michael thought what to do. He couldn't afford a bottle of coke anymore. He had thought the soft drink still went for the regular retail price of fifteen naira.

The old man said: 'It is not as if these hotels are really after the welfare of foreign guests..'

'They're after the foreign currency' Victor concluded.

'I hear in some respected hotels, prostitutes have been hired as part of the services rendered there,' the old man informed them.

Victor hissed. Michael, looked up at his friend for a sign. But there was none.

'Don't be surprised,' the old man went on, 'if a pure water seller ask you to pay in dollars!'

Michael did some mental calculation. He heard the old man say, 'Only God can save this nation.'

Starting, Michael asked:

'Which god?'

'Jehovah, God Almighty,' the man replied.

'So you're one of those religious traunts insinuating there's a god,' Michael remarked. 'I thought you were wiser than that!'

The old man was an evangelist. He adhered strictly to his Christian faith. He was suddenly bothered that he'd been conversing with an intelligent man who held God in such a low esteem.

'You really don't believe in God?' he asked.

Michael waved his hand. 'I don't, for there's nothing like God. It's an illusion. An opium of the masses.'

The old man could not believe his ears. He had come across many people with diverse religious views, but he had never met anybody who didn't believe in God. He stared at Victor but his face was expressionless, blank as white paper. Hurriedly, he brought out a small Bible from his breast pocket.

'You have a chance to hear from God,' he told Michael excitedly. 'In the Psalms, it is said that only a fool says in his heart there's no God. In the Book...'

Michael interrupted, 'You waste your time old man, you waste your time...'

'But...'

'It is because of people like you that this nation is like this today...'

'Young man...'

'You religious freaks have warped the minds of the citizens of this nation...'

'You must repent, otherwise you'll rot in Hell,' the old man announced.

'Hell? Who has ever seen Hell? Have you?'

'I've been given an idea in the Book of Revelation..''

'An idea. That's what religion is. One man's idea that everybody foolishly accepted.'

'In Mat 4:17, Jesus says, repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand,' the man quoted, exasperated at Michael's cynicism.

But the younger man refused to be daunted. 'Look at you,

I bet you don't even own a bicycle. Religion has turned you to a wretch. Where is the whiteman who introduced this so called god to you?'

In the past, the evangelist had won so many souls for Christ. He thought he could still win another one. 'It is written in Hosea 4:6, "my people perish for lack of knowledge."

'It is you who are perishing,' Michael cried.

'A soldier from the barracks suddenly snatches the reins of power and you don't complain because your Bible tells you he is from god. Another soldier comes in and wrecks untold havoc on the citizenry, yet you don't complain because your Bible tells you not to! How can this nation move ahead when people like you are impeding its development?'

Victor suddenly smiled. He had watched the war of words without saying anything. Now, he spoke 'Most Nigerians are unaware that they are patients of psychoneuroses.'

'What is that' Michael asked.

The old man closed his Bible. He eyed Victor pityingly. 'You too don't believe in God.'

'I'm a scientist,' Victor replied. 'I believe in facts. If God cannot be tested, analysed and interpreted, why should I believe in him?'

The old man sighed. He had thought Victor would be on his side. 'You men are wasting your lives. You...'

'In Psychoneurosis,' Victor interrupted,' the affected individual reacts in an abnormal manner to certain conflicting circumstances in his life but still retains his mental capacity to think normally and for the most part, to exercise normal judgement'

'Tell us, Mr. Scientist!' cried Michael.

'But the most common type of psychoneurosis here, is the phobic reaction,' Victor said. 'Here the patient manifests an unreasonable, unjustified anxiety regarding some particular situation.'

With a slight movement, the old man shook his head. 'Traditions of men! Better trust in the Lord with all your heart and

lean not on your own understanding!

Victor shifted on his stool. He looked very solemn. 'A junta who confines himself to his villa because he's afraid of being harmed is a chronic phobic reaction patient. A religious fellow, whose fear of Hell has made him live a dull life is a phobic reaction patient. A man who feels threatened by the presence of Church goers in his society is a patient of phobic reaction. So this nation's problems can be solved if some people visit a psychiatrist.'

The old man gave up. 'You two are beyond salvation. The devil has chained your souls completely.'

Michael laughed. 'Devil, god, soul - imaginary things! Why do you pay attention to these things?'

The sales girl, thinking the trio might be driving away potential customers, reared her bleached face. 'Which kind nonsense be dis? If una no wan buy anything make una leave my shop-o!'

** ** ** **

Victor entered the room. He had been listening to the football commentaries on his neighbour's radio.

'We lost,' he announced. 'Nigeria had crashed out of the championship!'

Michael looked up from the desk. He was more interested in constructing lines of poetry. 'Did you really think we would win?'

'But we lost so shamefully!'

'Please don't kill yourself over it. Those boys were playing for their pockets. You are only a jobless man.'

Victor suddenly asked; 'Can I see your poem?'

Michael showed him. The poem read:

In times like this:

I am a lizard

frollicking on mired walls,

I am a lizard

nodding at khakied bandits,

I am a lizard
crawling
nodding...

JONATHAN C. EZEH

Oyibada

Oyibada	-	A childless widow
Uroko	-	Ghost of Oyibada's late husband
Mgbedike	-	Late Uroko's younger brother
Omabe	-	Mgbedike's younger brother
Maduka	-	Oyibada's brother
Women	-	Oreshu
	-	Enyahuma
	-	A woman
	-	Some voices
Esato	-	Masked-spirit-town crier of Ndabo village

SCENE ONE

(A village setting denoted by thatched huts and such scenic units. Omabe and Mazi Mgbedike are in the midst of a discussion.)

Omabe: *(Absentmindedly)* Tonight?

Mgbedike: Yes. That stubborn woman should find the way to her village. She is too blind to see the handwriting on the wall, but she will do just that sooner or later. As I said, we shall strike again tonight.

Omabe: Mgbedike?

Mgbedike: Yes? *(Omabe bows his head in thought. An uncomfortable silence follows.)* Yes?

Omabe: You are trying to persuade me to do something I don't understand. In fact, I don't want be part of it any longer.

Mgbedike: What? Why Omabe. Why this sudden change of mind?

Omabe: Uroko does not want me ... does not want his wife thrown out.

Mgbedike: Uroko?

Omabe: Yes.

Mgbedike: When did he tell you that?

Omabe: Yesternight. In a dream. He warned me to steer clear of Oyibada.

(Lights fade on the scene. Lights come on again to reveal Omabe with a keg of wine, a climbing rope and cutlass, apparently on a palm-wine tapping round.)

Uroko: Why do you want to render my house desolate?

(Omabe turns and sees the ghost of his late brother, Uroko. He makes to take to his heels, smashing the keg and throwing away all that he is carrying, but the ghost is already on his neck. It catches him by the neck and attempts to strangle him. He screams.)

Omabe: But it is Mgbedike ... It's Mgbedike ...

Uroko: You, both of you, leave Oyibada alone! She toiled with me for twenty-one years. She bore eight children in my house, all of whom we lost at infancy. She suffered with me when I was bed-ridden for three years. Where were you then? Did you care if I lived or died? Now you want my lands and crops - the lands

and crops you know very well I never inherited but acquired by hard work. Oyibada laboured with me, and now you want to throw her out like a spent dog.

Whoever hurts Oyibada invites my wrath. (*Shakes Omabe violently, throws him to the ground and walks away, backwards. Lights fade and return to the ongoing scene.*)

Mgbedike: Ha! ha! ha! It takes more than two slippery bulbs in between the thighs to make a man. (*Becoming more serious*) Our brother died almost a year ago, leaving this childless old witch and you ...

Omabe: Oyibada had eight children.

Mgbedike: And how many are alive today? (*No reply*) Has she not eaten up all by her witchcraft? (*Moves close to Omabe*) Now, listen. We must evict that devil from our late brother's homestead. Do you have eyes and ears and that fat skull for fancy? Can't you see that Oyibada is the cause of all the evils that have befallen us in this family? What do you think killed our brother, a man who was becoming so prosperous? Why have your harvests become so scanty? Have we offended the gods? (*Omabe turns away his ears to suggest he is not going to budge from his position. Mgbedike shakes him by the shoulder.*) I am asking you, Omabe!

Omabe: (*Rising and freeing himself from Mgbedike's grip*) You can say what you like, but I'm not with you this time. Oyibada is not the only widow who has no child. If you knew she was not going to live amongst us, why did you keep quiet until she completed the mourning period of nine months before bringing this matter up. Mgbedike, I'm afraid the gods may not

spare us. We have burgled her house three times, we have destroyed her crops in the farm. Mgbedike, I am not going any further. The disease that kills the dog does not allow it to perceive the smell of faeces.
(Exits)

Mgbedike: *(Mgbedike is visibly shocked and bows his head in thought. A vicious smile plays on his face; he paces around, then stops suddenly.)* I think I've got it! And that will nail the coffin.

(Lights fade to darkness)

SCENE TWO

(Oyibada's compound. A hut with a precariously hanging roof is evidence of her extreme poverty. Old things like broken pots further emphasize this point. She sits beside a hand loom. She is in the middle of a conversation with Maduka.)

Oyibada: My brother, the chick continues to cry in the hawk's talons not because it expects a miraculous hand to wrench it out of danger, but simply so that the world would hear its voice. I have only told you this because I shouldn't like it if you heard from another source.

Maduka: Now, what do you expect me to do or say? This is the third time your house is being burgled in one month ...

Oyibada: Three times, and my crops

Maduka: All your crops have been destroyed and you cannot pretend that you do not know by whom. If a woman is not welcome in her husband's place, does she not return to her father's place? Are we so weak that we cannot build you a hut in Umu-udo? Uroko was bed-ridden for more than three years, but we did not ask you to abandon him in his time of trouble. Now that the gods have called him home who are we to question the gods? Have you heard of any woman who committed suicide because she lost her husband?

Oyibada: Uroko was more than a husband ...

Maduka: Do you want his two brothers to confront you face-to-face to know that they have unsheathed their matchets against you?

- Oyibada: *(Weeping)* Uroko! Uroko! When the Iroko falls, the old woman climbs it with ease. Come and see what Mgbedike has done to me! I came to you pure untainted. I came to you without blemish, a virgin. I have suffered and borne you eight children .. eight children! And now I have to face the world without one - not even you, Uroko! Since I came to Ndabo, no evil has stained my bed; the thought of harming even a man's calf has not entered my head; no-one has accused me of any wrong-doing.
- Maduka: I have not come to set off your endless lamentation. I have been sent to tell you that the whole of Umu-udo is unhappy with you. You bring shame on us by your recalcitrance.
- Oyibada: No! No! You are asking me to do what I dare not. How can I be alive and see Uroko's homestead turned into a farm? No! In fact, that white woman I once told you about had offered to resettle me somewhere else outside Ndabo; she and her friends have been very kind to me, bringing me food and clothes. But I don't want to leave Uroko's homestead desolate. No! That will kill me sooner than Mgbedike and his friends. I want to be buried along with my children and Uroko.
- Maduka: Well, I knew you would be this difficult. *(Rising)* I am leaving. If you want to die here, we cannot stop you. *(Attempts to go but stops to look at her in wonder, points at her falling roof)* Look! *(Starts to go.)*
- Oyibada: *(Who has continued her lamentation, now getting up)* Maduka, go in peace. Your concern shows me you are a real brother, but ... Please tell our people to

forgive me, but I cannot leave this place. I cannot bury nine corpses here and hope to find peace elsewhere. (*Maduka exits, shaking his head in sympathy*)
Oyibada! Cursed be the day that brought you into this world of misery.

(*Lights fade to darkness.*)

SCENE THREE

(A village square . Women are gathered, some sitting down, others standing, their babies strapped to their backs. There are women of various ages: old, middle and very young. Yet some more women keep arriving and joining the gathering almost till the end of the scene. Oyibada stands out from the gathering to address them.)

Oyibada: My fellow daughters of Okemba, I greet you. My fellow wives of Ndabo, I thank you for answering my call. As you all know, the sun is setting rapidly on my own future with every blink of the eyelid. A woman who has buried nine corpses cannot hope for any future ...

Oreshu: Oyibada, if you set off on your endless dirge, we will just disperse and leave you here. Go straight to why you called us together.

Enyahuma: Are you the only woman here who has lost all her children? *(A din.)*

Oyibada: Forgive me! Forgive me! *(The din subsides.)* It is just that an unhappy memory is like music. It has a way of pulling the hearer to his feet each time it plays. However, you all know what I've suffered these past months. My house has been burgled so many times this past one month, that I won't be surprised to get home now and find that my bamboo bed is no longer in its place. *(A grave smile plays on her face)* My crops have all been destroyed. I am sure none of you can pretend not to know the culprits, and I am also sure none of you here will pretend not to know what my offence must be.

Oreshu: Shouldn't you have taken this problem to the men instead?

Some voices: Yes! Yes! The vigilante group... The elders... Tell your late husband's brothers... What are you doing here? ... Don't mind her.

Oyibada: Yes, I know. That is, if I were seeking redress. Sorry, what redress does a woman hope to get from men? What I hope and earnestly desire is that a fate like mine does not befall you ... you ... you (*pointing at the younger ones with babies on their backs*) We must rise up as a single body of women and say "No" to this wickedness. Why, is it a crime to be a woman? Why are our husbands not also accused of eating up their children by witchcraft? Why must we be sent back to our paternal villages simply because we are unable to bear children or have lost them?

A woman: (*To her friend*) Is this not abominable talk? Why can't this old hag carry her load by herself? Must she drag us to the mud with her? Mama Ikwueze, I'm going home; my husband must not hear this (*leaves in protest; her friend hesitates, then follows her*).

Enyahuma: (*To a group of women nestled in one corner of the stage*) I think there's sense in what she says but ... (*loud to Oyibada*) what can women do about it? The men would ...

Oyibada: If a woman is forbidden to talk, is she also forbidden to keep quiet?

Oreshu: Oyibada, we hear that your people in Umu-udo sent somebody yesterday to take you home.

- Oyibada: Yes, But the question is no longer Oyibada. The question is "Why is the woman treated with less respect than the man's palm-tree climbing rope? Why are we not worth more than an empty calabash?"
- Enyahunma: Not all women are married to families with the likes of your Mgbedike and Omabe, don't forget, so ...
- Oreshu: I suggest that Oyibada should go back to her people and save her head. It is the tradition. A woman cannot force herself on her late husband's people if she hasn't a son.
- More voices: Yes... Yes... Must we drown with her just because we are women?
- Enyahunma: Quiet! My mothers and sisters, why can't we women ever have a peaceful meeting ... even when our welfare is being discussed? Peace! Tradition! What tradition? Who says what is the tradition? The men, of course. Come to think of it, our menfolk use us like the *udala* fruit which is eaten when fresh and succulent, but only to throw us out when sapped of all the juice? I think I understand what Oyibada is talking about, because I have been a victim of this man-made *tradition* (*stressing the last word derisively*). Why are all our old women, even those fortunate to have surviving children at old age, branded witches. Ochebo Iyija Asadu (*pointing out the woman referred to*) I have been told that when you were married here you were the envy of many women because of your beauty. Why do men now twitch their noses when you pass? Why do they pretend to be searching for fodder in the bush when

you approach? Is it not because of the *cystitis* sustained at your sixth childbirth which has refused to heal? Women of Ndabo, let us give a thought to what Oyibada has to told us.

Oyibada: What else do I have to say, my daughters and mothers. I am satisfied that at least two or three of you understand what I am saying. If I die this moment, I shall have died a contented woman, contented in the thought that one day our women would rise up to assert their humanity. This is the threshold of another life for you.

A woman: *(To her friends)* I suspect this is the result of some strangers who have been visiting her in the company of a white woman. It now appears they do not only bring her gifts of wrappers and things, they also

(The voice of Esato (a masked town crier) is heard off-stage. His metal gong sounds. He repeats his cry. The women panic and start to disappear in different directions.)

Oreshu: Do not run! Let us confront them. This is another design they use to coerce, tyrannize and dehumanize us. Do not run! *(The others go on running and hiding away. The masked spirit enters bearing a matchet. The rest of the women scatter in all direction, except Oyibada, Oreshu and a few others.)*

Oyibada/
Oreshu: Esato Ndabo, we have not seen you! *(Covering their heads with their hands and kneeling down, their backs to the Esato.)* You bumped into us unawares. It is not the intention of your children to look you in the eyes. Esato Ndabo, we have not seen you.

Esato: *(With authority, ignoring their pretended respect).* Women of Ndabo, women of Okemba, why do you want to discover what colour your ear lobes have? Can anything sweet-smelling come out of the anus? Why do you want to undermine the authority of the men who made you women and wives, in whose houses you hide your heads at night. The land of Ndabo has been defiled by this meeting, this unlawful gathering of disobedient wives. No man of Ndabo shall eat any food prepared by any woman who attended this meeting until the woman cleanses the land with the blood of a goat. As for the major culprit, Oyibada, I have instructions to escort you out of the soil of Ndabo immediately. *(Oyibada slumps, lifeless, Oreshu tries to pick her up but the Esato motions for her to stop. The other women flee out of the stage, screaming.)* You are not to leave Ndabo with more than you have on you here. I am Esato Ndabo. All who disobeyed me in the past have paid for their lack of wisdom with their lives.

Oreshu: *(To the Esato. Torn between the instinct to help her fallen friend and obeying the Esato's order.)* She is dead!

Esato: Her body cannot be buried in Ndabo soil. *(Picks a handful of sand and sprays it on the corpse of Oyibada ritualistically, then tries to pick the corpse up. Oreshu raises a dirge in praise of Oyibada. Lights die suddenly.)*

CHINEDU ENE-ORJI*In The Line of Duty*

They have killed my son!" screamed my mother, when she heard the news. This brought our relatives and neighbours hurring into our compound. That was two years ago, when I brought the information home, that Mezie my younger brother had been posted to Sierra Leone. It was well remembered that three soldiers from my hometown, who had gone on similar postings to Liberia did not come back alive. Well, one of them made it back home, but with both legs missing. He died two weeks later. But Mezie survived. Many months passed, then I had news that Mezie was back and had gone to see our parents. I packed my bag immediately and rushed to our hometown. Early next morning, I walked with him down a narrow path through the bush towards the palmgrove. Mezie was just a pace ahead of me. He was looking five years older than his twenty-two. Now a permanent glint, perhaps of determination or of ruthlessness resided in the pith of his eyes. They were not there when he passed out of the Academy. All I saw then was a brash swagger, a young body and face chiselled into ruggedness by months of rigorous training and a pair of starry eyes looking into the bright future.

We got to a crossing. "Turn right," I said. He did. After a while, I asked him to step aside, so that I took the lead, because this portion of the track was tricky. We walked to a ledge where treacherous steps were cut into a rock. I climbed down into the rafia palm grove, carefully, and he came after me. The grove was cool and quiet, save for the chirping of birds, screeching of insects and the white spatter of warm spring water cascading from three meters above. I placed the toilet bag I had been clutching in my armpit on one of the boulders that were strewn around. Mezie chose one of them and sat on it. I sat opposite him.

He unbuttoned the flap of his breast pocket and brought out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to me. I declined. He lit one for himself, inhaled deeply and puffed out thick smoke which spiralled into the air. The smell of tobacco fused with the fragrance of wild flowers to give off an acrid odour. I peered at him through the haze of smoke.

Since I got home, I had refused every offer of cigarette he made to me. But every time, it seemed he took my refusal as a matter of course. I stopped smoking a year ago. Down with Emphysema, I visited my physician who advised that, if I wanted to live a long and happy life, I should quit smoking. I took his advise. So it was a shock when I noticed that Mezie now smoked heavily.

"This place reminds me of a spot in my mission area," he said and looked around warily. Just then, there was a snap and he turned round instinctively, jumpy.

"It's just a monkey," I said reassuringly. A monkey had swung from one branch to another.

"Well, it's this war, you know," he said gravely. He had been giving me snatches of his experience, any time we could steal away from the flood of visitors who came to see him.

"When you've stayed in the dark, humid stomach of the jungle for endless days, with continuous rain, tracking your quarry, sometimes not knowing you have become the stalked, you loose your sense of time. You only perceive space. The heat, the sweat, the din of the forest, the squeaking of a million insects, the calls of birds and animals you cannot see all get at you. The jungle does it. I have had good boys in my platoon and I have lost some."

I looked at him as he paused to take a pull at his cigarette. Here was my younger brother talking about boys and losing them. And most of them were men far older than he was.

"As I was saying, this spot reminds me of an incident when we were trying to flush the rebels out of a village they pillaged and occupied. Out of overzealousness, my boys chased them far, far into the forest, into swampy ground by a river. Three of my soldiers got caught in a patch of quicksand. The rebels who knew their way

around got to the other side safely and scared away my men who wanted to rescue their colleagues, with bullets. So, with the rebels on one side, three of my boys trapped in quicksand and the larger body of my troops on the other side, I was informed via radio. When I got there, the trapped men had sunk to their chests, clutching their rifles over their heads, while the rebels poked fun at them with rifle shots. "In anger, I called our camp and asked for a Puma helicopter gunship. When the chopper came in, strafing the rebel position with machine-gun fire, we threw ropes over to the mired men and pulled them to safety."

"But we were not this lucky all the time. There is nothing as difficult as fighting somebody in his backyard. Sometimes you lose experienced fighters for no fault of theirs nor because of enemy superiority, but because of the quirks of the very people we are protecting."

"How do you mean?" I interjected.

"The rebels go about raping, killing and maiming their own people, even toddlers. Do you know the gut it takes to amputate the limbs of a mere child?" he asked me.

Not knowing what to say, I shrugged. He looked at me momentarily and his eyes seemed to say: "there are many things you do not know and may never know," he closed them. When he opened them he said:

"I have seen the dismembered remains of hundreds of babies; hacked to death with an axe."

"Those rebels are not in their senses," I said. "They must be on drugs."

"Now you are talking. When we kill rebels and search them, you never find any valuable on them, but cocaine and other drugs. It is these same rebels that people aid to fight us. Can you imagine women and children helping rebels to ferry arms and ammunition across road blocks into territories held by our troops? I know a couple of men who have been court martialed because they lost their patience and shot these collaborators. We have lost a lot of men because they had scruples: holding fire to save the lives of

women and children used as human shield by the rebels."

Then his voice rose a notch higher. "Can you imagine that? Fighting vermin by the rules. In two instances, when I have had to give evidence before a court-martial, I told them in no uncertain terms that it was mere hypocrisy trying to fight by the book. After all this was not a conventional war. But it always came back to the same thing: 'International observers were around, conventions had to be obeyed.' Convention my foot!" He stamped his foot on the ground in annoyance.

"Why don't you take your bath first," I suggested.

"Go ahead and take yours, while I smoke another cigarette," he said as he brought out the packet.

I threw off my clothes and stepped under the cascade. Raising my voice, I said with relish:

"I always tell my friends they do not know the luxury of taking a bath in spring water. One of them asked me in bewilderment if it wasn't madness buying bottled spring water to take one's bath with."

"Well, in our mission area taking your bath with mud water is a luxury. Sometimes it is only when you get back to camp that you have what could be called a bath. Then you have the opportunity to pick leeches and ticks off your body." He sucked long at his cigarette and inhaled deeply, blowing a ring into the air. I continued to wash myself.

As I towelled myself, I watched him undress. There were several scars on his body and legs. I did not ask questions. Does anybody ask a woman which pregnancy left a particular stretch mark on her belly? He took his time taking his bath. And he did it like someone who wanted to wash off the scars on his body and mind.

"You didn't come back with any diamond?" I asked with a tinge of disappointment in my voice. "After all, Sierra Leone is a diamond rich country." He smiled wryly and said:

"War: wealth and whine, women and wine."

"What was that?" I asked, wanting him to repeat it. But he

said: "War is a complex business. To help yourself survive, it is better to leave it simple. Just concentrate on killing the enemy and saving your skin."

"I don't understand you."

"Nobody likes war, not when you've been in it. Well, maybe except the gun merchant. After every battle, you take stock, counting loses on both sides. And you see corpses of men you had just shared jokes with, men who had just read letters from their loved ones. Men you had counted."

I felt the bitterness in the voice and tried to empathise. I had never been in a war; but the worst I had seen was a car crash: blood and human appendages littered everywhere.

"No, I did not come back with any diamond. I came back with a lot of diamond-studded stories."

"Okay let us have one of them."

He buckled his belt and looked unseeingly at a chink that penetrated the roof of palm-fronds, as if he was thinking of which story to tell me.

"Ehm, lets see," he said, squinting. "It is only in war that you know the grit with which a man's spirit is built. It is the story of Captain Ibrahim. He was my company commander before he was called back to the Battalion Headquarters as adjutant. He was an officer everybody was proud to be associated with. An officer's officer. I did not just meet him at the mission area, I had always known him here at home. In fact, right at the Academy, where he had graduated as the best all round officer cadet. He was a family man who loved his wife and son dearly.

"Maybe it was the life in the city, away from the terrors of the front. But when you are thousands of kilometers away from home, fighting another people's war, with frayed nerves and all... 'man no be wood you know'.

"He got into a relationship with a local girl. A lot of people thought he would be taking her home when the hostilities come to an end. But you can never tell with human beings. The girl knowing the lie of the land took Captain Ibrahim around. He

peddled his influence a bit and did small racketeering and diamond trading with the Lebanese and Syrian businessmen. Nothing you could call 'big', because that would get him into trouble with the brass hats.

"The week a prominent Lebanese businessman was murdered after he was robbed of a large quantity of diamonds and an equally huge sum of money, in foreign currency, Captain Ibrahim had a swelling on his head. According to him, he sustained it in an accident. And everybody noticed his girl friend was not around. He said she went to Guinea to visit her family who were taking refuge there.

"Several days later, our boys manning a border post sent a signal to Battalion Headquarters. They had arrested a woman who wanted to cross the border with large quantities of diamonds and foreign currency undeclared. She had wanted to sneak across the border but when she was found out, she tried to bulldoze her way through using Captain Ibrahim's name and influence.

"The boys did not budge, but instead sent a signal to Headquarters to check her claims. The snoop intelligence boys intercepted the message and asked them to send her to Headquarters.

"She was a really tough girl. But after two days of interrogation, she broke down and spilled everything. She had informed Captain Ibrahim of the large sum of money and diamonds in the Lebanese's possession. She got to know about it when he contacted her to know if the Captain would be willing to provide him with escort to guide and guard the shipment across the border to Guinea, for export.

"Why and how it happened? I cannot explain. But, that is what war does to men. I do not know if it was stress or greed: trying to make in his own small way what senior officers were doing up there."

"You mean a case of the calf watching the mother cow chew it's cud?"

"Well, maybe. But he fell to the wiles of a woman. I just

don't know. Captain Ibrahim and the girl colluded and killed the man in cold blood. They took away his money and precious stones. Somehow, the girl clubbed Captain Ibrahim to unconsciousness and bolted with their loot. The Captain was arrested and court-martialed.

"He was found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad, with right of appeal. But his appeal came to nothing. As it happened, I had been posted back to the headquarters to assume his office while he was on trial."

"Was he killed eventually?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it a waste of money training officers only to shoot them?" I asked.

"That is the paradox of the goddam exercise!" he said.

"But the law had to take its course."

"And it was my lot to carry out the prescription of the law. It is tough to kill your superior, especially one you had a lot of respect for."

"What! You mean you shot him? Why did you not allow the cannon fodder to do it?" I shouted.

"Look, brother, in the line of duty you do not have a choice, you just do your job," with a smack of rue in his voice. An eerie silence came over us as I absorbed this piece of information. After a while that seemed like eternity, he continued.

"One morning, my commander called me into his office and showed me the confirmation of sentence signed by the Field Commander. He asked me to go and execute it the next day.

"I stumbled out of his office to mine in a state of shock. Throughout that day, I was lost in contemplation. The next day, I gathered six of my trusted soldiers and told them we were conveying Captain Ibrahim to Freetown. I got him out of the guard-room. After paying him compliments, I informed him that he was being transferred to Freetown. He sat in the cab of the truck between the driver and me.

"As we drove on, I thought about the whole war. It was our

duty to kill rebels and we did it without second thoughts. It came naturally. We were trained to kill but not ourselves. It was illegal. A taboo. But now, the same law had prescribed that one of us must go. I did not believe that a man, who had been upright, loyal and dutiful and exemplary should forfeit his life because of just one wrong turn. But the law is supreme. Any way, I would just give the order and the soldiers would do the dirty job.

"About a hundred kilometres from Freetown, I asked the driver to turn off the major road. At this point, the Captain became wary and said:

"Young officer, but this is not the way to Freetown?"

"I know that sir," I said firmly, ordering the driver to stop at a clearing that was shielded from the road by Eucalyptus trees. I ordered the soldiers down from the truck and explained the situation to the now distraught officer and told him that I was only doing my duty. And it dawned on him that the end had come. There is a wide gulf between accepting death with calm and dignity and dying dishonourably.

"After I read out his charges and sentence, he unclasped his wristwatch and pulled off his dog tag and handed them to me."

"Give them and my other belongings to my wife and son. That is an order, Lieutenant," he said with authority.

"Yes sir," I answered.

"And tell them that I love them."

"Then I ordered the men to get prepared to carry out the execution drill. But they did not move. They only stared at me. These were men whose respect, trust and confidence I knew I commanded. But here they were refusing my orders. As I looked at the soldiers and then the officer and back to the soldiers, I knew I was in dire straits"

This must have been the dilemma which Abraham came across in ancient time when faced with the problem of sacrificing Isaac. But man's faith has been whittled away by years of persistent struggle against the vagaries of existence. These men though descendants of Abraham, did not possess such faith as was

required. They had lost faith (even if only momentarily) in the system of things. They were not going to draw their swords (sorry pull their triggers) against their son. And Mezie did not want to be the sacrificial lamb.

"I tried to empathise with the soldiers: they could not understand why they should kill one of their own, their leader, because of some ungrateful foreigners. They had looked at the hypocrisy of the whole war or peace keeping as our superiors would like to call it. And it did not make much meaning to them any more. I knew I had a near mutiny situation in my hands; if I did not handle it properly and with despatch I would be the worse for it. I had been given an order and a superior one from the Field Commander and I had to get it done or my commission would be in jeopardy.

"I rushed back to the truck and snatched a machinegun. I trained its muzzle at my men, covering them effectively and asked them to drop their rifles. They did. Unclasping the flap of my hip holster, I brought out my service pistol. I took aim at the Captain who merely gave me a nod and fired. The shot reported, reverberating unusually loud for its calibre over the clearing and among the trees. The bullet went neatly through his forehead and he dropped dead.

"Immediately the Captain's corpse hit the ground, the soldiers came to themselves. They went back to the truck and got their shovels. As they dug a grave I stared into thin air, dazed. We gave him a decent burial. When the grave was ready, I inserted his charges and sentence into a bottle and dropped it in."

As we walked back home in silence, I knew my younger brother was now a man in every sense of the word. While we dressed up to go out, he pointed to a kit bag and said:

"That is Captain Ibrahim's property." Reaching out into one of the pouches of his bag, he pulled out a gold wristwatch and a silver dog tag.

"I have to deliver them to the Captain's wife and son. This is really going to be a tough assignment," as he looked at the

ceiling in contemplation.

One does not know much about the working of the world or the human thought process, but at that moment, I could swear I knew what Mezie was thinking about. Just then, he looked down and away from me, to hide the tear drops that ran down his cheeks.



NORBERT OYIBO EZE*Bitter Memories
(for my country)*

Never,
never more
I pray,
shall we behold that horizon
where Zombies muge the dreams of stars,
and currents of despotism submerge
the terrains of truth.

Who does not know
what those fifteen years of slavish rule
concealed in her bosom?

Lives glittering like morning star.

In those years,
years of bitter memories
letters howled like a hungry lion over in sun,
guns crackled like thunder,
while swords leaped from their scabbards
and tore the limbs of people
whose pens drip truth,
whose mouths were full of songs of panting freedom

Who does not know
that
Giwa,
Rewane,
Saro-Wiwa,

Kudirat,
and those best-brained soldiers of Ejigbo crash were people stuffed
with plums of wisdom?
Plums which many would like to pluck,
and most, to eat and digest.

Who does not know
what those fifteen years concealed in her bosom?

A tableaux of prodigals
kissing their concubines in the flowing blood
of our screaming brothers,
our angelical brothers.

MAXWELL A. OKOLIE***Exile Unlike Any Other: Assimilation,
Alienation as Themes in African Fiction***

*And the dogs fell silent
as I went in search of a tree
missing in my life
a coelacanth that I had to reach for
in the bowels of primordial darkness.
(Utam si Chikaya)*

That "tree" is the tree of life, the "essence" of being and African reality. It is the soul that animates the body without which the individual is nothing but a mere lifeless mass of flesh, a hybrid without a name! African fiction of the colonial era, whether written in French, English, Spanish or Portuguese is pervaded by a deep feeling of "loss," and inadequacy, a nostalgia for a lost identity, a determined search for a socio-cultural identity in an alien system that sought to negate African culture, civilisation and human relevance. Corollary to this is a great obsession for the African past, values, ancestors and all that had given the continent a meaning before the advent of the white man.

For more than three decades after its emergence, African literature continued to haunt the deep recesses of African childhood for inspiration and popular appeal, exploiting the charm and seduction of an unforgettable past that confers it with originality and patent. So gripping and convincing is the alluring candour of this past that hardly any of the founding voices of African fiction departed from the passion. Very few latter-day African novelists really had time to tackle here-and-now modern societal problems without evasion. And in spite of the general monotony of the subject, African literature entertained it and idolized it, creating the impression that this new literature either

lacked the revolutionary ardour, and literary creativeness acquainted with treating socio-political changes or the type of genius that gave rise to such literatures as English or French.

Many a critic wondered why this fixation? To some, such obsession can only be a sign of lack of inspiration and self-castration, consequence of a long paralysing narcissism whose obvious effect is inspirational atrophy. To others, positively disposed and more optimistic, rediscovering the African past is a step in the right direction, a concrete act of decolonisation and self-redemption. In the alchemy of all the emotions and heartaches that gave rise to African literature there is none so harrowing and more invidiously traumatizing than the nagging feeling of "exile": exile from self-worth and identity, exile from cultural self, from socio-political relevance; exile not only consummated and perpetuated by history and colonisation, but incarnated in the "black skin."

Those who reprimand African literature for obsession with the past are ignorant of this African's socio-historical exile and consequently can hardly imagine the profound psychological importance that the past can hold for him. In a literature created out of painful socio-political circumstances, in the face of a prolonged revolt against alienation, assimilation, enslavement and cultural genocide, rediscovering one's past can be a veritable act of rebirth and end of exile, indeed a resurrection, of the self, a purging of emotions for a persecuted race determined to escape from the contempt of history. It is in this light that the evocation of the past in African literature becomes, each time it occurs, a return to the origins; a reiteration of self-discovery and not a vain repetition. It is a much more deeply crucial quest for the African "Holy Grail," than a mere sentimental act. Colonization and history demeaned the African continent, consigning it into the realms of "darkness" and ignorance; a dark continent with neither culture nor civilisation. And the colonizer felt that the Black mind was a blank canvas on which he could freely embroider the "wonders" of his knowledge and civilization. With his self-assigned "mission" to civilize the Blacks he proceeded to change, to "re-create" them,

inculcating in whatever modes of behaviour he required, having first denied their originality of character. Marc Rombaut could not have been more blunt when he said:

bewildered, emptied of
his very essence, condemned,
chained down in the white
conscience, the Blackman
symbolized hunger, misery, ignorance...¹

and perhaps less than human: This is the crux of the matter. Total «exile» that banishes the African from every aspect of his being. How does one imagine this misery equal to none, the agony of a man "emptied of his very essence" and tethered to the white conscience. All the passion and lyricism inherent in African literature derive from this singular psychological malaise.

Unseen, psychic, sometimes felt and palpable, this exile, unlike the exile in time and space, the physical removal in distance of a person from a fatherland or beloved ones, portrays the African as a non-person. Classified as having no history, no culture, no civilisation, no past, no future, no invention, nothing at all, the African was, by the fiat of the colonizer's caprices, reduced to a nonentity, a mere parasite of a world heritage. Thus inflicted with the full demeaning brunt of history and colonization, this man was mercilessly destituted even to the use of his own name and language, for he was also assumed to lack both the language, the means and the art to articulate the anguish in his heart or to contest the myths and theories that had been freely woven around his person. His mother tongue was a barbarism unacceptable to his colonizers, who therefore contrived to have an identity tailored for him and foisted on him like a straightjacket from which he could hardly escape. Trapped like a prisoner, in this falsified identity, deprived of all the "bearings" that defined his originality, the African

¹Marc Rombaut: *Nouvelle Poesie Negro Africaine*, 1976, Paris, p. 9.

felt all the more the pangs of this surreptitious exile. The colonizer hardly left him any other option, except assimilation or alienation. By assimilation he was expected to imitate and ape western civilisation and codes of character at the expense of his originality. But Aimé Césaire cautions that the man who abandons his culture and civilization and gets completely immersed and swallowed up in another's culture commits "suicide". False identity borrowed or fabricated as a means to gain racial acceptance via assimilation creates alienation, and perhaps a more complex social problem. Deep down, inside the individual, there is always this "longing" for a "nativeland", a haven of self-completeness from which one is exiled, where the real self, the undivided self in its proud originality, suffers no inadequacy, leaving no "emptiness" to fill; no craving, no nostalgia for another life or a lost paradise to regain. It is this furtive feeling of "banishment" from real self-identity, this feeling in a person of "living what he is not" that constitutes the "exiles" that we are talking about in this essay.

In the days of colonisation, assimilation constituted a mimetic strategy of social adaptation, compromise, enabling its practitioner to get a "niche" in the white-dominated society and benefit from certain social and political privileges. The "assimilated" considered himself as part of the ruling elite, shedding most of his culture in order to fit in properly into the class in which he takes refuge by accepting unconditionally the ways and beliefs of the class as a model. The Creoles of the West Indies in the nineteenth century were so assimilated into French culture that even their poetry betrayed no traces of their black origin.

Historically few other peoples have known, lived or suffered this exile in question in the way Africans have, both as a racial group and as individuals. The details belong to the historians, but from the slave trade (that great human haemorrhage and absolute exile) to the scramble for Africa and eventual colonization of the continent, to the time of lonely years as students in Western countries, the African is perhaps the classic example in history of a conditioned victim of one form of exile or another, with its

corollaries of alienation, marginalization, paternalism, segregation, racism and assimilation. Multiform in nature and manifestations the exile we are talking about is most insidious, and yet elusive to define. But its force, its consequences have fervently inspired African writing since the last three decades.

The meeting of Africa and Europe ranks perhaps as the "golden age" of colonial expansion and European political supremacy. But that single event marked Africa indelibly, putting it and its peoples in a socio-cultural dilemma whose far-reaching consequences have continued to haunt the African psyché and the chronicles. It was a meeting of those who owned the world, knowledge, and civilisation with those who had "no history" and nothing at all to justify their existence.

Colonization was therefore a "mission" to make human beings out of them. And as colonization ate deep into the continent, classified its natives, assembled them in its crucible of change, using such strategies as schools, churches, the law, the police, frontier forces, intimidation or cajolery, systematically emptying the indigenes of their real essence and values, force-feeding them with alien notions and values, unfamiliar ideologies and concepts, the African lost grip of his life and universe. Things that had hitherto bound him together with his world, giving sense and importance to his life and society became vilified, ridiculed and methodically swept aside as the remnants of a primitive and barbaric culture. Torn between the rapidly disappearing familiar world, and the imperiously pervading westernisation, the African was no more than a game trapped in a cage in his own land, now strange and "unfamiliar." A bird in a cage, depressed and dreaming of the forest can be likened to this African who, in the face of alien gods to worship, alien values and notions to gobble, a new tongue to learn, new names to answer, new codes of conduct to master, looked a sorry image of a "body without a soul," a tree with no roots! This is the fundamental exile. The systematic emptying of an individual in order to fill him up with values and modes of behaviour other than his, this was the exile in action. No novelist

chronicled the peripeteia of this tragic exile with the same verve and poignancy as Chinua Achebe. Okonkwo's death may perhaps pass for the penalty paid by a man against a heady current of change, but his attempt to halt or derail change are also a manifestation of a profound desire to hold on to the self, to discard the transformative balefulness of alien values susceptible to change not only himself but also his people, bringing them to lose authenticity, and perhaps become a "taxidermist's cultural dummy," of their original self. This "divorce" or alienation of self from its cultural originality in Okonkwo's view, amounts to exile. It is the cutting off of the individual from his roots and cradle, the effacement of the essential landmarks that bring him to recognize himself, feel familiar with it, and coincide with himself. Any attempt at imposing a "cloning civilisation" on the African, leading to an inner-life re-ordering of the individual, achieved by subjecting him to alien attitudes and patterns of behaviour with no logical bearing to his real world simply completed the exile discussed here and the dilemma of its victim.

With colonisation in force, and African education declared void and untenable, European education was prescribed and imposed. Africans found themselves in colonial schools, learning European "ways." The ingenious, indoctrinal potentials of this education was not in doubt as western superiority and genius were eulogized, while the African was made to look no better than an insolvent dullard. Stereotyped for a purpose, his new "education," supposed to white-wash him to a point of acceptability by the colonizer, ended up suppressing his real identity, making him neither African nor really European. To some, the status of "assimilated" African, been-to (in Nigerian jargon) "evolve" (in francophone countries) was sought as a status symbol. To others it proved disastrous because of its capacity to marginalize or alienate the individual.

It is not for nothing that Cheik Hamidou Kane chose

*Ambiguous Adventure*² as title for his most important novel. The ambiguous adventure in question is, of course, the quest for assimilation at the expense of one's authentic identity. Samba Diallo, the protagonist, presents the image of an individual lured far deep into change, therefore, into exile, but who tries to sneak back to his real identity in moments of sober analysis and self-criticism.

At times, confronted by his double choice, on the one hand to absorb a large share of Western values with its transfer of socio-economic and technical know-how, and on the other to remain himself, save his identity and culture, the African shudders to a point of emotional and psychological stupor. For him technology, western knowledge and the need to absorb development of all types subject his sense and desire for authenticity to a hard test, just as the introduction of social and technical models of education and progress insufficiently mastered and poorly applied, pose a great danger to cultural traditions.

Inevitably this model of western "civilisation" proved popular at its inception. Like birds lured into a trap with grains, Africans poured out to colonial schools. And Cheik Hamidou Kane asked: whether what they learned, was as good or worth what they gave up.

In the words of Samba Diallo, the individual gets trapped at the end of his adventure, overwhelmed, ashamed with his experience itself, for, in reality, the expected transformation does never get accomplished; one turns into something else; something without a name. In most cases, the purported metamorphosis just stalls, grinding to a halt, incomplete, leaving the victim in a lurch, a hybrid impasse in which he, not only feels the anguish of being a "strange" nature incapable of incarnating two cultural strains at the same time, but also the opprobrium and futility of such a venture. And in this hybrid state of incomplete transformation, the victim gets installed in a state of exile, being neither himself nor the model he set out to imitate. No other case of alienation can be as pathetic and complete as this.

² Jularid Eds., *Union General*, p. 164.

James Currey appreciates the growth and diversification of African literature of the twentieth century from early negritude poetry to revolt, disenchantment social malaise, novels of realism and conflicts. These forms express African spirit, traditions and aspirations. But the dynamism and ramification of the novel attests to the determination of the African to break away from the spell of exile, to divest himself of all the rags and faces of false identity in order to regain his original self. Simply put, African fiction is the narration of a soul engaged in an odyssey of a sanitizing search for "a way home" to the full reality of "le moi", the self. Self as an individual or self as a racial group. Whatever African literature proposes, whether its social milieu, forests, fauna and flora, whether colonial experiences, exploration of the past, analysis of social customs, myths, superstitions, or beliefs, political struggle or social evils, each and everyone of these items represents an unconscious attempt to purge the African mind of its haunts; to bring it closer to reality and therefore to its lost identity; to recreate a familiar atmosphere, a familiar world and vision of society. It is an attempt to restore the landmarks which will enable the real-self to re-emerge and recollect itself, recognize its "nativeland" and therefore to resurrect. No detail is superfluous in the exercise. The African novelist, aware of his vital role as guide in this search for an end to exile, makes every aspect of African existence, a literary experience. With the patient and tranquil *savoir-faire* of an artisan, he systematically details African ecosystem, values, and forces that influence African destiny. The more he talks about them the more he decolonizes his compatriots, repatriates them from "exile" and re-integrates them appropriately in their true identity. Only in this way can he effect a nullification of exile and the feeling of strangeness that the colonized African felt of himself. It can therefore be said that it is not for fancy or lack of romanesque techniques that most African novelists indulge in filling their works with apparently non-vital details. To the European, without the same need or social and historical experience, this may appear vapid and unprofessional. Has African

literature not been criticized by many a European of lacking depth in plot and characterisation, of being unimaginative in ardour and philosophy. Curiously enough, these lacunas in style and form, unpalatable to western critics are no more than the manifestations by which the African self foils its exile, and responds to originality in its proper "couleur locale"

While colonisation lasted, racism, assimilation, alienation, marginalisation, oppression; each of these attitudes contained in its display a dehumanizing factor which also obliged their target to renounce a part of himself and identity. The African playing a second fiddle to his white master, to please him and by being obsequious and earning a lower wage than he was really worth, lived on "exile" and more so if he was the type whose glances dimmed and retreated into the sockets of a bowed head, each time the master lifted eyes on him.

African writers and Africanists have therefore spared no efforts, not only in the defence and illustration of African cultures and civilisations, but also in encouraging the general passion among Africans to go back to the roots. It is this tropismatic response to the roots which explains widespread African evocation of the past, childhood, ancestors, folktales... etc in literature.

Referring to the African writer in his book Jean-Paul³ Sartre described him as "Black Orpheus." Orpheus, in Greek mythology, was a love-struck husband, who when his wife died, unable to bear the loss, decided to go down to the Hades (land of the Dead) to look for his Eurydice. Beneath this episode lies the significance of a journey which was essentially a quest for identity, a search for completeness. Orpheus was incomplete without Eurydice who gave his life a meaning. Sartre could not have chosen a better metaphor for the African writer. For socio-political and psychological reasons, the African novelist, as Black Orpheus, had to seek and recover his «Eurydice-past-identity» in order to be complete again after the

³ *Orphee Noir* in *Preface to Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et Malagache*, L.S. Senghor, 1948, Paris.

ravages of colonisation. Caught in this dramatic psycho-social reality, Africans had to turn to the past, to the consoling womb of ancestral times, in search not only of a refuge, a grotto of souvenirs, but also a firm-ground on which to re-affirm their personality. So omnipresent is the theme of "Past" in African writing that at times, it appears that the African is incapable of writing anything else. But the frequency of repetition of this subject is clearly a measure of the obsession it is source of. The mind that flees the present, seeking consolation in the affective reminiscences of the past, is a mind out of tune with its present, and the world around. That could be said of the African protest writer's mind of the negritude era. "Perfection," says Mircea Eliade,⁴ lies in the origins. And perfection here means authenticity before colonisation, before the exile! There in the dim lights of the past, in the dusty treasure-holds of ages, lie the wealth and splendour that made the glory and fame of pristine Africa. Reaching out to this past, to embrace and assume it is tantamount to a return from exile, a regaining of self.

Understanding the message and psycho-social aesthetics of this part of African search for identity, its alluring ontological relevance, equates to understanding the incidence of Black Orpheism as well as the emotional perception of the notion of "freedom" and cultural identity in African fiction. Each of these items conjured up from the past, by this systematic psycho-archaeological exploration, becomes a revelation, a rediscovery of a depository of some fraction of the original African self. These depositories "relived", and re-integrated into the conscious; or pieced together, like bits of a puzzle, build up to the lost African personality and identity. As the African recalls them, he re-experiences the sensation of "being," the undivided self. Restoring the past is therefore one sure way of being "de-exiled," and asserting the right to be Black. It is the full knowledge of the Black

⁴ *Mythes, Reves, Mysteres*. Gallimard, Paris, 1957.

man's value that inspired WEB Du Bois' poem:

I am a negro
And I glorify myself with the name
I am proud of the black blood
that runs in my veins.⁵

It was not surprising that most African writers of the negritude era found their hobby-horse in the negritude fervor, talking about Africanness, expressing their black personality without shame or fear, and caring little whether their action pleased the whiteman or not. Obviously the negritude movement and its attendant militancy turned out to be, according to Aimé Césaire,

a simple recognition of the fact
of being a Blackman
the acceptance of that very fact,
of our destiny as Black, of our
history and our culture.⁶

Consequently, coming to grips with this awareness, and building it into the conscious mind, together with its implications was already a step on the road to ending black exile. He that says he is, is bound to be. "Cogito, ego sum," supposes that he that feels himself, thinks himself, and talks about himself can not fail to be recognized as real, and his impact felt. The African of the negritude era, by sheer force of sloganeering and written riposts assailed obdurate colonial consciences and like Prometheus, ravished his freedom and right of existence from his white master.

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois: *Ames Noires*, 1993.

⁶ Aimé Césaire: "Entretien De Juin," 1959.

It was then like a fly in the ointment when Wole Soyinka in his celebrated satire scoffed at a tiger that needed to shout his "tigritude." The Nobel Laureat knows full well that a tiger that ceases to assert its tigritude is as good as dead. The tiger's tigritude is in its action and killer instinct, in its humour, in its savage innate impulses. These acts in a way, are assertions, open revendications of nature. But not given to words like humans, the tiger exhibits these qualities in its daily activities. Action speaks louder than words. One cannot therefore rightly say that the tiger does not show its tigritude. In the same vein, an eagle that does not exhibit and therefore demonstrate its "eagleness" can certainly not be a true eagle. Tigritude, negritude and eagleness are natural qualities which may be exhibited to be appreciated. For years, the whiteman expressed his "whiteness," in literature, analysed it and eternalized it. It is through literature and contact that the whiteman got to be "known" and understood. The Blackman has not erred in or stopped talking about himself in literature, and helping to make himself better understood by those who would otherwise not have cared to. Negritude was perhaps not meant for people like Wole Soyinka to understand, those who had the good fortune to live in a world that did not really know the throes of racism, segregation, assimilation, alienation or marginalisation in the terms, forms and degrees that Aimé Césaire, Langston Hughes, Léopold Senghor, Jacques Roumain or René Maran did. It is not surprising that those who grew up in the serene socio-political advantages of protective Indirect-Rule can ill-conceive the pangs of dehumanisation and injustice that inspired their counterparts marked by efforts to hurl their humanity, and right of existence, at the deaf and hard conscience of colonial oppressors. Assertion of Negritude should therefore be seen not as a futile slogan of political agitator, but an important moment in self-awareness in the struggle to end "exile" in black identity. However not all Blacks, all Negroes experienced the same pride in black identity. In a harsh world of racism and colonisation there were some who chose the motto: "Submit, imitate, and live." They conformed with

assimilation not by choice but more as a strategy to survive in a world where racist supremacy was bent on carrying the day. David Diop⁷ dubbed them "Renegades", for the worst exiles were those whose indoctrination and servile imitation of the "master" had rendered so irredeemable and so insensitive that they even despised their fellow Blacks. Metamorphosed so much by "exile" and used to voluntary servitude, these renegades were no longer Africans or Europeans, but a strange nameless hybrid, perpetually tormented by the feeling of not being two cultures at the same time. Like the bat, they are neither a true bird, a true reptile or a mammal, but example of men in exile, who, having lost everything: self, culture, name, fatherland, pride and honour, live the moral and physical desolation of a race without a homeland..

But assimilation leads to alienation with its concomitant social problems. Samba Diallo's death in *Adventure Ambigue* is a welcome death that he would have willingly given himself by suicide in order to end his absurd, hybrid status of an "incomplete metamorphosis," an alienation unlike any other. What African fiction proclaims with mature conscience and all the linguistic acrobacy it could muster is the unconditional return of the African to his identity, the immediate termination of assimilation, alienation and therefore, of exile, for indeed he has "sojourned a thousand years in this country of exile, groaning and maturing under the weight of demons..."

The exile is first of all an affliction; its disconcerting tendency affects the entire person, but more enervating is the feeling of "absence" from self, of want and inadequacy that it engenders in its victim. Unable to compose with this nagging

⁷ C.F. David Diop in *Coups de Pilon (Presence Africaine, 1973)*, p. 38 also in C.F. Sow "Ou sont-ils donc allés?" in *Negritude, Black Poetry*, Wilfred Carley, New York, 1970. p. 24. Leon Laeau, one of such victims, laments in *Musique Negre*, 1931. Port-au-Prince, p. 5. - "Do you feel this anguish and despair unlike any other, of taming with words from France, this heart of mine that I inherited from Senegal."

feeling, and unwilling to accept it as a way of life, the African fought to vomit it out of his system:

*to spit out on the (colonizer) his hatred, his genius, his beauty, his revolt, his life, his love, resurrecting the man that had been killed in him, unveiling his true face, flagrantly human, imbued with blood and sunshine*⁸

And the more he emptied the "whitism" in his veins, in his culture, in his attitudes, the more he discovered the way back to his roots. All the blandishments, forces, propagandist antics, indoctrination and brainwashing from the colonizer's repertory were insufficient to hold him blindfolded in the dungeon of identity exile. The years of "black and proud" of "black power" and agitations for political independence supplanted years of subservience and obsequiousness. Earlier on, African exile had been wrought through assimilation and a system of education which represented the western world as model of power, knowledge, land of salvation, indeed Canaan! Young Africans at school dreamed frenzily to escape to Paris, London or New York. The disequilibrium of mind, body, social perception and environment perpetrated through white education and colonial media, gave rise to a generation of young Africans, ill-adapted to their proper social medium. The West was the sunshine of the world, the rest of cultures and civilisations simply waited for its rays, warmth, and recognition.

It took writers like Bernard Dadié; *Un Nègre à Paris*¹ to break the spell. With all his brio as a master story-teller, his cynical humour of an amused satirist, he demythifies the myth that portrays the Western countries as "Paradise" on earth. This, however, has not stopped completely assimilation, alienation and ambiguous identity prototypes in Africa. And how can this be when

⁸ Marc Rombaut, 1976, Op. cit. p. 15.

the countrysides are daily emptied of their youths flocking to the towns, when cities rise up everyday, celebrating foreign culture and values and trampling upon our revered traditions. How can traditional values be preserved and made to blossom when the alienation of the elite class, the invasion of Americanisms and Westernisation assail the conscience and resistance of the average African elite? Although colonisation has ceased, but exiling tendencies, coupled with general predilection to westernisation, have continued to create divided identity for the African, thus driving him into a socio-psychological state of perpetual conflict injurious to his dreams and aspirations of progress.

Not all Blacks suffered in the same way, at a great cost to their dignity and colour, to adapt to assimilation or alienation. Many, like floatsams, began a life of errance and social mimetism, which, in the long run either destroyed them or enabled them, like Medza,⁹ to discover in a hard way that

The real tragedy of the African is that of a man abandoned to himself in a world that does not belong to him, a world he did not make or help to construct.¹⁰

This is the exile we are talking about in a world whose familiar, social, and cultural milestones have been uprooted, obliterated. But the ability to recognize this exile, circumscribe its poignant impression of emptiness, and "absence" inimical to the person, already constitutes an important measure against it. Any attempt to rationalize, travesty, or mask of non-person of adulterated authenticity is unacceptable. All in all, African fiction gave itself as task to narrate the African in his myriad aspects, strip him of all the traces of contamination, tearing away all travesty, all masks, all imperfections that exclude him from assuming full control of his

⁹ Hero of Mongo Betis *Mission Terminée*, Eds Buche and Chastel.

¹⁰ *Mission Terminée* p. 219.

identity. In doing this African fiction reconstructed the African universe in its virtues and vices, presented the "homo africanus," in his heroism and humiliations, his glories and failures, restored his courage and belief in himself and inspired him with a smile of triumph and pride which permit him, like Achilles in Iliade to proclaim to the world:

Do you not see what man I am;
Tall and splendid;
born of an illustrious father,
and an immortal mother.¹¹

In short he is restored to his identity and personality. And with this new-found self-awareness and dignity born out of identity regained and exile overturned, the African proceeded to demand his socio-political independence in the early sixties, bringing to an end assimilation, alienation, and marginalisation... etc in their extreme colonial connotations. It was a worthy revolution, that re-engaged the geniuses and energies of Black Orpheuses. For Chinua Achebe, and his likes:

Here is an adequate revolution for me to espouse, to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes (exile) of years of denigration and self-abandonment.¹²

This revolution gave back to the African not only his proper identity and heritage but exorcised him of all complexes and obsessions, re-affirmed belief in himself and his capabilities, bringing to a final end, exile - the absence" of man from his true identity.

¹¹ See Pierre de Boisdeffre, in *Les Ecrivains de la Nuit*, 1973, Eds. Plon,

¹² *The Novelist as a Teacher in African Writers*, Nigeria, 1963, p. 3.

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UGOCHI NNEKA IFEJIKA***Living a Mirage***

- Mr. Emeka Ndukalia
Mrs. Ijeoma Ndukalia : His wife
Mr. Clement Ogbu : Bank Manager of Merchant Bank of Africa (MBA).
Mkpumkpu : Money lender.
Junior} : Children of Mr. and Mrs.
Adaku} : Ndukalia.
Chimdi} : House boy of Mr. and Mrs. Ndukalia.
Okorie :
First Gentleman
Second Gentleman
First Neighbour
Second Neighbour

ACT I
SCENE I

(It is late afternoon as Mr. and Mrs. Ndukalia arrive at their well-furnished and cosy home. They are full of smiles as they recount the day's activities in their living room).

IJEOMA: *(Removing some of the gold jewellery adorning her body)*
Darling, you have really done me proud today. The coronation ceremony was perfect, and all eyes were on you as you took those graceful dance steps of yours. In short, you were wonderful.

EMEKA: Ije, my dear, you flatter me in so many ways. Really, I must have been so engrossed with the rhythm of drums and flute that I didn't even notice all those eyes gazing at me. I must have been transported with the music. All the same. I am glad you enjoyed yourself and welcome the chieftaincy title too. You seemed so sceptical at first.

IJEOMA: *(Hesitates)* Well, not really that I objected to your being given a chieftaincy title in your village. I mean, you have done so much in the village these past months and it is now usual in Igboland that a man is recognised in his hometown according to his achievements.

EMEKA: Then, tell me what exactly was the problem?

IJEOMA: Emmy, the issue is that I have been worried about the bank loan you took early this year. Remember, this is the first week of September and you haven't really made any turnover. Are you sure we are going to be able to pay the bank at this rate and you even used your construction company as collateral.

- EMEKA: Is that your fear? Have you begun to doubt me? Don't worry, I am equal to the task. At least I know that I have become a household name in this part of the country and other parts. Even if the worst comes to the worst I should be credit worthy. Moreover, I have submitted my proposal for the Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) contract and I don't think the two other proposers are any match for me.
- IJEOMA: Darling, that contract is not secured yet. Don't forget that you could lose your company to the bank if you are not able to pay back the ten million naira, plus the interest that it will accrue. You have pumped in a lot of money into this chieftaincy title, bought two very expensive cars just to grace the occasion.
- EMEKA: (*Flaring up*) What are you trying to say in essence?
- IJEOMA: (*Trying to explain*) I mean all these things could have waited until you have made proper investments with the bank loan. I mean it's ...
- EMEKA: (*Cuts in*) All right that's enough of that. I am the man here and know my responsibilities, right? I have not had any need of more than one brain bearing my financial accounts. When I do, I will consult a second brain. But for now I don't think it is necessary (*gets up and leaves the living room*).
- IJEOMA: (*Shrugs*) Well, he knows better (*gets up and begins to arrange the cushion headrest and handrest, as Adaku rushes into the living room startling her*).
- ADAKU: (*Shouting in excitement*) Mummy, mummy, guess

what? Daddy just promised me a trip to America after my exams to spend the long vacation. He said the trip is going to be my birthday gift from him this year. He also said he would get my visa and ticket ready before then, so I could go with Aunty Rita and her kids when they are travelling next month. I will also be doing my birthday shopping over there.

IJEOMA: That sounds quite interesting. That would be your best birthday gift in a long time. So make sure you impress Daddy and make him proud with a good result, so he wouldn't have to change his mind. Okay.

ADAKU: Yes mummy, I will try my best.

IJEOMA: That's my good girl. Give mummy a big hug and a kiss. *(She does so)* Now run off and join Junior and Chimdi at the dinner table. *(Looks lovingly at her as she skips off with so much energy into the other room.)*
(Lights fade).

ACT I
SCENE 2

(The next morning, Mrs. Ndukalia is in the Kitchen preparing breakfast for her husband as he walks into the kitchen, all dressed up ready to leave for work).

EMEKA: *(Still adjusting his tie)* Sweetheart, I think you should forget about my breakfast, because I am leaving immediatly and I'm almost late.

IJEOMA: *(Surprised)* Aah! Why so early? It's just a few minutes to eight and you don't usually leave this early for the office. You should eat something no matter how small.

EMEKA: I can't even afford a second for the breakfast. I got a phone call this morning from Fred to tell me that the PTF Chairman would be flying in from Abuja this morning for a business appointment with him here in Port Harcourt. I want to use this opportunity to have a word or two with him about the contract I am interested in, just in case there is something to follow up *(about to leave the kitchen)*

IJEOMA: *(Stops him at the door before he leaves)* Darling, I wish you all the best of luck.

EMEKA: Thanks, sweetheart, I have my lucky stars with me. *(Gives her a peck on the forehead before leaving).*

(Lights fade).

ACT I
SCENE 3

(Later that day in the evening Mr. Ndukalia returns home after a very hectic day in the office. He is looking very ruffled and worn-out. His topmost shirt buttons are open, his tie loose and drawn to one side, his shirt tail showing over his trousers at one or two places. His children rush to welcome him as he enters the living room).

JUNIOR, ADAKU, AND CHIMDI: Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!!! Welcome back *(They tug at him from different sides as he slumps into a cushion chair tired. Junior takes his briefcase).*

EMEKA: Hello kids. How was school today? You look full of energy today. What is the secret?

JUNIOR: *(Talking excitedly)* Mummy gave us a treat today. We went swimming at the Sports Club. We also went to the amusement park and we had a lot of goodies to eat afterwards.

ADAKU AND CHIMDI: *(Both trying to speak at the same time)* Yes, Daddy, we...

IJEOMA: *(Comes out from the inner room and cuts in)* Welcome back, dear. *(To the kids)* All right, enough of the chattering kids. You can see your father is just returning from work and is worn out. You can all keep your story till later when he has got out of his work clothes and had something to eat. *(To her husband)* Darling, don't you think so.

EMEKA: *(To the children as he gets up from the chair)* Yes kids, I think your mother is right. You will tell me all about it later. For now, let me have a word with

mummy, okay. *(They begin to leave. He gives each of them a peck on the cheek).*

IJEOMA: *(To her husband)* So, how did it go today, did we have luck on our side.

EMEKA: Well, I would say that we are making a headway. I spoke with the PTF Chairman about the contract proposal, but he did not really give me any assurance on that.

IJEOMA: *(Getting impatient).* Then, what did he have to say.

EMEKA: He didn't really give me anything you could call an answer. I guess he was just being diplomatic about the whole thing. I can remember he mentioned my bidding being the highest, though, of course, it is the quality of work that they will be looking at. That was all, really but all hope is not lost, although we have little or no time left to pay the bank loan.

IJEOMA: *(Suddenly gets very frightened)* God, what are we going to do if things don't work out right. Emmy, I am getting so frightened.

EMEKA: *(Draws her to him)* Don't worry sweetheart, all will be well.

IJEOMA: *(Suddenly gets an idea)* Darling, I was just thinking. Don't you think it would be wise for us to cut down on some of our expenses. Adaku's trip to America next month for instance will not be necessary. You could give her some other birthday gift, instead of spending so much on ticket and every other thing involved. I mean, we could at least be a little bit

more economical. She could still travel some other time when things improve.

EMEKA: You know I have promised her, and I can't go back on my words. All the other students in her school, most of her friends travel often, so why shouldn't she. I mean, I don't think things are that bad.

IJEOMA: Darling, I understand, but sentiments will do us little good just now. If you can't afford it right now, you might as well forget it. Anybody can say what he or she wishes to say. I don't think you owe anybody any explanation for not sending your child overseas for vacation. Remember, she is to do her birthday shopping when she gets there. The expenses will be too much at this time for us.

EMEKA: *(Suddenly raises his voice)* I don't care what it takes. Adaku is going to travel next month and I definitely will not start living like a church rat in order to save.

IJEOMA: *(In a low tone)* What if you don't get that contract? Have you ever thought about it?

EMEKA: Even if it will take the last drop of my blood, I must get that contract. It is a do or die affair.

(Lights fade)

ACT II
SCENE 4

(Two months later, second week in December, Mr. Ndukalia is in his living room thinking aloud)

EMEKA: God, all my hopes have come crashing like dreams. I was so sure that I wouldn't lose that contract. How am I going to pay the bank back now? I have to think of a solution fast before it is too late. *(Suddenly the door bell rings and startles him. He hesitates a little before going to open the door)* Hello, Goodmorning.

MR CLEMENT OGBU: Goodmorning. Is this Mr Ndukalia's residence?

EMEKA: Yes, can I help you. I am Mr Ndukalia.

Mr. Ogbu: *(Comes in and sits down)* I am Mr. Clement Ogbu, you must remember branch manager at Merchant Bank of Africa. I came to remind you that the bank loan you took will be due for payment next week with your 21% interest for one year. If you fail to pay up by next week, the bank automatically takes up your company which you staked as collateral.

EMEKA: *(His voice becomes shaky)* Mr. Ogbu I plead with you to give me some time. If you could give me up till next year, please.

Mr. Ogbu: Mr. Ndukalia, business is business. I cannot go against the bank's rules and regulations. Besides, I warned you about the consequences of not paying back at the agreed time. Next week is the deadline, nothing more, nothing less. Goodbye Mr. Ndukalia

(Stands up and starts for the door).

EMEKA: *(Getting hysterical as he rushes to him)* Wait Mr. Ogbu, please wait. Let's come to terms. *(Ogbu doesn't respond as he leaves and closes the door behind him)* Oh! my God, what have I done to myself.

(Light fades).

ACT 1
SCENE 5

(Two weeks later, Mr. and Mrs. Ndukalia are in their dining room, eating lunch.)

IJEOMA: Darling, now that things are the way they are, there's no need crying over spilled milk, because what has happened has happened.

EMEKA: *(Getting irritated)* So, are you saying that I am supposed to be celebrating the loss of my company?

IJEOMA: No dear, I haven't said that, have I?

EMEKA: Then, what are you saying?

IJEOMA: I just wanted to say that we should start thinking of how to restructure our lives and cut our coats according to our size.

EMEKA: How do you mean?

IJEOMA: I want to suggest that the children be withdrawn from the private schools they are attending and be enrolled in a less expensive school. Junior, for instance, could be enrolled in a Federal Secondary School and Adaku and Chimdi could be sent to the primary school down the street. You know that with the look of things we have to change our lifestyle, since we can no longer meet up.

EMEKA: Look, Ijeoma, I cannot see myself washing my dirty linen in public. I am not going to give anybody the impression that I lost my company to the bank because I couldn't pay the loan I took. Instead, I would simply make them believe that I just got tired of running the company and decided to close it for something better.

- IJEOMA: But, for how long will you keep up the make believe? Surely, one day everything will come to the open. Emmy, you have to realise that we don't owe our lives to anybody.
- EMEKA: For how long I decide to conceal it is my business and I don't want you either to go about telling people our predicament in order to solicit their sympathy. I have set a standard in this town and I will definitely not step down and my children will not leave the private schools they are attending for any backward public school.
- IJEOMA: (*Getting desperate*) What of me, Emmy? I am a qualified lawyer. Don't you think it is time I got a job and helped out with the running of this home. I am wasting away sitting in this house day in day out.
- EMEKA: Impossible. My wife will not work under any man. I don't need you to do any work other than looking after my children. If you must do any work apart from that I can open a boutique for you when I have enough money.
- IJEOMA: Okay, you don't want me to work for selfish reason, but you do not have a certain means of income. So, how are we to keep up?
- EMEKA: Somehow, we will.
- IJEOMA: You have to start thinking of getting another job. With your qualification as an engineer you can still get at your hands on something. We have to face the hard fact, knowing things can never be the same. Even if they will, they will take some time to build up.
- EMEKA: You want to know how I am going to do it. I have an

idea in mind. I would go this evening to Mkpumkpu.

You know he is into money lending. I will go to him with the two cars I bought during my chieftaincy title, drop them with him and collect some money which I plan to put into a business that a friend introduced me to. The business has to do with import and export and it will bring a lot of money.

IJEOMA: Emmy, you have started again with all these businesses that you are not sure of. Have you thought about this business before agreeing to jump into it? I don't think that borrowing from a money lender is a wise decision. I suppose that human beings learn from their mistakes and try to better themselves and not to get into worse trouble.

EMEKA: I know the business is genuine and even if it were not, the issue is to make money and nothing else. Once the business matures after a period of six months, I will go to Mkpumkpu and collect my two cars and even pay my interests comfortably without any stress.

IJEOMA: It sounds so easy to you, doesn't it?

EMEKA: It will be different this time because I will shoot and I won't miss. Have you forgotten my title OMEKANNAYA. (*Beating his chest*) I am the true son of my father.

(*Lights fade*)

ACT I
SCENE 6

(Six months later at Mkpumkpu's residence. Mr. Ndukalia is in the living room waiting as Mkpumkpu comes out to meet him, dressed in a long Kaftan flowing down to his ankles.)

MKPUMKPU: Goodday Mr. Ndukalia. Long time no see. Any news for me?

EMEKA: Not really Mr. Mkpumkpu, but we need to talk.

MKPUMKPU: All right (*Getting up*) Let me get some drinks for us to wet our throats.

EMEKA: No, don't bother for drinks now.

MKPUMKPU: (*Sitting down again*) Now, tell me what really is the problem? Has something gone wrong?

EMEKA: Yes, actually the problem is that the business I collected money from you to do was a failure. I didn't even make half the money that I invested in it.

MKPUMKPU: So Mr. Ndukalia what do you want me to do about it? I don't see how that affects me in anyway.

EMEKA: I am not saying that I am not going to pay you back the money. I know our understanding is to pay at the end of six months. I have come to see if you would accept part payment, to pay the rest by the end of the year. I want to retrieve one car now and the other after I have completed the payment.

MKPUMKPU: (*Laughs sadistically*) Aren't you a wise man, Mr. Ndukalia? You think the business I am doing here is child's play? Just forget about your two cars if you do not have the money, the ten percent monthly interest.

EMEKA: (*Pleading*) Please, Mkpumkpu consider my terms. Don't be so hard on me.

MKPUMKPU: Look gentleman, this is beyond negotiation. I won't be taking a part payment from you. We reached an agreement and signed it, now it is irreversible. My word is my bond.

EMEKA: Please, consider, I have a family to take care of.

MKPUMKPU: (*Getting up*) Please, my young man, will you be so kind as to leave my house? I believe you must have thought about your having a family before coming for a loan (*Showing him to the door*) It's been nice talking with you, Mr. Ndukalia. (*He leaves Mkpumkpu's house with his head bowed down*)

(*Lights fade*).

ACT 1
SCENE 7

(It's a cool afternoon, Mr. Ndukalia is sitting in his living room with a bottle of whisky on the centre table and a glass of whisky in his hand as the door bell rings. His houseboy runs out and goes to open the door.)

FIRST

GENTLEMAN: Good day, boy. Is this Mr. Ndukalia's house?

OKORIE: Yes sir. You wan see am?

SECOND

GENTLEMAN: Yes, it is important that we see him immediately.

EMEKA: *(Overhears their conversation and goes to the door still holding his glass of whisky).* Yes, gentleman is there problem here? Can I be of any help to you?

OKORIE: Oga, these men say they wan see you, quick-quick.

EMEKA: Thank you Okorie you can go inside now. *(Okorie leaves the scene).*

FIRST

GENTLEMAN: *(Showing his identity card)* I and my colleague are from the State CID. You are to come with us immediately to the station; you are under arrest.

EMEKA: Wait a minute, what are you talking about? What exactly do you mean? What am I being charged with?

SECOND

GENTLEMAN: My dear young man, you may wish to reserve your questions for the DPO at the station. But if you

must know, we have information that you are involved in import and export of hard drugs.

EMEKA: *(Exclaimed)* Good gracious! Look gentleman, I have always done clean business. I have never put my hands in anything dirty.

SECOND

GENTLEMAN: Are you coming with us to the station, Mr. Ndukalia or do we have to take you by force?

EMEKA: *(Starts going towards the telephone in the living room, drops his glass of whisky on the side table)* If you insist, I have to call my lawyer first before I go anywhere with you.

FIRST

GENTLEMAN: *(Walks up to him)* I am sorry Sir, we do not have the time for that. You can make any call you want at the station when you get there. *(Both gentlemen start to drag him out as he tries to resist, shouting protests.)*

EMEKA: *(Shouting)* Leave me alone you barbarians! You will have yourselves to blame when you realise who you are messing around with. *(Still struggling)* Let me go now! *(Neighbours enter. Mrs. Ndukalia who is just coming in from the market drops her shopping bags and starts shouting hysterically.)*

IJEOMA: *(Shouting)* Where are you taking my husband? What has he done?

FIRST

GENTLEMAN: Take it easy Mrs. Ndukalia. There is no need getting yourself all worked up. Your husband is a suspect for

drug trafficking. You can come with us to the station if you need further information. For now we cannot waste a moment longer because time is not on our side. *(They drag Mr. Ndukalia out of the house).*

IJEOMA: *(Shouting after them from the door as they leave)* Bring my husband back for me, you hooligans! *(Falls down on the ground and starts weeping and talking at the same time as the neighbours gather around her in the living room consoling her)*

FIRST

NEIGHBOUR: Take it easy, Mrs. Ndukalia. It will be all right. It's not the end of the world.

IJEOMA: No! No!! Oh my God, I knew it was going to come to this. I warned Emeka, but he wouldn't heed; now he has got himself into trouble because he wants to remain a man of the people. *(Still sobbing)* Who do I turn to now? How am I going to explain this? What am I to tell my children? That we have been living a mirage *(Sobs till lights fade).*

AYODEJI OLAYEMI

Dancer of the Fleeting Scenes

Dancer from the realm of fleeting scenes
Dancing quietly, into the foreground of a dream
coming in softly

 coming in subtly

coming with a flourish

 your meander, carries a curious meaning...

Again, you're a Shapely Silhouette

 twirling into the twilight

 bestowing your radiance across the lonesome plains

A Wily Temptress

 treading the innocent waters

 bestirring their weiling depths to surge in lusty waves

Again, you're an Avian Goddess

 flashing your festive feathers in full display

 flaunting your plumage

 Your supple waist

 Your flowing grace...

Playful Minstrel

 weaving amid the crowd of cheering reeds

 your entrance

 like a spritely flower

 brings its unfurling promise

Who are you... Nightly Brilliance, shimmering and a starry troupe

If I met you, and let my eyes caress you

And tasted the warmth of your promise

 will you be true?

answering constantly

 answering faithfully

answering-
 you appear and beckon to me
And like whirlwind gods
 working up a wild and dusty blur
We become at last triumphant
 over all the earthen laws
Sweeping through motion
 stepping together
 turning as one
Like the free faring flock
Their piercing cry, carrying far and continuing on
 spirit and rhythm
 a gushing stream of sweet music
The whole world spins with us
 as we turn
in the heightening spiral of our joy.

And so I still hold on to my dream
Even after the empty awakening
Egret Princess, when you venture from me
venturing
 and then returning
venturing
 but always returning
Over the sea...
 and beyond the hills
Our forever bond, is the flock of freedom
Returning...
 to the theatre of our love
Then come follow our dance, in the ring, and in the round!
Come away with us, to the depths of our dancing trance!
For the dancer's art, is the lovers art
 is the birds' lofty art
And the dancer's heart, is the dreaming heart
 flapping with yearning for flight
And eagerly, skipping into the fields
 we find ourselves again

For indeed, our pride and our own power
for us...
is in when we play.



FIDELIS U. OKORO*From the Bowels of Beelzebub*

As Janet's eyes darted from one side of the large church auditorium to the other, she knew immediately she had arrived at the right place. It was the fourth church she was attending in four weeks, and it was likely she was going to stay. The Sunday before at Christ's Love Tabernacle, one of the new churches in Ozadakon Island, she had arrived ten minutes before the sermon but was so disappointed at what she saw that she had left without listening to it. The church was full of girls, just a few young men some younger than her by many years. It was one of such churches her father once described as the modern day church of boys and girls. As the pastor stepped up to the pulpit, she stepped out of the church.

Here at Christ's Wonderland International, there was a world of a difference. From the spacious parking lot to the glistening pulpit where the energetic, bespectacled pastor stood, everything looked simply wonderful to her. There were no less than fifty cars in the packing lot and nearly all of them were new. The flowers in the well-trimmed garden were exotic; some of them looked so beautiful she thought they were artificial, but she was in such a hurry to see the sort of people in the church that she couldn't go closer to confirm it. Inside the church, she sat in the last row as usual. She saw the eyes darting in her direction as soon as she raised her head from the quick prayer that followed the entrance of late comers. She noticed the auditorium exhumed with spirituality, with its beautifully painted walls and ornamented ceiling. It was cool in spite of the blaring speakers. It was orderly in spite of the large number. She was quick to notice that the pastor was handsome. She had come to know that all the pastors in Ozadakon new-generation churches were handsome. But this one was exceptionally so with his mesmerizing moustache, rounded

smooth chin, sparkling white jacket and shiny gold buttons. She leant sideways almost immediately to the woman sitting on her right and asked his name.

"Pastor Paulson"

"Is he married?"

The woman looked into Janet's eyes before returning a reluctant No. Janet swallowed hard.

At the male side of the church were no less than sixty men, the age of whom were by her rating all right. A number had a bunch of keys in their hands or beside their seats. Only one or two had a young baby by his side. Janet swallowed again, then relaxed and began to listen to the sermon.

The discovery of God and his love in the churches of Ozadakon was the most powerful thing in the life of Janet, and it was a discovery that now occupied a front row in her being. But it had not always been so. Seven years before, she would have laughed at any of her friends who took church affairs seriously. Brought up as a church-conscious Christian, pretty Janet recognized the power in her beauty too early in life to give any Christian precept serious thought. She nevertheless understood her father's knighthood and her mother's headship of the Christian Mothers as indicative of a strong Christian background. And so she didn't have to think twice when a column in a form required her to fill in her religion. But that was the farthest it went. She could stand up from the family night prayers to write replies to the several love letters she got in the day; and she could walk away from the morning prayers, school books under her arms, into a boy's room down the street. She mastered the art of not getting pregnant as early as when she was fourteen and so did she her parents' demeanour, knowing what to say or do when they were around to assure them she was a good girl. And she had such an innocent look and tone only very few did not think her so. Moreover, she had only the forty eight hours of the weekend to play the good girl. Janet's parents were as neck-deep in their church activities as they

were in their separate businesses which took them away to distant places most of the weekday. Whenever they returned, however, they made sure the children got enough corporal punishment and verbal discipline for any misdemeanour reported by the children against one another. Weekends were the most fearful time for the children, and consequently, they were best behaved then.

In her university days, she was known about the campus as a brilliant dancer and a mimer of pop songs. She was most popular at the end of the session during departmental send-off parties of graduating students. That she was going to perform at a show meant that the show was going to be well attended. Her beauty and her talents were more inviting than invitation cards. She was so beautiful no girl ever invited her to her birthday party, for Janet would definitely become the cynosure, defeating the whole purpose of a birthday party for such a girl. In spite of her popularity outside, all her room mates knew her for her quick temper and sharp finger nails and feared her for them. She could pick a quarrel on a trivial issue and would scratch anybody mercilessly. She studied laboriously, but was cautious to do so only when the examination was a few days away. She avoided anything she did not enjoy or did it sparingly when she had to. Most times she read her pop magazines and sang the latest songs to the delight of any room mate with whom she was on good terms; or otherwise made them envious by waking up early and trying one flashy dress after another before finally picking one when they were all gone and walking into class or away from it. Her religious room mates hardly prayed in her presence for she would explode into wild laughter as soon as they went down on their knees. She was so irreligious that seeing religious people made her guilty, and in her guilt she made fun of them. Her happiest moments were when a girl who came into the room looking religious began to pray less frequently, began to apply rub lipstick, began to put on trousers, and finally began to receive male visitors. The fall of a religious person made her own ways the more natural.

The high point of any party she attended was the wee-hours of the morning when the drunken men began to fight over her. It made her feel very important. With broken heads and bleeding jaws about the hall for her sake, she often felt like the only surviving exotic specie in the last conservatory of beautiful women.

Only one of the men succeeded in taking her home, sometimes a bystander who did not join in the fight. She enjoyed also the chagrin of the girls whose boy friends got injured fighting over her.

Such girls never spoke to her or spoke good of her many days after. But she did not care a straw about that. While some might think her too cheap for her beauty, Janet was actually very philosophical about man-woman relationship. Experience gathered over the years had taught her that sticking to one man or doing so for a long time would bring down her worth in the eyes of such a man. And so she always left a man when his love for her was at its apogee. The freedom she had to walk into and out of relationships was too precious to exchange for bondage to a man for a little longer than a few weeks after a given party. And men were always there; she was never in want of admirers ready to give whatever she demanded. She wore the best dresses, donned the best hairstyles, and sometimes, when Dr Zade and Prof David took her class in any course, she also had the best of grades. She had discovered that men were like big children. One could get children to do anything by opening one's palm and making them see a packet of biscuit. And they could do more if one was cautious not to give them plenty at a time. For the fun of it, one could let them see the packet, but then raise it up. Then they would jump and beg and sulk, and would continue that way as long as one's hand was up. Sometimes she would just sit down somewhere pretending to be reading, then with the corners of her eyes she would watch as men swarmed around her doing silly things to attract her attention or to please her, then she would think of her Big Children Theory, and smile. Many of them boasted vociferously. Others laughed extra mirthfully, even at what might not be a convincing joke. At the flimsiest of excuses, one of them would begin to quarrel with

another, usually a weaker one, then begin to fight him, then to beat him mercilessly, just to let her see how strong he was. She would just keep her eyes on her books in spite of the hullabaloo. She knew where they were heading. Men always made a detour. When he thought he had proved his worth enough, one of them would come up to her, fully perfumed, sometimes licking or having just licked a sweet smelling confectionary, and begin to commend one thing or another about her. All of them would make a show of speaking well, pronouncing or mispronouncing English words to match her skill. They usually started by asking what she was reading, then began to make a brilliant attempt to show they had read it or knew everything about the course for which it was meant, and without her asking for it, they would embark on an energetic explanation of everything they knew. She would just sit quietly with a shy countenance, sometimes throwing in a smile or a frown to which they reacted appropriately. After running around the tree for some minutes, hours sometimes, peeping into every branch, he would lay his hands on the trunk and make a bold attempt to reach for the boughs, most times with hands trembling and lips quivering. At this point, she would explode into laughter, multiplying his misery exceedingly. She would not directly ask any to leave her, but after sizing a man up, she would know whether to continue to watch his game or to say or do something that would make him put his hands down and leave, sulkily.

Janet's life was padded from birth onwards. Her father was rich enough to send the entire family to America on holiday on occasion. And from America, they usually came back with new accents, new things or new ways of doing old things. Being the first of such a well-to-do family of three girls and two boys, she usually came back to the university with more money than some of her professors were paid in two months. But the money she got from men, most of whom were poorer than her parents, or boys, most of whose university education she could comfortably sponsor, had the taste that her parents' money did not. Sometimes she genuinely wondered whether men were not a little extra lavish in

the way they doled out money to her. But that did not stop her from asking for more. She did not have the worries that bothered most girls in the university. Not even the marriage of her younger sister yet to gain admission into the university, nor the scramble that left only two other of her female classmates unmarried in their final year made her lose a wink of sleep. She knew a beautiful girl could always get married. She was, however, worried that some of her classmates who were poor students were adding the responsibilities of marriage to the burden of their studies. How could Helen cope with econometrics with her pregnancy? How would a dull girl like Angela manage with macroeconomics with her having to go home to her husband every weekend? Her worry soon gave way to pity, as she saw their perpetually gloomy faces or overheard their bitter complaints about the troubles of life, by which they meant the troubles of the combination. She swore that if any desperate suitor came her way, she would certainly tell him to wait till she had got her degree. Fortunately, she didn't have to tell anyone.

Her third class degree did not bother her either. She was certain a job was waiting for her somewhere in the private sector where she had sworn to work. And it was. She was interviewed in six places after her National Youths Service and was offered employment in the last, Natkons Ventures, an importing and exporting outfit, where the interview panelists had other considerations than the ability to answer questions correctly. She was employed as a personal assistant to the director, a position created on her entry into the company. The young, single director, Nathaniel Akonkwe, promised rapid promotions if she did her work well, and this she solemnly promised to do.

Work was tough sometimes especially when goods just arrived at the port or were about to leave it. The strategic position of the company in the heart of the populous island brought it close to a ready market when goods arrived, but it was not always easy getting agricultural products from the hinterland to the port for export. While Janet's work was mainly in the office, the tension of

work at the two extremes of exporting and importing was high enough to make her think she was not enjoying her job. But the thought of accompanying the director on a local or international conference after those difficult days was good enough to make her stay. The bonuses for such trips were usually big enough to draw a genuine smile from her. Moreover, between the tough days, workers in the company had good times attending weddings, organizing birthday parties or child naming ceremonies. Mr Akonkwe himself, though a strong-willed, hardworking, business man, was not unwilling once in a while to hold a party for his employees. He was as dedicated to his money as he was to their happiness. And for that, many workers put in their best and wished him well. Six years after working in the company, Janet had more than a smile on her face. She had one of the most furnished of flats in the city, and she drove one of the most flashy of cars in the company, a car second only to that of the director. Like all other female employees, Janet couldn't help developing a soft spot for the personable director to whom she was close both officially, going by her job, and unofficially, going by her affection.

It was in her seventh year working in Natkons Ventures that Janet looked about her and discovered for the first time that something was missing very badly in her life. At thirty and three years of age, a streak of wrinkle had already appeared on her forehead. She knew a second was on its way in six months time unless a cure for wrinkles was discovered before then. She also discovered that Nathaniel was giving more than directorial attention to Jennifer, a young graduate recently employed by the company; and that while she was still the director's personal assistant, it was Jennifer who now did all the personal duties and made all the journeys previously assigned to her. She lost a wink of sleep, then a minute, then a full hour. That Nathaniel who was so protectively fond of her would begin to feel uneasy in her presence was evidence that the world itself was turning upside down. Her initial reaction was shock. When she recovered, she walked up to her full-length wall-mirror for a thorough scrutiny.

Apart from the unsightly line on her forehead that became more obvious when she had a frown on her face, the mirror revealed little else of a change in her. She was still extremely beautiful. She was still fair and smart. She was not too tall for a woman. Her chest was still very full, even without enhancements. Her nose was still exquisitely pointed even when seen from afar. She was neither plump nor lean, somewhere in between. Her neck was still very slender, without being longish. Her eyes were still sharp and small, twinkling when she was happy. Her hair was still ebony black, and so were her eye lashes and eyebrows. Her voice was still sonorous even when she talked. And her steps and carriage were no less graceful than in her university days. Her most recent pictures actually showed there was a flavour to her beauty that was not there before, confirming what Nathaniel himself used to tell her: true beauty matured with the years. She heaved a sigh that was between relief and horror. Nathaniel was the first man she ever was friendly with for as long as six years and was the first to put her aside in preference to another woman. At first she thought it was just a break over the quarrel they had over promotion at which he claimed her nail cut his hand. But when she attempted to be friendly to other male employees before his eyes and discovered he didn't mind at all, she knew it was all over between them. Her anger soon gave way to a sudden realization that she needed to be married as soon as possible.

All the men who crossed her path after Nathaniel's exit were confronted with one irrevocable, non-negotiable condition: marriage or nothing. And on this condition all of them to one would smile, or laugh, or wince, after which they turned away and never returned. She changed tactics. She took all such men into her car and took them to her flat to have a look at her residence. She made a few take a glimpse at her bank account by "carelessly" leaving her bank note on the centre table while preparing for them a lavish meal. One or two got to know she had shares in one or two banks and that she had an investment overseas. But all of them on her singular condition turned around and walked out into

vacuum into which she looked with desperate trepidation.

She started making friends with many ladies who were in the same boat with her. Many of them had well-thought out ideas about how to attract and entrap husbands and suggested them to her. Anthonia suggested she could organize a lavish birthday party at which most guests would be men, and say it was her twenty-fourth; but the last Janet so celebrated was her twenty-seventh and many in the city attended it. Juliana suggested she could become pregnant by a man and threaten to sue him to court if he did not marry her; Janet told her to try it first. Agnes denounced the whole idea of marriage and suggested a single parent family; but that did not appeal to her. She got tired of listening to suggestions even when her ears were always open to more.

It was by accident one Tuesday evening, while listening to her now favourite radio programme "Women's Angle", that she stumbled on a most fortuitous of facts: Men, no matter how badly they lived, when they want to marry, head for the church to find the holiest of girls. Janet's heart glowed at this discovery. She headed for the market the following day and bought a large-sized, gold-rimmed Bible complete with a concordance and cross-references. She put her jeans trousers into her portmanteau and bought seven colorful gowns and seven headties. She put aside her blushers and lipsticks, and used only face powder and eye pencil. She locked up her rock and roll and rhythm and blues, and bought six gospel C.D's whose lyrics she learnt. The following Sunday, with the Bible under her arm, and one of the songs on her lips, she walked into the first church, God's Gift Mission International.

The dearth of men in the church that day made it a dull place for her. She hardly joined in the singing, just clapping once in a while. And whereas others danced towards the offertory box, she simply walked up to it, dropped a note and quickly went back to her seat. The sermon was good, but the elderly pastor's many grammatical slips distracted her a lot. Everything else was normal until the congregation began to speak in tongues. She looked from one face to an other. Everyone spoke in tongues except her. At

first she was amused by what seemed to her like oral gymnastics but she soon began to feel odd. Years ago she had overheard students' groups speaking in tongues in their classroom meetings, but this was the first time she came close to any who did. The variety and tempo with which the different persons spoke were thrilling to listen to and she couldn't help opening her eyes and looking from one mouth to another. She became curious. Even though she wasn't sure of coming back to the church, she walked up to the pastor after service and asked for explanation. Speaking in tongues, the pastor said, was a gift of the holy spirit. It was the language of heavenly beings and only they and the person who spoke it could understand it. Any who got filled with the holy spirit would speak in tongues. It could not be taught. One should begin by repenting of one's sins and giving one's life to Christ. Then one should close one's eyes and think deeply of God and heavenly conditions. One would then speak naturally in a tongue previously unknown to one. Janet knew in the instant she must get filled with the holy spirit and that she must speak in tongues.

The following Sunday at Eternal Faith World Outreach, she closed her eyes and thought deeply of God and heavenly things. She thought of them so hard she had pains in her forehead. Then she started praying aloud. But her words were English words. Annoyed, she fell silent. She did not wait for the end of the sermon before leaving. But she knew she must speak in tongues if that meant holiness.

All through that Sunday night Janet was restless. She repeated the process many times over but she could speak in no strange tongue. She confessed her sins to God and promised to do nothing but good. But no unknown utterance. She pledged to give a huge sum to the poor and another to the pastor. But no new language. Exasperated, she lay still, thinking neither of heaven nor of heavenly things. It was in this state about an hour later that an idea struck her. She jumped out of bed, headed for her book shelf, took out a book and began to read it avidly. It was a book she last read in her first year in junior secondary school. Before dawn she

had read it through twice.

That Sunday at Christ's Wonderland International was very special for her. Not only was she in the right place but she was complete for the first time since she started attending churches. She was gay and lively. Her Amen was one of the loudest as the young pastor prayed. She sang like a nightingale in May and swayed like a tree branch in March. To make her offering she danced with the others to the front and took some time to bring out a bundle from her purse to put into the box, then danced back to her seat, hands in the air, waving. Then she waited. Not long after the offering, the pastor happily announced that that Sunday was his birthday. The congregation gave him a standing ovation for two minutes. Smiling broadly, he told them that when he was in the world, he used to spend whole days celebrating. But now the work of the Lord had to be given priority. He was making to continue with the rest of the sermon when one of his deputies walked up to the pulpit and asked to be allowed to speak to the congregation. In a very inspiring tone he told the congregation God should be given special thanks for preserving Pastor Paulson for another year. The way Satan had fought against him because of the progress of his ministry in helping many lives, it was due to God's special blessings that he was still living. As a blessed congregation, therefore, it was necessary to show God their gratitude with special songs, special adoration, and special offering. The piano started playing almost immediately and the congregation began to sing, then filed out slowly towards the now empty offertory box. This came right out of the blues for Janet, but she managed to take a note along as she joined the thankful file to the front.

The rest of the sermon was short, but enjoyable. Pastor Paulson was most jocular as he scampered from one part of the pulpit to the other. He was sooner praying and waving his free hand in the air. Some in the front row stood up and started praying

silently. One or two behind them did the same. Before long everyone was praying silently. The tempo rose gradually to a crescendo. One or two started speaking in tongues even before the Pastor began. Janet was caught unawares. She stood up quickly, closed her eyes tight, raised her head up facing the ceiling. In a flash, her clear sonorous voice was heard above others:

"Va a ta place, ouvre la porte, ouvre la fenetre, c'est un banc, c'est une maison, c'est une tableau noir, elle est edudiante, ill est etudiant, Monsieu Mayaki est tres riche, est tres vieux, est tres grand, est tres Monsieur Magaki, Mayakakaka, mayakukuku marasarataka, donne moi un bonbon, donne-moi des oranges, donne-moi un pantalon, va _ ta place derriere l'arbre, va _ ta place a c _ t _ de la maison, va _ tas place devant le professeur..."

The bell had chimed more than twice and others were becoming quiet. But Janet spoke on, not knowing the meaning of the bell. She waved excitedly in the air making the woman beside her move away inch by inch. The whole congregation was now attentive to her without appearing to be doing so. One or two opened their eyes and looked at her. Another pair murmured to each other. Three or four joined. Before long the whole congregation was murmuring. As the murmur rose, Janet spoke louder:

"... repondez s'il vous plait a cote de la maison, repondez s'il vous plait, derriere l'arbre, repondez s'il vous plait devant le professeur, venez ici, venez ici, vient ici, voyonotokotoko vramirisikataka, tres bien, tres bien bon a mi, serikotoko, horikotoko, vorimakataka...."

The pastor waved at the murmuring congregation.

"Praise the Lord!"

"Alleluya!"

Janet stopped abruptly

"Praiise the Loooord!"

"Alleluya"

"Amen?"

"Amen."

"Many years ago when I got my calling, the Lord appeared to me in a vision. And when I say he appeared to me, I mean in the same way as we see in posters and paintings. Yes, I saw the Lord. Amen?"

"Amen".

"Many things he said that day still ring in my ears six years after. But one of them is bubbling on my mind now. The Lord spoke: 'Paulson, Paulson, I am sending you now as my agent to fight against the demons, to shame the demons, and to demolish the demons'. Amen?"

"Amen"

"For many years now, Pastor Paulson has been doing just that. None has come here and gone away with his problems. Many demonized persons have come to Wonderland and all to one had gone away shouting 'Alleluya'

"Amen"

"Aleluya!"

"Amen!"

"The Lord is good"

"Amen!"

"He is good"

"Amen"

"He is marvelous"

"Amen."

"He is gracious"

"Amen"

"Amen?"

"Amen"

The loudspeakers boomed. The echoes resounded as the pastor paused and looked intently at the congregation from side to side. Intense silence descended on the congregation. One could hear his neighbour's heartbeat. Pastor Paulson closed his eyes, stretched his left hand towards the left wing of the church. All eyes followed the slow but sure movement of the hand. As it stopped, he spoke, solemnity in every word:

"The Lord telleth me someone on this side of the church has a problem with the demons".

Emotion rose high through the hall, passing through people's hearts like hot liquid. It always did in expectation of a miracle.

"This person has had this problem for close to three years now, concealed but not from the Lord. Yes behold this is the day of salvation. This is the day the Lord has made. 'Come thou forward' is the utterance of the Lord. 'Come thou forward and take your deliverance.'"

The pastor opened his eyes briefly. None had yet come up. He wiped his glimmering face with his handkerchief and cleaned the corners of his mouth, then closed his eyes again.

"Come thou..."

Janet hadn't seen this side of the sermon before and so looked on with great interest while still savouring her debut at speaking in tongues. She was sure she did marvelously well, having stumbled at no words at all. The thought of integrating into the mainstream of the church was a real thrill for her. No longer was she going to stand out as odd, whispering when others shouted, gloomy when others were happy. She did not understand most of what she said, but that did not detract from her joy. She was sure God understood her predicament and must have made excuses for her. Perhaps, later the real one would come, and come easier and more rhythmically like that of the pastor. She had already looked at the choir stand more than twice and imagined herself behind the microphone one day, melting hearts with her rare talent. Then she'd be sure...

"The Lord said: Feare thou not. I'm with you.' So come forward. Take your deliverance from those dark devils called demons. They disturb you in the night I know, and give you bad dreams I know, and whisper in your ears what you never heard before. Come forward right away and take your deliverance."

He opened his eyes again. None had come forward. The silence was becoming embarrassing. In the past people usually

came out as soon as the holy spirit had directed the pastor to them. Today, the pastor had spoken for close to three minutes but none had come out. He whipped his handkerchief out of his pocket waved three of his lieutenant in Janet's direction then began to wipe his face. They approached and asked her to move to the pastor.

"What for?" she asked.

"To be delivered."

"Delivered? To whom?"

"Not 'to.' From the demons."

"What?" Janet was incredulous. "You gotta be kidding!"

They put their hands on her shoulders and shoved her out of the pew.

"Take your dirty hands off me, you swine!" she shouted.

They dragged her to the front.

"I say leave me alone!"

"It's for your good."

"This is your golden opportunity."

"The demons are wicked. Comply now."

By now Janet was in front of the pulpit.

"Pastor I ain't got no demon."

"Yes, the demons pretend to be angels of light, I am aware! But the man of God is never deceived. The man of God knows the true tongue, and the one that rolls out from the bowels of Beelzebub."

"I said I ain't got no demon."

But the more she swore, the more they were convinced the demons spoke through her. The men held her tightly as the pastor approached. Murmuring filled the auditorium. Some wondered at the wickedness of the demons. Others wondered at their picking only beautiful women. One or two said the pastor shouldn't be forcing unwilling horses to drink. Three or four said it was love on his part to do so. Now at the edge of the pulpit, the pastor, eyes shut, raised his right hand to place on her forehead. Janet struggled free, then punched and scratched the men and they let

her go. The pastor missed a step and came down the last step almost on her. In a flash, she brought down her ten finger nails on his cheeks and scratched them badly. The pastor's spectacles fell. He dropped the microphone and scampered backwards shouting.

"Jesus, Jesus! Beelzebub, Beelzebub!"

Many in the front row repeated after him as the three men came back to struggle with Janet. Some who hadn't heard the name Beelzebub before asked that it help them in the situation, thinking it was another name for God. For a number, the encounter was their first observed literal battle between the forces of good and the powers of darkness. Janet swore it was their mothers and grandmothers who had demons, then turned and ran towards the front door. The women raised alarm and ran to the sides. One or two younger men headed for the windows. Using a handkerchief to wipe his bleeding face, the pastor stood at the left end binding Janet in Jesus name. Out in the garage, Janet discovered she didn't have her keys and charged back to her former seat. In a stampede the congregation started running out through every available opening. The children whimpered. Their mothers wailed. Their fathers picked sticks from outside and went to their rescue. As soon as Janet had picked up her keys, she drove off at a terrible speed, cursing pastor, congregation and Wonderland.

CHINYERE NGONEBU**Book Review**

AUTHOR: J. Nwachukwu-Agbada

TITLE: Love Strokes and Other Stories, 94 pp

PUBLISHER: Barloz Publishers, Benin, 1998

Nwachukwu-Agbada's *Love Strokes and Other Stories*, his first short story collection, features twelve "scintillating capsules of human existence...." Spanning diverse ethnic regions, socio-political periods, and human conditions, the book becomes a journey of exploration and exposition. The stories present life as lived by the ordinary citizens. Apart from the first story in the collection "From Dinner to Despair" and the story "The Trial of a Leopard", the remaining ten stories centre on modern day situations in the country - especially of the squalid type. We are taken through the nooks and crannies of society, the seamy sides of life, the habitual night prowlers, the dupes, the robbers, the usurpers, and many other crude realities of existence. The good are there too, but are mainly flat characters, easily outwitted and villified by the more daring unscrupulous elements.

Love Strokes and Other Stories brings up lots of surprises in the activities and experiences of the protagonists. Hence, turning up surprises is one constant feature of this collection. From the first to the last story, the reader is jolted out of his expectations by the sudden and unexpected twists of events. A dinner which the lame Nduka hopes will promote him before the white man evolves into a

treacherous plot in "From Dinner to Despair." In "The Second Denial", Sidi turns down her old lover only to be raped and dumped by the new found heartthrob. Dinta unknowingly shoots his only son instead of the sought-for leopard in "The Trail of a Leopard." A woman throws away Mallam Sariki's entire life saving thinking it was just a small dirty pillow; and the inveterate liar of "The Twisted Tongue" gets the shock of his life.

One technique which heightens the surprise in these stories is irony. The ironical turn of events in most of the stories is masterfully contrived to achieve a surprising outcome. Some examples are "Money Yab Man" and "The Twisted Tongue". Bola ("Money Yab Man") who goes on a rendezvous behind his wife's back gets more than he ever bargained for. Nelson ("The Twisted Tongue") forges a telegram on the death of his mother in order to get a week's casual leave to attend a concert in Lagos with his girlfriend, Angy. When he is told that his mother died on the exact date he had Angy send the false telegram, Nelson is dazed:

Nelson went limp. Shock waves coursed down his entire frame. It was like an electrocution. His thoughts could not form for a useful recall. But he remembered soon enough that it was yesterday he had asked Angy to send the ill-fated telegram in the name of David, his elder brother (p. 34).

Angy had previously warned Nelson against making such a plan:

"No! No! Nelly, it's not good. Your mother is alive and you're talking about death. I mean it's a bad plan. No one jokes with death" (p. 32).

But Nelson had summarily dismissed her:

"That's superstition, Angy," he said smoothly, "it is for our grandfathers". (p. 32).

In "The Small Dirty Pillow," another ironical situation occurs. Mallam Sariki is about to throw out the woman's child from the train and his fellow passengers plead:

Don't let the child pay for what he does not know about, please Mallam. Mallam, please forget about the pillow. We shall buy you a bigger, newer pillow, for after all the lost one is small and dirty (p. 26).

The passengers' plea infuriates Mallam Sariki more:

Their comments jarred in his ears. Rather than assuage him, they angered him the more. Who was their definition of small and dirty? How did a big thing look like? Mighty as the Wase Rock from where a month ago he had driven down a herd of twenty full-sized cattle to the south? To say that a pillow containing many thousands of naira was small, and dirty too, was too much for the mallam to bear (p. 26).

Humour is another feature in this collection. The author contrives the narratives in such a way that, even in the midst of sullen events, the reader is moved by the subtle humour that seeps through to the surface. Apart from endowing a light-hearted mien to the texts, humour is used to convey a sense of hopeful restoration of humanness in seemingly hopeless situations. The reader, for instance, will not fail to smile at the incident where grandfather sends a twenty-page letter to his son requesting for a motorcycle and how the two-day-old motorcycle is quickly stolen from him by an unscrupulous man in the guise of a good Samaritan; or, when Mbazigwe ("Midnight Figure") shoots a carved statue dumped at his house thinking that it was his rival Odokra.

Agbada conveys his tales in a compact, closely knit structure. There is no verbosity or superfluity, either in description or in

language use. The stories are short and straightforward, the language clear specific, and concrete. Yet, the author conveys his meanings beautifully. Consider the beauty of this passage that fully portrays the satisfaction of Mallam Sariki on successfully selling off his cattle in the South ("The Small Dirty Pillow"):

With the free hand, he began to wave to the *mama-put* woman who had loaded his plate with a heap of boiled rice and beans. He was waving at those people who had thought a moment ago he would not succeed in catching the train. He was waving at Umuahia, his customer-town where he was always relieved of his animal goods (p. 24).

The following passage equally shows aptness of description:

The Mallam could not finish the question on his mind before he noticed the wheels of the train beginning to glide rhythmically away like the legs of a millipede in motion. He took the last scoop, filling every space in his mouth. Then he gathered his small dirty pillow and a short walking-stick and started running after the huge iron snake (p. 23).

The lucidity of the author's descriptions can also be seen in "Midnight Figure":

Now the two men were staring at each other, realising for the first time how powerless they had become. Odokra, short and sturdy, was as stunned as a quarrelsome housewife whose only weapon - her flippant mouth - had suddenly been slapped shut by her husband. Mbazigwe on his own resembled a masquerade who had unexpectedly lost his mask (p. 67).

These passages leave strong impressions on the readers' minds and they make the author's task of expressing himself less burdensome because they are picturesque and evocative. The author's language is so forcible and compelling that there is definitely no overt attempt for him to tell, to explicate further. The language simply casts the reader into the scenes and leaves him to interpret events and situations as he wills.

It seems that in the attempt to shorten the stories and tighten the language, the author leaves the conclusions of many of the stories open-ended. The reader in this way is given the opportunity to be involved in the resolution of the conflicts of each story and the opportunity to let his/her imagination wander at will with regards to the eventual outcome of each event. In "The Probing Eyes," does Naomi's husband shoot Prospero? What eventually happens to Mallam Sariki's Pillow and the irate woman's child of "The Small Dirty Pillow"? Is the land tussle ever settled in "Midnight Figure"? These questions and many others keep the reader musing over Agbada's stories. In this way, they extend the reader's experience of the tales beyond the texts even after he/she has dropped the book. However, it does not in any way reduce the literary impact or quality of the collection. The Open-ended conclusion is a style Agbada seems to have mastered to his advantage.

Over and above the themes of deceit and betrayal we see in this text, lie hints of regeneration and restoration. The underlying messages that emanate from these tales is that love conquers all things and, that for peace to be restored to our broken lives and societies, love must be allowed to prevail. This is why the woman in the train gets into trouble because she fails to love a fellow human being ("The Small Dirty Pillow"). Other difficulties the protagonists find themselves arise from failures to love genuinely and be loved: Bola's infidelity ("Money Yab Man") leads to blindness and shame; Prospero's lust ("The Probing Eyes") lands him into the den of Naomi's dare-devil husband; Nwokoro's greed and deceit ("The White Man's Head") brings about the destruction of his home and

belongings, etc.

So, as the author writes in the Foreword, *Love Strokes and Other Stories*, "is the various faces and phases of love, and sometimes their opposite, for it is obvious that when love flees from a space in the human heart hate takes over." It is, therefore, the various dimensions of this 'hate' that *Love Strokes...* captures most adroitly.



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