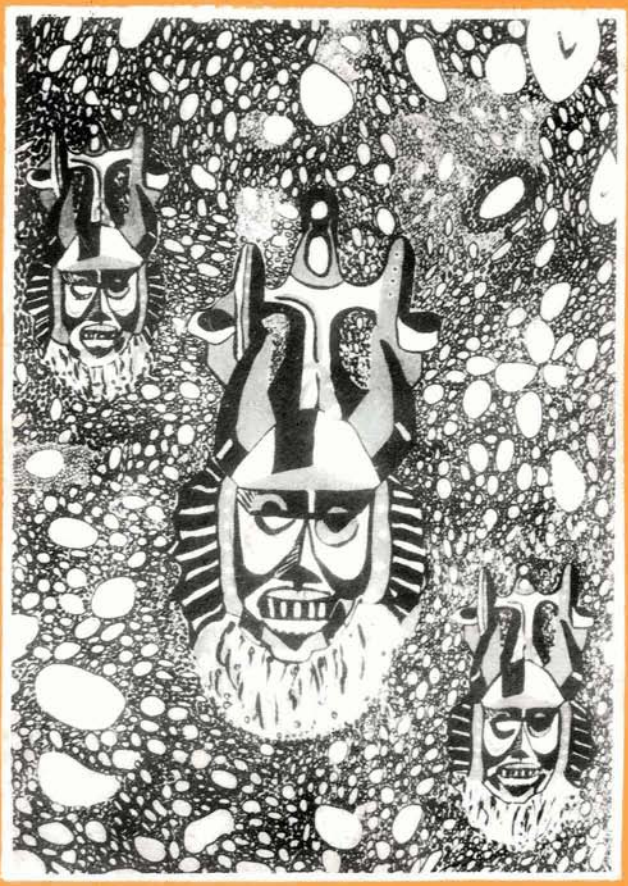
Okike

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



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O K I K E

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To our Subscribers, Contributors, and Readers

Okike Management regrets that it has not been able to maintain its publication schedule over the past few years, and has decided to complete the series up to October 2000 with *Okike* Number 46. The series will resume with Number 47, to be dated February 2003. Please, bear with us.

GINIKA ENEKWE

Life

Life is like crossing a dark deep blue sea
to fetch a fortune.

Life is as sweet as honey
and as bitter as gall.

Cross it without grudges.
without a frown,
for as fortune drops on your freezed palm,
a smile shall return to the lips.

When it is sweet,
don't be a peacock.
When bitter, manage
for tomorrow's sun
might wear a big smile.

Making Decisions

To decide
is like sinking mama in a river
and leaving baby on the shore.

To decide
is to trample weeds
and leave disturbed plants to grow.

To decide
is to hurt others and please oneself
or the other way round.

To decide
is to meditate
and make situations just and fair.

To decide
is to forego a lot
and forget the past.

To decide
is to sit down,
think and weigh.

To decide
is to stop being a goat
but to see the colours as they are.

DON BURNESS

Satara Sky at Night
(for Jose Bacelar)

nowhere have I seen
a night sky like this
the vast South African sky
dances its batuque
flashes of illumination
as if all the paradise flycatchers
and all the malachite kingfishers
and all the lilac breasted rollers
the most beautiful birds
were turned into stars
and galaxies of parrots
bedazzle the imagination.

ONWUCHEKWA JEMIE

Lament for Nigeria

And so they
gunned Murtala Mohammed down
on the dusty street
the last bright hope of his generation

So little common sense
So much greed
So little sense of common good

And the more
you chop the nation into pieces
the more
pieces they clamour for:

We want our own state
our very own little state
Give us this day our little state
right here in our backyard. . .

next to the village latrine . . .

What is wrong with Nigeria?

Then arose a new breed of vultures
called CONTRACTORS

with their henchmen entrenched in office
robbing the public treasury
delivering nothing
ex-never-do-wells
drop-outs from engineering schools
ex-politicians
ex-professors
ex-private and permanent secretaries
picking the carcass of the body politic
their with their hordes
of wards--
their ex-school girl lovers
with their
BOTTOM POWER
nicknamed UPE
because unable to pass exams
yet they fly to London twice a month
for their "contract"
their
CASH MADAMS
with fat asses
gaudied in lace and gold
and their three thousand naira loincloth
which they nicknamed
OIL BOOM
since they think it will
last forever. . .
And the newspaper headline said:

400 NIGERIANS REFUSE TO COME HOME

(stupid idiots who hate their country, etc.)

So they offered me a job--
after holding my application for 30 months
But at the Ministry in Lagos they said:

WE CAN'T FIND YOUR FILE!

But. . .

WE CAN'T FIND YOUR FILE!
WE CAN'T FIND YOUR FILE!
WE CAN'T FIND YOUR FILE!

Two days
of this famous song
known to everybody
who ever applied for anything
anywhere in Nigeria:

WE CAN'T FIND YOUR FILE!

Next day
I gave the fellow
₦2.00--
and they found my file. . .

Set fire to Coal Camp
Burn Surulere to the ground--
Cities unplanned
except for the railway line
with two level crossings
dividing the shantytown
from the GRA
a colonial barricade
that remains unchanged
like so many things colonial
Every new part of town is like the old:
first they clear the bushes and build the houses
then they discover there are no streets
there are no pedestrian sidewalks

there are no parks
no playgrounds
none of those healthy open spaces
which our fathers
planned
into their villages
for a thousand of years
All the land was shared out
among those with the right connections
And beggars mob you in the street
and refuse rots in the street
and scum breeds in the clogged open drains
the smell of shit is all over the place, my friend
the city is one vast sewer

Just wait, just wait, you JJC
Just wait three months
You will throw banana peels in the gutter
Like everyone else. . .

What is wrong with Nigeria?

And the national motto?

WHY WORK ON THE JOB
WHEN YOU CAN JUST SIT ON THE JOB?

Then there was the story of the secondary school teacher
(highly exaggerated, no doubt)
imported all the way from Philippines.
For three years she lived out her contract
drew her salary
but taught no classes--
because the school building
was never finished.

NIGERIA?

Nigeria is a state of mind
for which a name has not yet been invented!

A nation without shame,
Nigerians import everything
from airplanes
to toothpicks
they start with first class toothpicks
and when their treasury runs low
they switch to
second class toothpicks
And all the while they cry
FOREIGN EXCHANGE!
FOREIGN EXCHANGE!
First they invented UDOJI
to share out the oil money
which they thought would last forever

Money for hand
back for ground,
said the buxom young girl
reflecting the national
spirit

(So much for "the missionary position")

And the national motto?

WHY DO TODAY
WHAT YOU CAN DELAY TILL TOMORROW?

Whenever a child
wakes up it's morning to him
says the proverb
But Nigeria is in a deep coma

incompetence, irresponsibility,
dereliction of duty,
sloth--

Nigerians will give you
seven excuses for every failure
And at Lagos airport
the loudspeaker said:

THE FLIGHT TO PORT HARCOURT HAS BEEN CANCELLED BECAUSE OF SUNSET

The ignorant passengers
looked at one another in amazement

Repeat:

THE FLIGHT TO PORT HARCOURT, etc.

An explosion
(of laughter, don't you worry)
rocked the hall.

(As someone is said to have said,
Something new is always coming out of Africa. . .)

Then they said they wanted
a new national anthem
an anthem composed by a child of the soil
And they held a competition
and synthesized
five best entries
no better than the original
doggerel

They did not ask Sonny Okosun
Victor Uwaifo

Area Scatter
or Nico Mbarga to compose the music
They did not steal a tune from Nelly Uchendu
or the Lijadu Sisters
nor from Obey, Osadebe, Fela or Ade
They borrowed nothing
from the rich mines of the villages
of Kuru and Kaura Namoda--
It's the same sour British march--
with bongos added!

And the national motto?

WHY WORRY?

WHY HURRY?

COME TOMORROW!

Mbonu Ojike said:

BOYCOTT ALL BOYCOTTABLES!

But that was in the 1940s
when the fever of nationalism
was high
Ojike's slogan
did not become
the

NATIONAL MOTTO

with all the usual fanfare—
but you can't feed
a nation
with one cassava patch in Item Okpi
nor with praise songs from the Ikengas

And daily the newspapers
drip with

inane headlines:

- GROSS INDISCIPLINE IN NIGERIA CAUSES GREAT CONCERN
- RULERS ADVISED TO SHOW EXAMPLE
- JOURNALISTS URGED TO UNITE
- STUDENTS TOLD TO BE MATURE
- CHAPLAIN HARPS ON DEDICATION TO WORK
- COMMITTEE CALLS FOR LOYALTY

Meanwhile, at the universities
scholars deliver lectures
today,
imported junk
tomorrow—
American junk
which Vietnamese rejected
(says one cartoonist)
has become
the stumbling block
of Nigerian economy

WHAT IS WRONG WITH NIGERIA?

Nigerians love big words
like
INFRASTRUCTURE
They love to
TALK
about
DEVELOPMENT—
But they shun hardwork
and worship the short term
They follow the line
of least resistance
and quick
profit

Nigerian policy makers
are obsessed
with education
which they think
is the solution
whereas, my friends,
factories and farms
are much more urgently needed
by the nation

Nigerians boast of VISION but practise something else
proudly declaring that Nigeria has
NO IDEOLOGY
except of course
the NEO-COLONIAL IDEOLOGY
which makes us
the raw material estate of the Western world
& its profitable dumping ground

And chaos rules the motor roads.
Around every bend
At the crest of every hill
One kilometer in every ten
Is a litter of tankers, trailers, taxis & corpses
On narrow, winding, steep-graded roads
full of craters, pot-holes,
soft shoulders
and sheer drop-offs,

Death awaits the unlucky rider.

NIGERIA!

NA WAH-O!

I pledge to Nigeria, my country
To be faithful, loyal and honest...
So help me God.

OSY OBI

In the Night Train

Mendez Alvaro station was not as crowded as Anene had expected. But he didn't think much of it as he looked at his watch every now and then. Then he lit a cigarette and pranced the platform, muttering to himself and blowing smoke in all directions. He was waiting for the last train. If he didn't get to Aluche station soon enough, he would have to wait there for the hourly bus. The few coins that jingled in his purse wouldn't take him farther than Leganes. And on a weekend like this, to flag down a taxi in Madrid was nothing short of wilful liquidation, the economics of which he understood too well in relation to his salary. So, Anene let the cigarettes bear the rage of his agitation, while he worked himself up the more.

Then he looked up through the chrome eaves of the platform. It was dark, blank and void. He couldn't see the warm night sky over Madrid. Or the unobtrusive and serene masses of pale clouds that sailed like monstrous camels, silently, towards the horizon. Or the ebulient moon that shone in splendour above all these. He was well over twenty metres underground in Mendez Alvaro. He tried to listen to a classical tune that spilled out from a small loudspeaker overhead. It was no use, because it was the grunts and groanings of the climatizing machinery inside the train tunnels that he heard. Then he heard the distant chugging of a train.

When at last the train appeared through the tunnel, he saw that he had been waiting all this while at the metro section. God, what is wrong with me? he muttered to himself. What is

wrong with me tonight? He cursed himself roundly and rushed for the mobile stairs to the train section. Luckily enough, a train was about to depart and he jumped into the second coach and sat down, his heart beating like the tom tom of a macabre ritual. Even after he had closed his eyes and drawn a deep breath, a certain fogginess still lingered in his head as the train jerked and shot off noisily on its heavy metal tracks towards Atocha Correspondencia.

Seconds slithered away before he heard the slamming of a door and the ruffling of papers. He opened his eyes. And before him was standing the ticket checker with a booklet and a puncher.

"Buenos tardes. Un billet, per faver," the man said.

Anene searched the pockets of his jacket, found the ticket and gave it to the checker who promptly punched a triangular hole on it and gave it back. And to Anene's surprise, the checker did not tarry nor look around but went straight for the door to the next coach and disappeared behind it.

"Bloody racists," Anene muttered. "The pig wouldn't bother nobody else!" His African blood simmering inside him, he looked about him sneering. He wondered too if anyone saw the clouded spite on his face. But seeing that the coach was virtually empty, he regretted his outburst. Except for the couple that sat two seats away on his left, and a woman that sat like a collapsible needlework on the last seat to the end of the coach, the entire coach was empty. What he had thought were fellow passengers were merely the headrests of seats seen through the corners of his eyes. He shook his head, blamed his general nervousness and quickly pushed the thought out of his mind.

But another thing immediately caught his attention. A little away from where he sat were a couple sitting so intimately close, so close that they seemed cramped into one seat altogether. But it wasn't the amorous posture that piqued his curiosity. What exactly struck Anene was their sharp physical contrast. He had not seen in years a couple this remarkably odd. They were such

a couple that would make one remain forever puzzled as to why some relationships were so illogical and curious, bordering oftentimes on absurdity. For Anene, it was like getting trapped in the labyrinth of a puzzle. Looking at the girl, what sprang up in his mind's eye, mysterious as it was, was the livid image of a plump rose being choked by crooked brambles. The girl gave you that impression at a sudden glance, even afterwards. Her presence was breathtaking, and she was beautiful. Profoundly beautiful, Anene thought. Wasn't she like a master's painting? Or like classical prose? Perhaps more like a sonnet. And thinking of a sonnet, all at once Shakespeare's "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" surged into his mind. He remembered vividly, too Emile Zola's apt description of "The Maid of the Dauber" :'Is she beautiful? You could not analyse her features or determine the contours of her face. She intoxicates you at first sight, as strong wine does on the first glass. All you see is a whiteness amidst a red flame, a rosy smile.... She turns your head and you are already too captivated to study her perfections one by one'. Her facial charms were such that made one who knew a thing or two about arts to search for classical models. And because Anene knew about the arts and because he had the time, he insisted on analysing her features; moreover, since the couple were so absorbed in each other, they provided no counter stare to his own.

So from where he sat, Anene stared at the side of the girl's face. And when she rummaged in her handbag for something, he saw it all–all her beauty–and his heartbeat quickened. She had long, glossy black hair that rolled down her shoulders. Her hair was full and it shimmered in the soft light whenever she moved her head. Her brows were a thin pencil like Da Vinci's measured strokes. Her nose was straight and narrow and had such thrilling curves at the sides of its tip that were it the craft of a mortal sculptor it would have been impossible to imagine the strain and sweat of chisel work that had gone into its perfection. Her cheeks were smooth and spotless, while her lips, glistening under a deep-red lipstick, looked so luscious that any man who looked

on them would think of strawberries dipped in honey. Yet nothing compared to her eyes! They were soft and translucent blue as the coastline of a tranquil sea, while their gem-like pupils were emerald green, dark at the core like tropical vegetation. In these eyes were a veritable union of the colours of life—the sea and vegetation. But what charmed Anene most was that her face, on the whole, had something indefinite and inscrutable, something of a Mona Lisa—a spectre of mystery and cold curiosity. You couldn't tell with certainty if her mind was fixed on a lofty philosophical thought, or if she was merely on the verge of breaking into a most delicate smile. Such was her charm!

More charming yet was the simplicity of her dress. She wore a long black coat and a tight-fitting long skirt. Inside the coat was a skyblue turtle-neck that no doubt concealed the ringed delight of her lovely neck. Except for a slim necklace on her neck, a small gold ring on her small finger, she wore no other jewelry, not even an earring. She appeared love-struck, pampered and over-cuddled, with an elusive presence that could conjure up what is or what is not. She seemed the sort of girl that brought to your nose the delicate perfumes of exotic flowers even when they were not there. The colour and texture of her skin suggested that she probably grew up in the sunny coast of Spain and for the later years spent her time in cool, airconditioned places. You could see, too, that she wasn't made for rough and hard things, having probably been nurtured on such aqueous delicacies as skimmed milk, yoghurt, chocolate and fruit juice. She appeared that delicate.

But the man on whom she dotted was anything but delicate. He was lean. He was wiry. He was tall. All these attributes stood apart, unified only by an inflammable disposition which he exuded. He was all bones, too—hard crystalized bones that didn't seem capable of wearing out even in the roughest of weathers. His seemingly gentle and choreographed manners notwithstanding, or the Mesphistophelian aura in which he

basked, he certainly looked violent. His hair was black, oiled, neatly cut and combed backwards. And this deliberately exaggerated his veined and receding forehead. His eyes were dark and mysterious and gave Anene the creepy feeling, as they met his own, that he had stared down a deep, disused well. His hawkish nose, long and narrow, must have determined the meagre lips and the sharp jaw that in some comical way made him look like a genius of some sort. But he didn't look like the kind of genius for better things. Yet, Anene, no doubt, felt that this man was in control of his life, as well as the life of this beauty who obviously depended entirely on him. His age? It was difficult to tell, although Anene felt that fifty was safe enough for a guess. But the girl by his side was no more than twenty-four.

While Anene still studied this pair of strange lovers, the ticket checker came back, solemn and fatigued, and proceeded toward the engine cabin. The couple began again to kiss and fondle like teęnagers. Anene felt the heat of their passion spreading across the empty coach in steamy breaths and muffled groanings. Suddenly the man shoved his overcoat on the seat beside him, pulled the girl on his laps and with his hand in her luxuriant hair he began to suck on her lollipop lips. And with lustier passion, the girl wriggled all over him, breathing rapidly.

Suddenly, a sizzling hush fell over the entire coach like a long drawn sigh. Anene's ears buzzed. The trundling sound of the train on the rails seemed far and faint. And he felt a sudden sharp drop in the warmth and the brilliance of the lighting. The coach swerved uncomfortably left as if negotiating a bend. Anene could tell from the tinted windows that the train had just rammed into a tunnel because an interminable row of lights now ran on both sides like thin yellow streams. Then a recorded feminine voice broke out from the unseen speakers overhead: Proxima parada, Atocha Correspondencia con linea uno de metro.... The train began to reduce speed. The lights came on full again and with it the crunch and grind of heavy metals on railtracks. The train ground to a halt.

Because of its location, its train and metro lines, Puerta de

Atocha was the second busiest in Madrid after Chamartin. There was hardly any doubt in his mind that nearly all the seats would be taken.

Anene felt uncomfortable knowing that a lot of people would crowd into the coach and interrupt the live show he was watching.

He was wrong. Although there were lots of people on the platform when he looked through the window, they soon disappeared into the other coaches or didn't get on board at all. Three men and a woman who got into his own coach quickly left for the next coach. Anene swiftly reasoned that most people often neglected the first set of coaches. But in his heart, it was gladdening to remain the sole audience of a passion act. Fortunately, the enamoured couple were not distracted by the stopping and the eventual taking off of the train. They went on kissing as before, while the train rammed its way at a shuddering speed towards Embajadores.

For the first time, Anene felt a sudden warmth in his groin and a worm-like stirring that often triggered an unwanted erection. He crossed his legs and turned away, looking at the red neon signs overhead that told the time, the temperature and the next destination.

When he turned his attention toward the couple again, he saw that the Mephistophelian gentleman was now relaxed and less engaged. His face was flushed and a network of veins ran like cables across his neck and forehead. His eyes were closed and his breath deep and long-drawn. Lifeless like a statue, he held the girl with one hand across the shoulder, while the other hand lay on his laps. And now, holding him tight by the nape, the girl busied herself kissing him hard by the side of the neck. Anene could tell how hard from the occasional twitches of facial muscles rippling through his reddening face. Then suddenly the man stiffened and grew pale. His eyelids tightened and flickered convulsively. His bony and slender arms tightened around his lover's shoulders. He winced, gasped and made such short and

sharp exhaling sounds as one who had climaxed. The girl still clung to his neck kissing him, while her mass of luxuriant hair heaved lustfully in the soft light. Then gradually the man's grip on her shoulders slackened and he began to fondle her neck. She purred like a kitten and began slowly to withdraw her face from his neck. As she withdrew Anene saw on the side of the man's neck, by a dilated vein, a trickle of blood which clashing with the coach light gleamed like a red gem.

Anene's eyes became transfixed and his heartbeat stopped.

As the man slowly opened his eyes and met Anene's cold stare he turned away and felt his neck with one hand and looked at it. Seeing the blood, he turned the girl's mouth to his neck again. And in the next icy moments that followed, the girl sucked the blood dry, kissed the man on the mouth and pressed her finger on the lacerated point on his neck. Anene shook his head to stabilize his senses while the train swung to the left with a thin grating noise. This often happened on the stiff bend between Atocha and Embajadores stations. But this night it took a clear horrid tone as if the train had lost control and was hurtling into the bowel of the earth. A thrill ran through Anene's spine. He held unto the cold chrome sidebar of his seat to steady himself.

Looking up later, he saw that monstrous beauty of a girl turn her rose-tainted face deliberately–it was so obvious it was deliberate–she turned her face toward him. And in the sudden flash of eyes, his eyes caught her eyes and–Lord of Hosts!–he saw that the colours of life had vanished from her eyes. Now boring deep like drills into his own eyes was the most diabolical glare of age of horrow, corruption and despicable vices. It was like looking into a pit of immortal hatred and eternal ruins. Anene's head swelled and he staggered. it was all too revolting.

In a sudden bolt, he got unto his legs and scampered toward the door of the next coach, muttering, "Damned, Damned". He observed even in his hurry that the illusive perfume of warmth and passion that had once filled the coach had given way to a cold odour of something corrupt and

nauseous. And the seat where the old woman had sat by herself like a collapsible needlework now had a human-sized bat-like creature on it, grinning at his predicament.

ONWUCHEKWA JEMIE

Sex, Scatology and Pan-African Popular Discourse

[1]Easily the most striking feature of African-American urban folklore, especially that segment of it known as "street poetry," is the widespread use of language generally regarded as vulgar or obscene. Among African-Americans, attitudes toward such usages have ranged from acceptance, embracement and even celebration to outrage and rigid condemnation. Such usages have been hailed as the essence of our *difference*, as the thing that separates *us* from *them*--and just as vehemently denounced as evidence of our backwardness, of our all too well known predilection for putting our worst foot forward and playing the clown of the world.

Let us consider the most popular of these leading terms: *shit, ass, fuck, motherfucker.* Vulgar and shocking as these words are, they are neither simple nor readily dismissible. For one thing, they have survived in the language for four centuries, and there are no signs they will wither away anytime soon. Such hardiness is its own validation: these words evidently supply some essential ingredient for running the machinery of the culture that ensures their continued super-robust existence. Indeed, obscene and vulgar language performs a critical function in the staging of the drama of modern African-American folklore, and to exclude it is to shut off part of the tradition's life-giving oxygen. Whereas such negative terms as *bad, terrible, evil,*

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*Adapted from Death Row: New Versions of African-american Urban Folklore, Forthcoming from Temple University Press.

wicked and *mean* are in popular discourse regularly inverted so that they carry simultaneously the conventional meaning and its opposite, with a decided stress on the opposite, these outrightly obscene and vulgar words carry with them a whole other complex of meanings. Each is capable of carrying, sometimes simultaneously, the conventional meaning, usually negative; an opposite meaning, which is positive; a neutral meaning; and a variety of meanings with varying degrees of negative, positive and neutral, plus a range of emotions and attitudes. Again, meaning is sometimes dependent on *tone* and *inflection*. Consider the following examples where the vulgar word is used either for primal naming or as an intensifier:

Take your *fuckin* hands off me!	*Negative:* anger
Don't *fuck* with me!	*Negative:* anger
What the *shit*/What the *fuck* you think you doing?	*Negative:* anger
Up against the wall, *motherfucker*!	*Negative:* anger, anger, contempt, hate
Run, *motherfucker*, run!	*Positive*: affection--a nine year old to his playmate at stickball
	Negative: same child to same playmate (anger & frustration at losing)
	Neutral: football coach to player
Soon as I get my *shit* together	*Neutral*: *my shit* is my belongings, my act, plan, show, program

	Negative: self-deprecation--like, I who have nothing to speak of, I and my raggedy-assed possessions, not worth a damn
That brother's got his *shit* together!	*Positive:* admiration-- he is smart, well organized, knows what he's doing, what he's talking about; he's in full control
Nigger, you ain't *shit*!	*Negative:* anger, contempt, defiance--you're nothing, worse than nothing, beneath contempt, and if you don't think so just fool with me, I'll crack your skull, nigger!
It don't mean *shit*	*Neutral*: it's nothing, it's unimportant, nothing to worry yourself about; don't lose any sleep over it

The word *nigger* itself, considered a true obscenity by many, is used in its conventional meanings (negative, or neutral) by both blacks and whites; but in addition, it is used by blacks to convey the most absolute of positive meaning--as a term of affection between relatives and friends, and of tenderness between lovers. Claude Brown has called it "the most soulful word in the world," a word with "many shades of meaning [and] a unique sentiment...exemplified in the frequent-and perhaps even excessive-usage of the term to denote either fondness or hostility" (Claude Brown, 134).

Lord, how can one *nigger* be so hard to please	*Positive:* affection, puzzlement, resignation
Nigger, you gonna be the death o' me!	*Negative:* exasperation
He's my *nigger.*	*Positive:* affection; he's my best friend. (Woman: he's my man) (Claude Brown, 134-135).

Or, as one fond father said to his young son, "You my nigger if you don't get no bigger" (McPherson 8).

That these words carry such a burden of complex meanings does not make them any more acceptable in polite company. Quite often they are used deliberately to shock, to register alienation and iconoclasm. Indeed, part of their power, and their virtually limitless potential for generating humor in this literature, comes from the electrifying contact between their rough and ready vulgarity and the smooth, polite fictive milieux in which they are so frequently detonated. A fine example is the putatively polite setting of the classroom in which Little Johnny knocks his cookies and milk to the floor and says to the teacher: "I don't want none of that shit!" The teacher, more shocked by the language than the act of disobedience itself, sends for Johnny's mother, who merely compounds her shock by declaring: "If he don't want none, fuck the little nigger!" And then there's Little Willie who refuses to use the polite term "rectum" to indicate what part of the man's anatomy collided with the truck: "Wreck'd 'um, my ass! He nearly killed the motherfucker!"

As with the milking of new meanings from old English words through complex inversions, the obscene and vulgar words so common in African-American popular discourse turn

together in the Americas, it is not too difficult to imagine how the Igbo *nsi, nshi* or *shi,* which just happens to coincide in both sound and meaning with the English *shit,* might have become a staple of African-American speech, serving both for common discourse and for vituperation.

Closely allied to *shit* is *ass.* These two words rank ahead of all others as the omnibus word, the world-of-all-works in all Ebonics. *Get your ass over here. Set your black ass down. I'ma beat your ass. If you can't do it, it's your ass.* This usage is almost certainly of Igbo origin. If not exclusively so, at least one of its roots is traceable to the peculiar dialect of the Niger Delta Igbo of Ndoki, Akwete, Opobo and Bonny. Instead of the personal pronoun *mu* (I, me), the Delta Igbo use the term *ike-mu* (my buttocks/my ass); and instead of *gi*(you), they say ike-gi(your ass). Among the Igbo, these usages are greeted with laughter especially by those hearing them for the first time, and speakers of that dialect are teased continuously.

Chinua Achebe, the great novelist and encyclopedist of Igbo culture, captures the fun in *Things Fall Apart.* A white missionary has arrived at the village of Mbanta, bringing an Igbo interpreter from the Delta.

> When they had all gathered, the white man began to speak to them. He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying "myself" he always said "my buttocks." But he was a man of commanding presence and the clansmen listened to him....
>
> "Your buttocks understand our language," said someone light-heartedly and the crowd laughed (Achebe, 1959: 134-135).

Then the interpreter spoke of "Jesu Kristi" who he said was "the

Son of God." A villager queries him:

> "You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then." The crowd agreed.
> "I did not say He had a wife," said the interpreter, somewhat lamely.
> "Your buttocks said he had a son," said the joker, "So he must have a wife and all of them must have buttocks" (Achebe, 1959: 136-137).

How did this laughable exception on the mother continent become the rule on this side of the ocean? How did this lowly part of the anatomy, elevated to personhood in a comical synecdoche in a remote corner of Igboland, come to usurp the African-American kingdom? The Delta was the corridor through which virtually all Igbo captives passed onto the Middle Passage. The Delta dialèct was, as it were, the last word they heard on the Motherland. Was it also the *word* they best remembered? And just think: if Louis XIV spoke Ebonics, *l'etat, c'est moi* would have been something else!...

Vulgar and obscene references appear in the most unexpected places in Igbo discourse. In his novel *No Longer at Ease*, Chinua Achebe inserted the following authorial gloss on the unfairness of life:

> Ibo people, in their fairmindedness, have devised a proverb which says that it is not right to ask a man with elephantiasis of the scrotum to take on small pox as well, when thousands of other people have not had even their share of small diseases. No doubt it is not right. But it happens. "Na so dis world be," they say (Achebe, 1991:97).

Elephantiasis of the scrotum is entirely in context with the matter under discussion in the novel, and quite consistent with Igbo

rhetoric—but unexpected, and *shocking* all the same.

Just as unexpected though considerably less unpleasant is an example from Achebe's short story, "Vengeful Creditor." Mr. and Mrs. Emenike have lost several servants to the government's free primary education programme. Now the gardener has come to give notice.

Mr. Emenike tried to laugh him out of this ridiculous piece of village ignorance.

> 'Free primary education is for children. Nobody is going to admit an old man like you. How old are you?'
> 'I am fifteen years of old, sir.'
> 'You are three,' sneered Mrs. Emenike. 'Come and 'suck breast'
>
> (Achebe, 1972:53).

Come and suck breast! Just like that? Unthinkable in a British or Anglo-American prose fiction of just about any period!

One way of measuring size or strength among the Igbo is to place the object or person on a sexual scale, that is, to gauge his/her/its ability or inability to perform mature sexual or reproductive duties. Thus:

O-si-ghi nne: He/she/it is very small (*lit.* it can't mount a female; is not big or strong enough to fuck a mother/woman. *Nne* means *female; full-ground woman; mother.* The verb *si*-e is specific to animals *mounting* their female, but the assessment of size/strength/capability is extended to humans and all other objects, organic and inorganic).

I-toruo-la itunye nwanyi ime!: You're old enough to impregnate a woman! (a common rebuke to a boy: behave yourself. You're no longer a child. Don't you know you're old enough to impregnate a woman?)

Sexual references invariably point to the mother. What is surprising is not that the mother is so frequently drawn into the fray (even when studiously avoided, she is always in a closet nearby); what is surprising is that the mother is handled with so much *disrespect*.

Achebe introduces the mother in a comic sally in *No Longer at Ease*. A little boy selling *akara* on the street sees a night-soilman "swinging his broom and hurricane lamp and trailing clouds of putrefaction."

> The boy quickly sprang to his feet and began calling him names. The man made for him with his broom but the boy was already in flight....The night-soilman smiled and went his way, having said something very rude about the boy's mother (Achebe, 1991:23).

As he plies the roads from market to market, the titular hero of Achebe's short story "The Madman" ruminates on the insults he has suffered – from children "who threw stones at him and made fun of their mothers' nakedness, not his own," and from the lorry driver and his mate who slapped and pushed him off the road saying "their lorry very nearly ran over their mother, not him" (Achebe, 1972:2).

The madman's references to the mother are casual and off-hand, nothing as sharp or wounding, presumably, as the night-soilman's measured thrust. A close encounter with his filthy broom would have done the job; but saying something *very rude* about the boy's mother is evidently vengeance sweet enough to smile. What very rude thing did he say that gave him such grinning satisfaction? Let's play hide and seek for a moment. Achebe has "hidden" the answer in another novel, *A Man of the People*. In a famous scene in an African legislature, the Minister of Finance, "a first-rate economist with a Ph.D. in public finance," is vilified for counseling austerity and other

commonsensical solutions to the nation's economic woes. An orgy of abuse is rained on his head:

> The entire house, including the Prime Minister, tried to shout him down. It was a most unedifying spectacle. The Speaker broke his mallet ostensibly trying to maintain order, but you could see he was enjoying the commotion. The public gallery yelled down its abuses. "Traitor," "Coward," "Doctor of Fork your Mother." This last was contributed from the gallery by the editor of the *Daily Chronicle,* who sat close to me. Encouraged, no doubt, by the volume of laughter this piece of witticism had earned him from the gallery he proceeded the next morning to print it in his paper. The spelling is his (Achebe 1966:3, 6).

The reference to the mother is remarkable enough for the author to isolate it for comment, probably because it appears in an abnormal context – a legislative chamber run on alien, pan-European protocols (more on this later). The scene nevertheless yields up our answer: the night-soilman heaped specifically sexual insults on the boy's mother, or charged him with incest. Among the Igbo, it could be the simple epithet: *Nne gi!* Your mother!/Yo'mama! (replicated in African-American usage). Or *Ikpu nne gi!* Your mother's vagina! Or the night-soilman could have called the boy *O-ra nne.ya!* Fucker of his mother! Mother-fucker!

If the actors were Efik or Ibibio (neighbors to the Igbo), it could be the infamous line *Iturn eka afo mmuo-mmuo!*—Your mother's vagina is full of water! [is loose, flabby, watery].

Donald C. Simmons, who suggests that the dozens is retraceable to Efik tone riddles, curses and sarcastic retorts, has listed samples from daily use as well as civil court records:

* *Look at your mother with three corns in her vagina*

* **eyen ntime nsene:** child of mixed sperm (i.e., conceived by more than one father)
* [I]n *Asua v. Mbeue* (case 27, CTNC, 1938), where the defendant alleged the plaintiff was a harlot "who had connection with people in the house and in the bush...," the plaintiff retorted that the defendant was "a rotten woman whose private part is watery" (Simmons 340).

The roots of the dozens are all over West Africa, and beyond. The blatantly racist British ethnographer, Dudley Kidd, found them in Southern Africa:

> Boys of the same age tease one another by well-known methods. One boy will say to another, "Your mother is an ugly old thing"; "Your people are all witches and wizards"; "Your mother is a crow," and so on. Strange to say, they do not tease one another much about their fathers, nor about their sisters. The great insults centre round speaking evil of the mother and grandmother (Kidd 198).

And Philip Mayer found them in East Africa among the Gusii of Kenya:

> The true measure of the unique unrestraint of pals and the climax of their intimacy is to exchange pornographic references to the other's mother and particularly to impute that he would be prepared for incestuous relations with her. "Eat your mother's anus!" is a specimen of this kind, or even the direct "copulate with your mother!".....
> Though the essence of the relation is that pals do not take each other's insults seriously, it may be

> part of the fun to pretend to be offended and made some appropriate retort (Mayer 33).

The dozens in embryo is a continent-wide phenomenon.

Under extreme provocation one Igbo man might say to another:

> *Hey! Rapu-m aka!....Gini ka m-mere gi?...M-rara nne gi?*
> *Hey! Leave me alone!...What did I do to you?...Did I fuck your mother?*
>
> [an offense so heinous it might justify such harassment].

In a remarkable scene in *Guelwaar,* a film by the great Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, two tides of angry men are fighting over a dead man, a Christian who was mistakenly buried in a Moslem cemetery. The Christians are determined to open the grave and retrieve the body, and the Moslems are determined to prevent such an abomination. They rush at each other. In desperation, a venerable elder freezes the stampeding hordes with a single word: *Anybody make another move I'll fuck his mother!* (Sembene 1994). So potent is the word.

But why all the *disrespect* of the mother? Why these copious references to violation of the mother through seduction, rape or incest—a slew of offenses on which is constructed a whole art form, the African-American dozens?

There are two fundamental offenses which human societies have universally tobooed from time immemorial; and it is not clear which should rank first and worst—incest, or the shedding of blood of one's kin. Incest, especially involving the mother, might well be in childhood the primal (male) fear. And one way to overcome fear is to meet it frontally: embrace the horror, acknowledge it, accommodate it by conscious will; bring it into the open, play with it, consider the possibility, then reject

it, trivialize it, make a joke of it, extinguish it with laughter.

A mother's intimate embrace is the child's source of all comfort. To grow and mature is gradually to disengage from that embrace. Boys in particular must be detached neatly and rapidly from the physical and psychological embrace of the mother (and, later, of wives and other mother-surrogates) to create space to learn and perform the necessarily hard, sometimes cruel duties imposed on them as guardians of the tribe (this is not the place to debate the merits of patriarchy). For boys, then, disengagement may be more like a violent wrenching away.

Every society has invented formulas for enabling the detachment process–a mixed bag of tricks and treats, sanctions and rewards to bring the young boy to the desired state of feeling. One of the most powerful tricks is to wave before the child the specter of incest, accompanied with prophecies of doom, as in the Efik: *obukpo ana etime ekporo emi abunde ekporo ye eka*—"rottenness will affect the penis which is used in intercourse with the mother" (Simmons 340). It is a preemptive strike against something the child knows little or nothing about. Typically, the agent is a playmate who may be older and bolder but not necessarily worldly-wiser; and the good opinion of one's peers, especially in such confusing, secret matters, is everything.

To be accused is immediately and unequivocally to deny. And denial will follow denial until the child gets in the game and learns to counter-accuse. From then on, it is forward ever, backward never. The twig has been bent–and so will the tree. Imputations of incest, in the face of the severe taboo, is society's backhanded, even underhanded way of enforcing detachment. In effect, the child is told: look how you huff and puff and sweat and carry on at an accusation which the accuser and everyone else knows is *false;* how do you think you would feel, what would you do, how could you live *if it were true?* A classically simple trick of acculturation or brainwashing, foolproof and fail-safe.

African-American dozens culture represents a

circumstantial, culture-specific instance of this remarkable pan-African heritage of male-child rearing. On these western shores, the black male child has needed not only to disengage emotionally from the mother (that, as we have seen, is easy enough), but to stay alive, and sane, in the face of what is done to his mother. In the African homeland, all those vividly painted scenes of abuse of the mother were merely unreal, conjured up as a means to preempt and prevent their actualization. But here in the Americas, under slavery, the imagined became real, and the real a nightmare.

Harriet Jacobs long ago set it down as an axiom, that "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (Jacobs 405). Who could possibly argue? The women laboured as long and hard as the men, and suffered the lash with the same virulence. In addition, they were sexually abused, and, to compound the horror, their offspring were snatched and sold away.

Of course, as Toni Morrison has reminded us, the men were sometimes raped by gay white men (Morrison 107-108). Nasty the experience, no matter how small the numbers. But this was not the source of the deepest black male anguish. Far more devastating was the fact that black men stood helpless while white slave traders, slave owners and overseers raped their sisters, sweethearts, wives and *mothers* again and again. Unable to object, strike a blow, or *kill the mother fucker!* What traumas did such radical impotence *not* inflict on the psyche, on the manhood and self-respect? *Powerless to protect his loved ones—that is the ultimate black male nightmare!*

Jacobs herself provides a glimpse of this male trauma:

> I felt humiliated that my brother should stand by, and listen to such language as would be addressed only to a slave. Poor boy! He was powerless to defend me; but I saw the tears, which he vainly strove to keep back (Jacobs 391).

William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs (69) state the matter this way:

> By law no slave husband could protect his wife from physical and sexual abuse at the hands of a white man. By law no slave mother could protect her child against physical and sexual abuse at the hands of a white man.

The two black psychiatrists paint an equally grim picture of things as they are today:

> The black family [today] cannot protect its members. Nowhere in the United States can the black family extend an umbrella of protection over its member in the way that a white family can. In every part of the nation its members are subjected to physical and verbal abuse, humiliation, unlawful search and seizure, and harassment by authorities. Its members are jailed, beaten, robbed, killed, and raped, and exposed to this kind of jeopardy to a degree unheard of in white families. Thus the black family is prevented from performing its most essential function—its *raison d'etre*—protection of its members (Grier & Cobbs 1968:68).

The African-American male has therefore had to achieve *detachment* of a higher, deeper, tougher quality than his cousin in the homeland. He must not only embrace the horror; he must chew and swallow it, let it work from the inside, tightening the guts, thickening the skin, steeling the bones, petrifying the emotions—and at the same time block the poison from callusing the shoulder and rendering the total person anarchic, suicidal, or dead.

How has the African-American male, over the harsh

centuries, managed to approximate this tall order? By what routes did he achieve this survival process, this process of pushing back the crushers and enabling the spirit to fly free? The role of music, of religion, and of the affirming sense of community, both in slavery time and after, has long been recognized and documented. And now, more recently, the masculine street game culture of the urban communities has been added to the repertory of protections. When restive youth are corralled into hallways, street corners, playgrounds and bars - the scene is set for the dozens to bloom from bud to flower.

While retaining the form and spirit of the West African original, African-American dozens has elaborated the witty one-liners into complex verbal war games involving huge armories and modes of attack and defense undreamt of in the homeland. It is a case of Darwinian adaptation for survival of the species in the killing jungles of slavery and racism. The mother remains the central figure. By learning to deal with verbal abuse of her, the modern black youngster learns to endure the historical, real-life abuse. It is as if the system is innoculated with virtual (verbally imagined) strains of the virus, thereby attaining immunity and new health in spite of the reality on the ground.

> Grier and Cobbs (1971:9) have suggested that the dozens introduces the boy to stoicism as a requirement of manhood. It insists that he understand that humiliation may be the texture of his life, but states also that manhood can transcend such onslaught.

In summary, then, the discursive ease with which sex and scatology are handled in the cultures and languages of the West African homeland is replicated in African-American culture, so much so that it is virtually definitive of the popular discourse. Parallel instances in the usages of other African peoples on this side of the Atlantic are, similarly, New World updates of ancient (and still contemporary) usages of the African homeland. When

viewed in this light, the phenomenon becomes far less startling.

It is now widely acknowledged that American culture is an amalgam mainly of European and African cultures (Native Americans were so systematically excluded and near-exterminated that their overall input is far lower). American music consists of the dominant African-American music and its Anglo-American derivatives, plus, more recently, Afro-Latin music of the Hispanic communities. And American English contains large dozes of African-American language or Ebonics. In short, white Americans may be transplanted Europeans, but the telling difference between their culture and that of their motherland is the African real presence.

Ebonics has exerted enormous influence on American popular usage, and some of its vocabulary and styles of expression have become part of standard, formal English. But on the whole, the formal written and spoken forms of Americans English have stuck close to the British originals. *Mother fucker* will not be read in the *New York Times,* nor *shit* heard on the floor of the Congress; and *nigger* hasn't been seen or heard in either place for some time. By the 1990s, even in academic settings, the brash sincerity of the 1960s and 70s had been displaced by a decorous "political correctness" that speaks coyly of "the N-word," "the B-word" and so on. However, in informal settings, out on the street, behind closed doors or among friends, middle class Americans of all races are just as free and voluble with their vulgarities as any *blood* in the *'hood.* American Presidents in particular are notorious for their "colorful language" once closeted with their aides and out of public earshot; but snippets still manage to seep through the listening walls. The most exhaustive record, of course, is the "expletive deleted" from transcripts of Richard Nixon's tapes. And the corporate culture mirrors the political. As one company executive recently put it, "We met behind closed doors. Voices were raised, and the King's English was abused" (Gutoff 42). Abuse of the Kings English has been going on in America for ages. Indeed, the king's linguistic

and other property has not been correct around here since way before 1776; and the African presence has something to do with it.

Every language has its rules of propriety. The overarching prudery of the English language renders inadmissible in polite or formal settings those scatological and sexual references which are perfectly appropriate in the formal rhetoric of the Igbo and other West African peoples and their New World descendants. Middle class African-Americans, growing up bicultural and bilingual, understand the rules and would select their language accordingly. But this is not the case with Africans reared in the homeland. Which explains why someone would shout "Doctor of Fork your Mother!" on the floor of an African legislature, where the language and context render it inappropriate, and then compound his gaffe by printing it in the newspaper the next day.

Outside the African homeland, the habit of discursive ease with sex and scatology can prove just as treacherous. Once upon a time, and not so long ago, an African scholar, blithely unmindful of the puritan restraints of the English language, and forgetful of time, place and circumstance, concluded his remarks before a professional association in the United States by evoking a time-honored Igbo proverb: "As our people say, when several people urinate on the same spot, it foams" (*Ndi ebe anyi kwuru okwu si, na anyuko-o mamiri ofu ebe, ogbo-o ufufu*). This was his way of celebrating the intellectual ferment (steaming, foaming) he had witnessed at the conference just concluded. As we have seen, this proverb would have been all right at a gathering of Igbos (or Africans generally); but it registers as vulgar and obscene at an international gathering of scholars or any other polite occasion in the pan-European world. Such a setting condemns it as language-inappropriate, a case of failed culture-translation and context-transfer.

Which of course is not to say that every demand of a language must be met at all times in all places. If that were the case, we would not have Chinua Achebe's hugely successful and

justly celebrated experiments with the English language; nor, for that matter, would African-American English or Ebonics exist, nor the other pan-African creoles. African-Americans must of course learn and use "standard English" for any number of good reasons, not least of which is economic survival; but really, at the creation of Ebonics, pan-European preferences and norms, whether linguistic, moral or social, have no relevance, nor *locus standi,* no presence. Not a thought appears to have been wasted on them, nor a backward glance.

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OLA ROTIMI

WHEN 5N-AUG CRASHED

NOTE TO THE READER

This is *not* a mere reporting of an accident which nearly claimed the lives of ninety-nine passengers and crew onboard an aircraft. That kind of reportage has been adequately purveyed by the Nigerian Press since the mishap.

Upon being convinced that I survived, I deliberately checked the spread of news of my involvement in that accident, for fear of being swamped with enquiries from sundry quarters. I felt that replying to them all might be repetitive and time-consuming. I preferred, rather, to tell it once-and-for-all. Someday. This is so that, whoever cares to know of it, would also; "see what I saw, hear what I heard, smell what I smelled, feel what I felt, taste what I tasted, think what I thought, and imagine what I imagined, before, during, and immediately after the cataclysm."

It was like this. My experience, at any rate.

The little girl, pretty in her white, flared dress, skipped smartly in light gray socks and black, dainty shoes, into the Arrival Hall of Murtala Mohammed Domestic Airport. Confident of having out-paced someone in particular amongst the horde of passengers just arrived from Kaduna, she pattered friskily to a stop, swirled round with buoyant glee on one foot, then studied

her frame perkily on both legs. Left arm now akimbo, it was time to appraise the distance isolating her from the straggly crowd of mainly grown-ups spreading into the Arrival Hall.

My eyes took her in, with amused interest, easing the strain of my one-and-a-half-hour waiting for Flight 104 to Port Harcourt on Tuesday, September 8, 1987.

Some travellers prefer waiting in the Arrival Hall. The Departure Lounge seems perpetually packed, stuffy and suffused with a certain, eeriemedley of clinking sounds, tired shuffling feet, and bored, low-toned voices — all of which, colluding with billowing cigarette fumes, leave scarce chance for personal comfort. But, then, waiting in the Arrival Hall to depart, has its own problems. A risk, to be precise. You're likely to be abandoned when the mass movement for boarding a plane begins. Sometimes, mass exodus precedes the boarding announcement, you see. And by the time a voice breaks through the public address system to intone the 'final boarding announcement' for your flight — the game is over! There you are — alone, forgotten, betrayed. Mad at yourself, you venture a one-man spring on the tarmac, only to end up last on a long queue of fellow-travellers, three-quarters of whom had already clambered aboard. In growing panic, you stare at the seat number scribbled on your boarding-pass, and start imagining someone else already ensconced in that very seat, relaxed, and fanning himself with the day's newspaper!

A smile was beginning to show on the little girl's face. Apparently, she had picked out the person of her concern amongst the approaching swarm of travellers. Her right hand shot out briskly from her side as if to gesticulate at the person, but froze in that instant, her head snapping to an upward tilt. Confusion now on that face. Her eyes darted searchingly at the ceiling of the Hall, attempting to detect the source of a voice that had suddenly pealed out from above.

"Attention please," the voice was demanding, amidst cracklings in the loudspeaker: "this is a boarding announcement

for Nigeria Airways Flight WT 104 to Port Harcourt."

I leaned sideways with relief, reaching over the silver armrest of the grey settee, for my travelbag. Simultaneously, other travelers in the Hall stirred up from their seats in reaction to the announcement . The little girl flicked her gaze from the ceiling clearly startled again, this time, by the sudden burst of concerted activity about her. Her eyes swiftly scanned the faces coming to life all around, and caught my gaze. I winked teasingly at her, slinging my travelbag onto my shoulder, amused by her bewildered expression which reminded me of that startled look from that little boy in out TV "Nasco wafers" Commercial!

I made for the Exit, meandering through the sprawl of disembarked passengers in the Hall.

"The aircraft with registration number 5N-AUG..." the announcer was still directing, as I passed by a woman who, I imagined, had something to do with the little girl. She was uttering certain words in the direction of the girl, an arm outstretched from the flimsy green-flowered shawl swathing her head, shoulders, and down to her traditional, calf-length petticoat — Maiduguri — fashion.

As she passed by, a healthy fragrance of perfume whiffed off her tracks. 'Bint El Sudan'. My nostrils tried to guess among the popular Northern brands of perfume. May be 'Aramis', with a drop or two of 'SS'. Anyway... Time to run.

Already humanity had spilled out of the Departure Lounge and was fanning out in a scurry on the tarmac toward Airbus 5N-AUG.

A few metres to the gangway of the aircraft, a sense of WAI intervened, mustering the overspread of travellers into a mass and funnelling the mass into a queue of sorts — with a few deviant bulges here and there, more stubborn, of course, at the foot of the gangway.

A family of four — floated forward, to the left of the queue. They communed with the groundcrew at the foot of the gangway, then fused into the queue up-front. I felt happy for

them, moved. Perhaps, by the springy expectancy in the children's steps. I seem to have a soft spot for kids of that age range, in any case. Precisely, for kids between the ages of four and ten. Uncanny as it may sound, some of my best friends are children in that age-bracket: to the extent that, over the years, I've come to identify three categories of them in Nigeria and outside. There are those who readily relate to you, mood for mood, when you engage them in a mock-serious discussion. Then, there is the group whose handy response is laughter, at the very idea that you're engaging them in discussion like two adults. Finally, are those who just stare at you — attentive, yes, but not quite knowing how to take you, or where to slot you between an idiot and a madman! All three groups have one thing in common, however: a receptive candour which one hardly finds in adults. The son of God himself must have detected that rare attribute in children, hence his pleadings on their behalf, to our hard, adult world in Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16.

The airport-tax fellow came over, checking the tickets one after the other. The queue snailed forward. Eventually, it was my turn. He squinted at my tax-ticket perhaps, studying the number on it: 251076. Swiftly, two hands shot out and snapped at the ticket. The left hand gripped it steady, while the right nipped off part of it. He then withdrew, and took on the next man. Nothing rude or brusque about this. Just doing his job.

Soon, my turn with the groundcrew. I proffered my ticket and boarding pass. The collector tweaked out the boarding pass, ripped off the stub with practised deftness, and flipped back the remainder to me. Up the gangway now, my feeling of relief deepening. Must have been about 6.15 p.m.

In the cabin, an air hostess came forward, cocked her head to scan the seat number on the boarding pass between my fingers.

"20-J," she muttered, stepping aside and filliping her fingers cheerily to indicate the aisle on the right. We were boarding from the tail-end of the aircraft. The mass of us.

Economy class folks.

20-J... 20-J... Oh good. A window seat. Great. I could look out, airborne, and enjoy nature's sport with colours upon the skies, before it got dark.

Another stewardess strode over from the front of the cabin, stopped by my seat-row, leaned forward and enquired amicably:

"Sir, are you Dr. Olurotimi?"

"Dr. who?" I asked, not quite getting her.

"Olurotimi," she repeated.

I shook my head, smiling.

"Oh, I'm sorry, she said turning to go.

"Never mind," I replied, then wondered to my self whether she had mispronounced my name, or it was simply an instance of mistaken identity. Anyway...

Seat-belts were clucking shut now, overhead luggage compartments clacking open, clanging close again.

A lady in pinkish blouse over an orange skirt with brown designs, took the seat next to mine.

Another period of waiting. I turned to page 14 of my copy of *Newswatch* — just released 'after the black-out'. I resumed my reading of the Ayagi/Olashore tragedy. Or rather, the ethical tragedy of a nation averse to men of principle and courage — if indeed what we've read about the circumstances of their humiliation is true. Thus far, however, we wait in vain for official refutations of the allegations in this matter; we wait for verifiable statements to restore our sense of justice: natural or poetic. We wait.

The aircraft engines had come on now, and a voice from the cockpit was introducing the speaker as the Captain. He apologized for the late departure, and assured that we would take off anytime from that moment. All we needed was clearance from Air Traffic Control.

The plane began a slow taxiing on the runway towards the take-off area. Or rather, 'Holding-position'. Some Cabin

Attendants were already poised in the aisles to act out the Flight Safety Instructions. The routine about Exit points in case of emergency, and about gas masks that would, on their own, pop out in response to reduced pressure in the cabin.

Just four rows of seats from me, a male and a female Cabin Attendant began to mime the safety procedure.

Nothing much to do, I watched their gestures, idly comparing those of the man in our aisle, with the lady's in the other. The impression was that, generally, the mimings of both were expressive. However, for specifics, those of the lady seemed to convey a certain pattern of fluid grace missing in the signals of our brother in our aisle. I tried to guess the cause of this difference, and concluded that the lady's fingers had something to do with her advantage. Slim, longish fingers tipped, or rather, extended further by laths of coloured finger-nails. It seemed that those elongations helped to give her hand-movements the benefit of optical illusion. One tended to perceive, in the course of those fingers waving and weaving through space, a continuum of trajectories in designs of loops and circles and curves — which all, pictorially, contrasted the rather brisk, mimic finality of her male colleague's. Anyway...

The aircraft was vibrating now, garnering up power for the take-off. The lady next to me extended an arm across my seat, reaching for the window shade. I obliged, lifting it open to be surprised by a flush of warm, orange glow from the retiring sun.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," I replied, returning to *Newswatch*.

Motion. The plane seemed to have decided it had worked up enough stamina to break links with earth. Engines at full rev, it pulled forward growling with rapturous confidence... faster, faster and up... nose probing the skies, it roared heavenwards with dignified violence.

It was a normal flight, for much of the time. Some thirty-five minutes or thereabouts, the Captain's voice came on again, announcing that we were approaching Port Harcourt, but that the

weather there was somewhat cloudy, with rain-showers.

A cabin stewardess came round now, collecting the wastes from the snacks we'd been served — moinmoin in tinfoil and packaged fruit drink. The texture of the moinmoin didn't quite support its appetizing flavour though. A bit on the dry side. Perhaps from being kept onboard too long. My tongue appraised it further for a comparison with Mama Esther's moinmoin at Student Hall D on Uniport Campus. The plane's moinmoin scored well on taste; but Mama Esther's was better on texture. Succulent.

A deep blue apron draped over her white-green uniform, the cabin stewardess ambled down the aisle, picking up the litter into a large-bodied, black polythene bag held out in front of her — the way our riverain women bear their 'igbukuru' (cane-rimmed fishing net) to collect 'isongu' (minnows) in the creeks.

The lady beside me picked up the empty drink packet and straw from my seat-tray, popped them into the collector's bag. But by the time I finished crumpling the moinmoin tinfoil for tossing into the bag, the stewardess had passed on. Hmm. Now, a dilemma. Do I reach out and across the face of the lady next to me to catch the stewardess' bag? Clumsy. Perhaps I should simply wrap up the oily mess in a serviette and dump it in a trash-bucket on arriving Port Harcourt. Dilemma indeed. In that instant, the lady beside me snatched the trash off my wavering grip, reached out behind her, and shot the stuff deftly into the polythene bag.

"Thank you," I said, dilemma resolved.

On reflection later, I dare say that that lady's little act of courtesy must have spared me some enormous problem when the plane later got into trouble. At least, I was able to maneuver with much freer hands. All I had when the crisis occurred were my lightweight travelbag and that copy of *Newswatch*. Clearly, an additional moinmoin tinfoil as yet another of my burdens, would have worsened my confusion in one of two ways. First, I might unconsciously still be clutching the oily rubbish: which

would have hampered the use of my hands in the grope to escape. Second, perhaps, in the pandemonium, naturally, I'd have dropped the litter in the aisle of the plane while scuttling for the Emergency Exit. This too would have brought on another problem. A deep feeling of guilt. Indeed, a deep feeling of guilt anytime I met Chief Owhonda face to face, thereafter. Who is Chief Owhonda? Well, fellows outside Port Harcourt wouldn't know him, perhaps. All right Chief Owhonda — Jackson Welemele Owhonda — happens to be the Sole Administrator of the Port Harcourt City Council, see. The body that controls our Environmental Sanitation Authority. The "Sulo" people, as we call them here. Chief Owhonda, in short, is the "Oga patapata" of those 'Sulo people' doing their utmost to keep P'racourt (and Rivers State!) clean, you see. So, the point is this. How on earth would I look at Chief Owhonda again, and not feel accursedly subversive? There he was, sweating with Col. Ukpo to re-make Pitakwa a "Garden City". And what was I doing? Dumping moinmoin wrappings in the aisles of an airbus at Port Harcourt airport. And why? Just because I was in panic to escape a catastrophe! Nonsense! Imagine! The born dog! I mean...!

Anyway, good lady — wherever you are now: "thank you, O" for resolving my dilemma.

Suddenly, a sinking... sharply! Again, with each sinking, voices rose within the plane — partly in protest, partly in prayer. "Well," I thought within myself, "the Captain warned that it was raining and cloudy. So... turbulence was to be... Whops — another one! A louder burst of voices, to yet another deep drop. I didn't like it either. Didn't like it at all. Too, abrupt. As if the pilot were desperately attempting a fast descent or something! Not long after, a steadier descent followed. The crisis seemed over. Touchdown would be anytime now. We braced up for it. Suddenly a heavy jolt, quickly followed by two looping gallops, as the plane impacted on hard ground. And for the next minute or thereabout, the Devil himself took charge!

A violent clattering seized every fixture in the cabin, the

plane trembling violently in what appeared to be a skidding. It deeped steeply to the left in a vicious traction cra-cra-cra-cra-cra-cra-cra the pilot seemed to be struggling with faulty brakes on ruptured left tyres — cra-cra-cra-cra-cra-cra-cra. Within seconds, the aircraft leveled itself again but careened to the right just as fast cra-cra-cra-cra-cra... it zig-zagged willfully to shuddering halt, only to lurch forcefully forward once more, still clattering, cabin lights blinking uncontrollably, gas-masks popping out from their encasements and flailing fiendishly in mid-air; overhead luggage comparments bursting open, pelting their contents wildly at passengers; passengers screaming "Jesus help me; Jesus save us!" as they abscribed a sustained torture of being dashed forward, seat-belts and all — dashed forward, jerked to the left, lammed back again, and bashed to the right!

At last, a heavy slam to a rough, trembling stop, quickly followed by an ominous hissing sound. Instantly, everyone was up for a blind stampede!

I noticed people rushing in two directions — to the rear and forward.

Dumbfounded, confused, I couldn't decide which group to join. For some strange reason, fear didn't come to me immediately. I guess I was too engrossed in *disbelieving,* momentarily, that that was the way we were going to end it all on earth!

The hissing sound seemed to increase all of a sudden. This was when fear gripped me. "Explosion," my thoughts concluded! That sound must be fuel leaking out, explosion and fire would be next! Hysteria. I bolted out of my corner, swung to the right, frantic for a grapple with the group at the middle of the cabin. Just then, a voice rang out — a man's voice. At this point, I must pay tribute to the owner of that voice — whoever he may be. He may not realize this, but his voice helped to save lives and reduce the number of casualties in that mishap.

I wish he would make himself known on reading this, so that the Nigerian peoples can thank him, salute his heroism

his waist, steadying him! "one by one," I urged loudly, "one by one!"

The crowding soon eased out: "now go," I ordered the boy prodding him ahead. I followed immediately, stepping onto a rubbery threshold in the semi-darkness outside. Pellets of rain pattered on my face, blurring something ahead that looked like a balustrade. Tottering forward, I reached for it, but felt my feet slip off, my body hurtling swiftly down an inflated plastic chute. In no time, I sensed my hand reach the end of the 'balustrade' but my body still in flight. My right arm shot out by instinct, just in time for it to share, with my left thigh, a brutal jolt as my body thumped on impact with hard tar. It happened so fast, instinct took over thought. At once, I rolled clear off the base of the chute lest the next passenger crash smack on my head. That tumbling brought me closer to the under-carriage of the aircraft, and this awareness filled me with fresh terror. Explosion! Now I'm going to get it! I smelled smoke And, indeed, in that moment, a voice cried out, deepening my panic. "Run, run away," the voice was yelling: "the plane will explode!"

The crier, I found out later, was an Airways worker — white shirt over a pair of black trousers. He was standing at the kerb of the tarmac, opposite the crash area. The fellow must have aimed his warning-cry generously at the escaping passengers at large. No doubt, about that. But the alarm caught the climax of my hysteria so precisely, that I took it for a final message solely meant for me to rescue myself forthwith, or die for ever!

Sons and daughters of our motherland; children of our ancestors, I'll tell you bluntly. Or as we say in Imo, let me tell it ho-ha! I can't now recall the details. How I managed to scud free from the ankle-deep, slosh of rain-water beneath the 'underbelly' of that air-bus. All I remember was my running... running with other survivors now down from the airbus and running too, I tell you... running 'like crazy' away from Armageddon. Wallahi!

The wailings of sirens rent the air, approaching fast from the terminus buildings. Somehow, in the frenzy of our running,

a thought came to me, forcing me to slow down. Panting, I yawed to the side of the runway and stood, facing the location of the accident. The children. Those children! Did they, too, make it down, or were they still trapped within that wide-bodied ammunition? I wondered. There was this urge to go back up the plane and see whether the children were still in trouble. But how? The chutes down which we slid, had no steps.

A deep feeling of distress seized me, weakening me with a sense of utter uselessness. I simply gaped at the fearsome incubus. Nobody seemed to be emerging from it now. Perhaps, the children also made it safely.

Beams of light from fire-engines and an ambulance racing up to the scene, cut through sheets of rain, revealing the approach of another crowd of survivors. This group was not running. Amongst the looming figures of mainly adults, two little shapes stood out. The children! I made for this batch of co-travelers, getting closer still to the children. Their father must have observed my drift.

"Prof." He called out, "we thank God, O"

"My brother," I replied, then resorted to Port Harcourt home language, "no be small thing."

I tried to remember the face. Apparently, he knew me. Port Harcourt, in any case, is a big-small city: paths cross easily in social circles, people knowing people. Somehow or other.

"And the children too," I added gratefully, "imagine!"

"Hmm," the gentleman could only sigh in pious tribute. Then I asked, not noticing the lady I'd seen with him and the children as we boarded the plane in Lagos: "what about their mother? I hope she's..."

"Oh, she's coming," he replied, "she only went to see whether she could pick up some of our things..."

"Oh... Ok." I kept abreast with father and kids, feeling relieved and at the same time humoured by the nippy bounce still in the kids' walk. Despite the downpour, the kids seemed to radiate a certain verve of jolly innocence from their gait. My mind brought back memories of that impish excitement we used to feel, at their

age, smutching tennis balls in muddy waters in the name of 'playing rain-ball'. I wondered what the kids could be thinking about the nightmare we'd just had. Their perception, I mean — their own mental version of the trauma. For all one knows, I thought to myself, they might not quite understand, not to mention of being bothered by, all that adult pandemonium awhile ago. All right, so the plane, in all its massiveness, took a dive suddently. Well, it bumped on landing... galloped, galloped, galloped... swerved sharply... side to side, trembling... pitched forward again... struck finally to a stop. Next thing, men and women... jostling with children for first place on slides! Ordinary slides, O! Like those in Apapa Amusement Park; or for that matter, the baby ones in Isaac Boro Park downtown Port Harcourt. That's all, O!

My sight seemed to be getting dim. The mist on my glasses, perhaps. I raised my right hand, adjusting the strap of the travelbag on the left shoulder. Felt for my glasses. Nothing. I was sure I had them on when I emerged from the plane. Before the plunge down the chute. They must have flown off at the height of my gymnastics on landing. I slowed down my pace again and moved aside, deciding this time to go back and rummage the area at the base of the chute for them. They certainly must be lying in that vicinity. I had to be in Benin the next morning, to examine some final year students. How could I equitably judge their stage-projects without my glasses on.

I started back for the plane. Getting to about three metres from it, I paused for a re-think. Tomorrow morning? Why not? Too many activities around the plane now, anyway.

A car swashed passed me self-possessedly in the watery tarmac, and came to a swishy halt amidst two fire-engines a few metres from where I was standing. With swaths of bright lights from these vehicles trained on the aircraft, reinforcing the revolving flashes of red beam from the fire engines, I could see the plane clearly now. In its full, naked helplessness. Without the usual gangway to link man to it, the height of the aircraft was

simply awesome.

Some firemen and Airways staff hustled around it, tugging fire-hoses and dousing the mammoth presence with fire-extinguishing foam. Desperate Lilliputians to a technological Gulliver! I noticed the left wheels were deep in marsh; the right tyres still perched on the runway. This gave the aircraft an upward tilt to the right causing the chute on that side to hang steeply and terminating about a metre above ground level. No wonder our descent from that side was so sharp! That must also explain the injuries some of us sustained.

The engine on the left seemed to have bull-dozed through a rugged surface, its lower part finally digging into ground. Which must explain the violent traction and sudden rough stop.

I tried to fathom what caused that hissing sound I thought I heard when the plane finally stood still. Perhaps the sound of rain spattering on the fuselage and sluicing down its sides? I didn't seem to quite make that one out.

Somehow, I started feeling sorry for the plane itself. Chutes hanging down lamely like the flappers of a startled dolphin; its massive body sloping clumsily to the left, upturning its black nose heavenwards like some pained animal in a dying wail to its Creator; its engines, two huge limbs, as it were, freshly mangled into stumps. The plane looked like some unnamed monster of mammoth proportions tricked at last by man from its ancient haunts; maimed to check escape, and displayed to all beholders; its long mystery exposed, its dignity undone.

I had begun to feel some pains. Down the length of my left leg. The thigh, down. My right arm too. A gnawing pain up in the shoulder joint. For the first time, I realised my left hand was still clutching absently to *Newswatch*.. I transferred the muddied weekly to my right hand and, bending over, reached with the free left hand for my knees. Left knee first. Sore. Now the right. Bruised. Oh, well... The left fist pressed against the left thigh, going down. The pains appeared to be more intra-muscular than superficial. Left fingers reached across to the right shoulder,

kneading the muscles around the shoulder-joint and down the upper arm. Sore.

I made to turn, to continue the onward trek to the terminus buildings, but almost lost balance. A pain spiraled through the length of the left leg, enfolding it in a tingling soreness. I must have stood on one spot rather long, under the downpour, gawping at the crippled plane. I steadied myself, body-weight more on my right leg, absorbing the pain on the left, while a verse form an old Edo chant flashed teasingly to mind:

If I survive this one,
If indeed I survive
This one,
I shall lavish thanks
Unto my Maker:
For many a trauma
Have I known,
But this one —
This one is
The FATHER
Of them all.

Feeling fully in control of my muscle co-ordination again, I completed the turn, and found I was limping now. The disorders from bodily impact on concrete, were beginning to appear.

Noticing another batch of co-survivors straggling by, I hobbled to join their company.

The lights at the Port Harcourt terminus buildings shone blithely afar. We set to a trudge on the kilometre-stretch of watery runway towards, them, and speculating, many-voiced, on the cause of the mishap. Burst tyres, some guessed. Unexpected, faulty brakes, others argued. Inadequate night-landing facilities, a youngman in T-shirt and jeans opined.

"I think the pilot flew too high," a man in long Rivers shirt

was explaining freely, "too high, and then started descending sharply but, too late: that's the end of the runway!"

"Why did he have to fly so high in the first place," a voice queried.

"To avoid the rough weather," a man responded in a accent that was either Indian or Lebanese.

"Bad judgement," a buxom lady, wrappers pulled up to knee-level, fumed from up-front: "why didn't he fly back to Lagos when he knew he couldn't land well in this kind of weather?"

"I don't think it's bad judgement," answered the man in Rivers shirt, "he must have thought he could make it."

"Then why did we crash?" Countered the woman, without turning to look at the last speaker.

"Must be a technical fault," the fellow in T-shirt and jeans repeated, adding: "Nigerian pilots are among the best-trained in the world."

"As for..." concurred the man in Rivers shirt. This also confirmed the opinion I had about the competence of Nigerian pilots, from friends skilled in civil aviation.

"Then why did we crash, now?" The woman repeated, this time stopping to study those speaking.

"Burst tyres," I put in.

"Ehen?" The woman sneered, turned around and quickened her stride away from everybody, clearly unimpressed.

We trudged on. The distance to the terminus buildings seemed interminable.

To disgress slightly... My opinion about the competence of Nigerian pilots was restored about a month later. This time, it was on a trip to Jos, through Lagos. Still unwell from my new phobia about flying, I took the afternoon flight from Port Harcourt. Monday October 5. Got on the 737 and braced up for... the unthinkable. The pilot announced his name. Captain Williams. I've now taken strange interest in memorizing the names of pilots on the planes I'm in these days. As though that had anything to do with anything. The plane trundled to take-off position, then set off on full speed on the runway. I shut my eyes

and tried to forget... just forget it all — to block it off my mind. But the effort seemed irrelevant. Smooth. The take-off was — in my imagination, at any rate — exceptionally smooth. I'd tensed up for that moment, swearing to terminate my journey to Jos on landing in Lagos, if my nerves got rattled again. I would look for somewhere to sleep in Lagos that night, then catch the first "Ekene Dili Chukwu' or 'The Young Shall Grow', the next morning, and head straight back for P'racourt. If the students at Unijos failed to find their external examiner, that's just too bad!

But again the phobia seemed unnecessary. The plane eased to a cushioned landing at the Murtala Airport, Lagos. Oh, well... I then tried the connecting flight to Jos. One Captain Dadi was in control of that one. Another reassuring take-off. But some forty minutes after, the Captain announced bad weather ahead. Raining again.

"Hmm," I breathed deeply, recalling a line in Shakespeare's *Othello*: "Chaos is come again!"

The rest of the journey to Jos was indeed uneasy. Such that the plane, which was scheduled to proceed to Kaduna, had to wait in Jos. The landing at Jos? A mighty relief. Despite the rains, thunder and lightning. Most consoling. Much of my phobia — freshly acquired since that close-encounter aboard 5N-AUG, in September — seemed to be receding, helped, perhaps, by some persuasive information I'd since gathered from magazines on flying. Incidents of air-crashes, I now learn, are only 6% of road mishaps. Statistics covering ten years (1972 - 82) in the United States, for example, reveal that for every *one* aircrash fatality, 16,700 deaths occurred on the highways.

Anyway, these revelations no longer have value or purpose in our Nigeria of today. The recent upswing in airfares has deadened what little enthusiasm one might have drawn from such statistics to favour flying. At present air-travel in our fatherland is a chimera! As uninviting as a barber's shop to a completely bald-headed man! As prodigal as a dog with stock fish in its mouth!

Even more distressing, is the nation's warped sense of economic logic which the decision to raise airfares has accented. Ours is a kind of logic that ignores the commonsense that if you charge reasonable fees, your commodity is bound to attract more customers. In turn, a "reasonable" profit margin would be your own. Depending, of course, upon organizational efficiency. But not in Nigeria. For Nigerian businesses, from petty trading through Corporations, to Cartels, the compelling motto is: go for the customer's jugular veins! The deeper and longer the cut, the more your gains. Whether the customer survives to come again, should not matter. Little wonder our businesses die young! Entrepreneurial sadism is the name of the affliction that kills them.

The problem with Nigerian Airways is basically organizational. Grapple with that, and the Airways' financial ague would subside.

Air-travel may not be for the ordinary man. As we've been told. Officially. But in an economically sick nation with manifestly anaemic telephone services, the ordinary man needs to move around, make business or job contacts. The most time-saving means should help his ventures. That's how he can improve his condition. By extension, that's how a nation in economic paralysis can start squirming to recovery, too. One should think.

Anyway...

PART III — Reunion with the Living

We trudged on. Towards the Airport Terminus buildings. The distance still seemed so infinite, I couldn't stop marvelling at the miracle of our survival. All ninety-nine of us. Normally, the plane needs this entire kilometre-stretch of unblocked runway

over which to squander its last thrusts of provoked energy, before surrendering to fatigue. But 5N-AUG didn't run that far. Indeed, one doubts whether it sped over 50 metres — metres mark you. Then a sudden dead-stop. After barely one-twentieth of the required distance. Yet it didn't explode! What happened to the unspent heat and fuel? The trapped powers of inflammable devilry?

I know it is faddish to say God had nothing to do with it. Belief in God belongs in the realm of mysticism. Aeroplanes and the complexities of aero-dynamic technology belong to science. Fine. But I have made up my mind on this one. God intervened. Indeed, He not only intervened. He supervened. Fullstop. My father-in-law had a plaque hanging smack in the middle of a wall in his dining-room. The inscriptions on it got me laughing the first day I read them. Looking back now and applying the wordings to the present discussion, they seem quite appropriate and not so funny. The words are simply these:

> "Don't confuse me with facts,
> My mind is made up!"

Nna, God had a hand in that one, O! Even Einstein, father of modern science of energy, acknowledges some influence of the supernatural in the affairs of man. Hence his contemplative testimony:

> "... any person who is seriously pursuing the study of science, must be impressed with the existence of a spirit far vaster than that of man."

And it wasn't that all ninety-odd of us who escaped, Jonah-like, from the bowel of that plane, were holy, righteous angels, either. Rather, it was that God was ... well, especially merciful, this time around. Anyway...

Finally we arrived at the entrance to the Port Harcourt

erminus Hall. A large crowd had massed in the passageway. At ur approach, the gathering peeled benignly apart to the sides — ıore to our right, a few to the left — studying us with awed ıterest. Weary, dishevelled, and dripping rainwater in our tracks, 'e progressed through the crowd,. nodding or smiling wanly to ıeir condolences:

"We thank God, O!" Some hailed us.

"Una sorry, ya," others commiserated in more homely 'racourt pidgin: "Che-y-a-a, una sorry-sorry!"

We soon fanned out into the hall, spacious and ɔnquettishly cheerful with bright lights. I felt a sudden craving ır a hot bath. The warmth in the hall must have induced that eling.

I made straight for the taxi park, limping past clusters of xi drivers and touts who had started to re-tell their varied ɛrsions of what "really" happened.

Three taxi drivers detached themselves from these clusters ıd hurried over to me.

"Master, na where?" One greeted.

"Campus," I replied, "Uniport."

"30 bread," he shot back, appearing casual about it.

"Since when?" I countered.

"Oga I think you see say night don come," said the other iver, swinging his bunch of keys and turning around to go, ive am thirty bread, make him take you go rest for house." He ɜs gone.

"All right, twenty-five naira," I declared to the remaining 'o drivers.

"Ah, Oga, no be so," said the one who had accosted me st. He smiled, shaking his head, then departed as well.

I now became desperate, and levelled down to P'racourt ɪgin with the last man:

"Which one you dey?" I asked him

"Ok, 25 — make we go," he said, shrugging his shoulders, d reaching decidedly for my travelbag.

He led me to a middle-aged, white 504 saloon car

crouching balefully in the rain. He opened the front door — passenger side — dumped the bag on the seat, twisted inwards, pinched the rear-door button up. By reflex action, my right arm reached out for the door handle, but fell limply back to my side, as a sharp pain bit again into my right shoulder joint. I stood still, absorbing the hurt. The driver, meanwhile, had swung out of the car, whanging the front door shut again. He turned to me, mistaking my motionlessness to mean a waiting for some courtesy:

"Sorry, sir," he said, yanking the back door wide open for me to get in.

"Don't worry, I'll manage," I said to him, sidling close to the opened door.

"All right, sir," he said, striding round briskly to the driver's door.

I tried for the second time to lift my left leg into the car Painful. I made up my mind to go easy. The muscles felt stiff in an all-pervading soreness. I decided to try another approach. Shuffled around, back to, eased to sitting position. Then, left hand pressing against the seat, I strained inwards. Farther. About two-thirds of the way in, I paused, swivelling slowly frontwards, and bearing the pain in the left leg as I folded both legs to a resting position. Which done, I lifted the right arm again, extending it towards the door. Hopeless. Let it drop lamely on the seat. Then pushed ... pushed with the left hand, bodily, closer to the door. A light shot bright. The driver must have wondered what was happening at the back. He watched me twist towards the door, reaching for it now with my left hand. I grabbed the inner handle, P-u-l-l-e-d, banging the blasted door shut. The driver clicked off the inner light, while I slumped against the back rest of the seat, releasing a deep sigh of exhaustion.

"Oga, sorry, O," the man said, switching on the engine. "We go reach campus now-now, ya," he consoled. Then he added: "only say, when we reach Oga house, Oga go shake body small put for me. Campus road for night like dis, get as e be!"

Shake body. That's a pidgin slang for 'tipping'.

I resolved to make it clear to him, rightaway, that I wasn't going to pay any extra sum. ₦25 it had to be, and no more. Taxi drivers are notorious for provoking misunderstandings over fares on reaching a passenger's destination. I was in no mood for that trick. But then, I didn't want to antagonize this fellow either. There weren't too-willing drivers around, and I couldn't bear to go through another round of agonized manoeuvrings into another car. If ever I found one! I decided to turn the fellow's meaning into a joke, and through that, to affirm my stand on the issue of extra payment.

"Shake body give you again?" I cued him.

"Only small," the man replied eagerly.

"You sef," I began, faking distress: "when I reach my house, you want make I shake body again give you. Abi? That mean to say, upon all the shake way airbus don take man pikin body shake so tay, come brooskata am throway finish dis evening, e no sweet you reach. Na wa, O!"

That seemed to get him. The fellow burst into laughter, swinging the car on the main road.

The rains were pouring down again. The driver stopped laughing, pulled himself together, leaned forward to peer through the erratic panning of his windshield-wipers. Static electricity from lightning was disturbing the music from the radio too, worsening the mewings of one of those local dabblers in pop music who insist on sounding like Michael Jackson but with lyrics that show neither creativity nor sense.

The driver turned off the embarrassment, ushering some peace and quiet into the car.

I shut my eyes, my body lax, and tried to think. Moments later, much later, a chuckling broke through my stupor, stirring me into wakefulness. It was the driver again. Laughing. He swerved right at Rumuokoro juncture, heading West on the last stretch of 11 kilometres to Uniport Campus. He continued laughing a few seconds more, then wrapped it up with a clearing of the throat as he said, half-turning back to glance at me:

"Oga say airbus shake him body brooskata throway..."

I let him be, and turned my mind once again t recapturing my nightmare with the plane.

But, somehow inexplicably, I had difficulty formulating coherent sequence of thoughts. Try as I might. My recollectio kept getting clipped, distracted, or worse, blurred out by t recurrence of a verse from an old hymn. The intrusion so trespassed my thinking entirely, dominating its course with haunting recurrence like the shock from a fresh failure. Perha the rains, the thunder, the slash of lightning had to do with t rather whimsical intrusion of that popular hymn into m thoughts. Not to mention the sustained recurrence of o particular verse from it:

Breathe through the heats
Of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb
Let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake
Wind and fire;
O still small voice
Of calm.

I gave up trying to recall the incidents on the plane, wi the plane, or from the plane. Rather, a new curiosity in this o song seized my attention: a new interest in the sheer interplay conflicting images in the verse, underscoring, as it were, t tenuousness, even vacuousness of life itself perceived in a external clash between violence and peace. Idly, my mind start picking out the conflicting words in the verse and pairing the up. Heat, coolness. Fire, balm. Speak, dumb. Flesh, the tangibl sense, the intangible. Voice — worded air; wind — unworded a Earthquake — agitation; calm — repose.

The tune came fully to mind, instilling my whole bei

with an odd sense of isolation, of desertion, loneliness; a vague feeling of emptiness, of loss mixed with terror — terror resulting, I presume, from thoughts of what could have been the case, had the ... the unspeakable happened. Shakespeare, contemplating the terror of DEATH through the musings of Hamlet, concludes resignedly that: "... the readiness is all!"

Was I ready? Was anyone in the belly of 5N-AUG, engaging Flight 104 to Port Harcourt, on that Tuesday, 8th September 1987, ready? Indeed, has any mortal ever been ready for Death? Those questions must have brashly opened up to me the naked reality of how vastly unrealized my earthly dreams were — still are! Like the very dreams of a pillaged Africa herself, the problem hasn't been from an under-utilization of potential; not from over-utilization of it either. The predicament is largely a case of mis-utilization of both gift and energies — a situation which lulls its victim into a heady feeling of progress, or rather into an opiated sense of motion, until a moment of honest introspection comes to reveal that the motion, after all, has been in circles. Much of the time.

My mind passed over dreams, capabilities, and seemingly unreachable goals, and took to wondering over persons whom I'd have missed sorely, had the ... the worst happened. Wife, children, relations; those junior workers on campus with their beatific "Good morning" smiles — whether I feel good on the particular morning or not; the little, neighbourhood children with their rascally delight in waving me down for a conversation on one thing or other; my students — the serious and the lazy alike; and, yes, of course, my prime joke-mates — Segun Akinbola, Rowland Abiodun, Olu Akoumolafe, E.J., Aunty M, Nwangaji, Di Mama of Temilolu. God forbid bad thing! Aunty Leti, Kay, those *vs* rascals; Nolue, Kalu, Dapo, Derobed Senator Hagher! Na wa O! The after-squash, 'Life' — beer-impelled braggings of Raymond Okafor. And the younger breed: Niyi Coker, 'Pedestrain' Alozie, Alani Nasiru, Colombos, Femi Shaka, Donwa-Ifode, Ben, Chineke! Akakuru, Seyefa Koroye alias

"NTC"! Chei! If, seriously, I had ended up in Hell, that place would have been real hell without people like you there with me, O. Allah!

At least, here in Nigeria, SAPo that scrubs FEMi notwithstanding, we can still manage to laugh. Or as 'Peter Pan' says about Nigerians' resilience to hardship, somehow we still "cry to laugh" Together.

As I remained slumped in the seat of that taxi, and just before the bump that normally foretells one's final approach to Uniport's Delta-Park Gates, I saw your faces. All forlorn, red-eyed, silently questioning without expecting answers. I could even sniff some lingering whiffs of Benson and Hedges about Koroye's presence, despite a dejected visage! And bogus-man Segun Akinbola looking distantly morose, numb and defensively confused — the way a penniless husband looks when departing the presence of a mother-in-law who has just scolded him again for stinginess. The fellow must have 'beered' himself sick! As though that could bring a friend back from Hellfire! Nonsense. The man indeed has a knack for doing the wrong things at the right time! Just disgusting!

And that's Ossie Enekwe, too. As usual glumly keeping himself to himself. Most likely, he could be recalling the bizarre lines in one of his poems, and wondering how dreadfully appropriate they are to the situation. That poem that reads:

> We came too late...
> We could not tell
> From the many mounds
> Which was yours,
> Since the grave-diggers
> Had left for the weekend,
> After a tiring week.

We could not have
Dug you out for a better pit.
We only wanted to identify your portion
and stand over you awhile,
At least to prove to you
That you had friends

The End.

— *Ola R.*

GLORIA MT EMEZUE

The New Poetry of Intra-personal and Inter-personal Concourse: A Study of *Naked Testimonies* and *Full Moon*

> The (new)... poet, in writing himself, writes his time. ... It (is) his business to express the greater emotional intensity of his time, based on whatever his time happened to think.
>
> (Hayward, ed. 1953:23)

Toyin Adewale and Chinenye Ce can be best described as the poets of their time. Both share common features that distinguish them from earlier generations of poets – features which attest to their peculiar styles and themes.

Both poets were born shortly before, during or after the Nigeria-Biafra war. They were brought up in a predominantly urban setting, thus having very little to do with the rural environment of most African villages. Incidentally, both had the benefit of formal education and studied English language and literature at the tertiary levels. In their poetry, one sees the influence of these socio-economic trends.

Many of the poets writing in the present generation were victims and witnesses of the slowly grinding economic and social malaise of the Nigerian society. Perhaps many of them too had borne the acute sense of hopelessness, total disillusionment and the defeat of a 'dream job' experienced by many unemployed Nigerian graduates of their time.

They are conversant with the cruel dictatorship under the

Nigerian military and the maladministration of their civilian counterparts ('malversations', *aka* Chinenye). They have lived through the Nigerian nightmare under past and present leaders and seen political buffoonery at its profound absurdity. These experiences cut very deeply into the physche of the poets of this period, thus leading to the more intense exploration of such themes as anger, hate, desolation, loss and love.

Toyin Adewale's anthology of poems *Naked Testimonies* was first published in 1995, with a reprint at the threshold of the millennium. Chinenye's *Full Moon* also came out at the beginning of the century. Both anthologies, — virtuous concatenation of poetry of deep intensity — remind us of Wordsworthian "...feelings recollected in tranquility." However, both anthologies chronicle the interesting struggle of poets to grapple with an acceptance of the human frailties through the evocation of feelings of love (Chinenye) and hate (Adewale).

One discovers an interesting similarity between Chinenye's and Adewale's handling of the twin emotions of love and hate in their *Full Moon* and *Naked Testimonies* respectively. Both poets traverse similar emotional planes in their exploration of their artistic mission. Chinenye paints a landscape of love, redemption and liberation in *Full Moon*, while Adewale's intensity of emotion explores the themes of desertion, loss and emancipation in *Naked Testimonies*.

One might argue that this is an 'escapist literature' which should not be tolerated during such times of 'urgency and commitment' as ours. I would rather that Adewale and Chinenye were appraised by their preoccupation with love and hate as a method of purgation and subsequent entering into finer emotions in order to come to terms with the harsh conditions of their times. This quest therefore calls for a greater dependency on interpersonal and intrapersonal concourse; thereby coming to terms with the present depressing situation.

The reason is not far fetched. Having lost faith in a nation of swindler-leaders who guarantee no valid future for their youth,

most poets of this generation 'discover' themselves by forging strong ties with interpersonal relationships. Chinenye glorifies friendships a great deal in *Full Moon*. As he puts it in the poem *For Joy:*

> My heart takes a leap
> When the warmth of your presence
> Stirs the dying embers...
> (Chinenye, 2001:22).

Such a relationship serves the dual function of helping the poet have a friend, but even more importantly, helping him 'discover' himself.

> You tended this fire
> To dance in orange glows
> And now here's my light and life
> In the radiance of your eyes
> (Chinenye, 2001:22).

'Love' uplifts and liberates the poet from the mundane and emptiness of everyday living:

> Thoughts of you
> Gently float around my loneliness

to the utmost heights of expectancy:

> Dreams
> Spill over the shores of my
> Passionate river's course

and ultimate promise of exhilaration in 'Dreams'

> And my solitary wanderings
> Carry your lingering presence

As the fresh morning flower ...
(Chinenye, 2001:25).

Sometimes, the feeling can be quite intense and vibrant as expressed in 'Night Time':

Burning and scalding
from the earthen heat
Of my smouldering heart
(Chinenye, 2001:25).

It is the kind of love that expresses the beauty of even the illusory and transient things of life as captured in the poet's symbolic portrayal of the moon in 'Queen of the Night':

...even the shining stars
Blush in your beauty's thrall...

Only to leave us at the unwary moments of expectancy:

But one, only one morning
Winking at the glowing cloud
And gone was the mystery queen

So too your beauty
O queen of the darkly night!
(Chinenye, 2001:46).

Above all, it is the kind of love that unearths all mistakes ('Fireballs 2):

That no earth
May hide
the errors of bygone days
(Chinenye, 2001:35)

in a subliminal sense...

to sear my heart
and rend
The veil of existence
bare, and naked
As this palm of mine
(Chinenye, 2001:36)

which also purifies and absolves as in a religious or mystical experience:

I
swim in purest atoms of
shimmering lights

and leaves us with the personal triumph of wisdom over ignorance:

Nothing
like your gaze that lifted the
veil/And underneath is the
pearl of the world.
(Chinenye, 2001:36-37).

Chinenye sings of the fearless quest for love which edifies and brings forth wisdom:

Follow me and we will search
Hidden corners of the mind
To be joined where dread pales
In million spectra of truth!
(Chinenye, 2001:24).

With this wisdom comes an awareness of truth and fortitude:

I shall forge along to build my dream
On airy hills beyond the rising sun

This liberates the wise from all shackles of hypocrisy, pretence, falsehood, tyranny and treachery of the mind (the hallmark of society). He declares:

> Revolution may rumble down high ways
> There'll be confusion after thunder
>
> I can look the raving tyrant in the eye
> And see the yawning emptiness in his glare
> (Chinenye, 2001:7).

When there exists an occasion for loss of love, the pain is very acute and leaves the poet in perplexity and wonder ('Breaking Point'):

> Are they really yours
> These eyes so cold and flat
> And gone those smiles that
> Lit the sun of your world
> (Chinenye, 2001:55).

Adewale overcomes this perplexity of broken truces. Hers is a studied, deliberate and calculated renunciation of all that discredit the 'villain'.

Once he was the beloved, and elevated to lofty heights just as in Chinenye vision that sought to transform both lover and loved. But now he is

> diminished in the eyes of her sunglasses
> (Adewale, 1995:12).

Adewale takes off in a semi-elegiac lament:

> I tell a tale of sour tangerines
> And shrivelled penises
> In the furnace of testicle crushers
> Diamonds are mere stones

In the trauma of dry sentences ...
(Adewale, 1995:46).

This tale of 'sour tangerines' which signifies a soured or ruined dream is further extrapolated in images of ruin and desolation:

... hearths crumble
in courtyards of ruin
Absurd altars say I am sacrifice...
(Adewale, 1995:47).

Adewale's gripping re-enactment of a tragic loss whirls along into its third and fourth sequences, unearthing more stupefying and numbing spectres till entering the fifth movement where the poet unravels a visionary triumph. In spite of all human tribulations, (wo)man stands firm and resolute:

It is I
Striding upon my high places
Shield my voice
I walk in fire
(Adewale, 1995:50).

In a satirical whiplash Adewale has flung men into a well-deserved sewage. Most often the cause of this break-up in relationships, men become mere subjects of ridicule ('A Thawing'):

...
he runs, she swims beneath his feet
glimpses of secrets file past
...
Once he was magnificent
...
He is still running
See his ears flapping in the wind

Run baby run
Dive into a nail bed.
(Adewale, 1995:38).

There is a cold cynical stance typical of Adewale's poetry which serves to belie the depth of the hurt being expressed in her poems:

...scowls that decrease our face value
This is the night
...vigil of septic pits
This is the storm
...solid sheet of shattered eggs
(Adewale, 1995:44).

This method achieves a 'reversal' effect that absolves the poet-persona of any response to the feelings. It places her audience, as primary participant, in the centre of the poetic concourse thereby invoking a collective cathartic effect. Adewale's style therefore succeeds in making the experience a universal one.

Loss and disappointment are themes that run through most of Adewale's poems. This symbolic loss, very much like that of a cherished dream, has the power of creating a new awareness in the individual. With this heightened recognition of the self comes the individualisation of, and pride in, the self. As she says:

There are lacerations
But we shall salve our wounds
Calm sandstorms...

The poetic gift of optimism is not squandered or inured ('Fresh Dawns').

...on the trail/of light
...

soaring and prideful like an eagle in flight
(Adewale, 1995:57).

It is rather enhanced by the promise of an eternal kind. Thus in 'Untitled' we have,

When hope flutters...
Like a quaking foundation
...
I'll hold your sure word
Knowing it's spirit and blood
(Adewale, 1995:56).

The poet subtly leads us into deeper knowingness, and awareness of truth, which prods mere human sentiments and emotions into the realm of indomitable spirit.

Adewale and Chinenye, acting on the influence of their times and age, have succeeded in exploring the range of emotions to delineate the complexities of their society. They have employed these emotions in their inward and outward creative expurgation without hindrance. This marks the dawn of a new kind of poetic or creative liberty in serious African writing now and probably in future.

THE LIBERATED CONSCIOUSNESS

The dawn of a new 'African consciousness' could be perceived in the poetry of Chinenye and Adewale who, for the first time, have begun an exploration of the self in depth and magnitude hitherto in danger of being deemed alien. They do not feel bound to explore topical themes or to infuse their diction with copious visions of African flora and fauna. Adewale and Chinenye simply write from their hearts, and this quality makes their poetry truly original as we can see from the following literary techniques.

STYLE AND IMAGERY

The most poignant imagery in the poetry of Adewale and Chinenye is their use of ethereal images. There is a recurrent use of imagery and images denoting the elements for example, fire, waves, water, wind, clouds, light etc., and nature like: 'hills', 'waterfall', 'mountain paths', 'sands', 'sun', 'moon', by both Adewale and Chinenye in most of their poems. There is no deliberate attempt to 'speak' like the traditional bards, full of high flown proverbial language, style and traditional imagery remarkable of the earlier generation of poets like Ezenwa Ohaeto, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun and Niyi Osundare. The language of these two poets reflects the flora and fauna of an environment they are familiar with. There is also a preponderance of images reflecting the urban environment, (Western influences that have come to be accepted as a part of the new emerging African society). For example, Adewale's use of 'jigsaw puzzles', 'Gethsamane', 'diesel', 'knife', 'spoon', 'fork', 'peak', 'cap', 'car', 'tarmac', 'sunglasses' etc. From Chinenye's anthology we have such images as 'polythene', 'jazz', 'siren snouts', 'ships', 'revolutions', 'doctrine', 'sentry', 'missiles', etc, used in describing objects and events in some of the poems.

Adewale's imagery is of course very African. For instance, when Adewale asks in 'Questing':

> How does it feel
> When your nests are ants, soldier ants
> (p.19)

one who had been bitten by soldier ants (perhaps on the way to the farm) can understand the sharp sting and lingering pain which this poet tries to convey.

Chinenye's reflections on 'Night',

> ... still
> and the faithful watchmen screech
> like vigilantes of the dead
> (Chinenye, 2001:15)

evokes a typically homely scenario familiar to African children. The 'watchmen' that 'screech' in the night here being the crickets and other nocturnal insects whose noise grows loud in the dead of an African night.

It is in the employment of these natural and vivid images by these two poets that their relevance to the present generation lies. For example, the use of 'sunglasses' (a borrowed mode of dressing by acculturation),

...diminished in the eye of her sunglasses.

by Adewaie, and the scorn towards the religious zealotry and hypocrisy of modern 'prophets'

('Heaven's seats', a borrowed religion) by Chinenye are appropriate deployments of contemporary themes by the poets in painting a familiar landscape without conscious attenuation of craft to suit ideological or traditional loyalties. Their natural choice of diction reveals a keen sense of observation, the quality of awareness for a writer in touch with their times.

POETIC SEQUENCING

Also noticeable in both poets is a movement of what I call poetic sequencing. Although this style is not peculiar to both poets, it is interesting that this style of writing should be a hallmark in their poetry. In 'Full Moon', 'New Yam', 'I am', 'My Baby', 'Breaking Point', etc, by Chinenye, and Adewale's 'Naked Testimonies' and 'Streams', one notices the gradual development and progression of thought and poetic rhythm culminating in 1/i, 2,ii, 3/iii etc that both poets label against each title of poem where this feature occurs.

Thus we have, 'Streams 1', 'Streams II' (Adewale) and 'Fireballs 1', 'Fireballs 2', etc by Chinenye. Adewale's 'An Eye is talking', albeit moving in the same rhythm of poetic sequencing treats different subject matters with each movement, while still

revolving around the central theme of gradual disintegration which the poem chronicles. Thus

An Eye is talking
- Morning
- Evening
- Night
- Day

where 'Morning', 'Evening' etc serve as individualised units of the same thought form.

CONCLUSION

Love and hatred, joy and sorrow, disappointment and expectation become weapons which the new generation of Nigerian poets (Chinenye and Adewale) use in 'conquering' their immediate environment. Both poets have used poetry as

> ... the power by which man understands the universe and improves his own condition... the goals of a rational man considered to be knowledge, freedom and happiness.
>
> (The New Encyclopeadia Britannica 4 1988:504).

As themes of artistic preoccupation, these tools successfully employed in coming to terms with themselves and their perception of their roles in their society, no doubt, guarantee for these young poets, an honourable place in the future of creative literature in Africa as well as the rest of the world.

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SAM ONUIGBO

Elegant Variation as a Discourse Pattern in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*

INTRODUCTION

It is said that "the being of literature is language" and that explains why language remains an important ornament for the ardonment of literary messages. If language is not merely a supplementary tool in the production of literature, it cannot be auxiliary in its interpretation. *The Interpreters* is one of the literary texts that benefit much from increasing flow of linguistic-based literary analysis.

When Maduakor (1987:81) says that *The Interpreters* has acquired a reputation as a difficult work, part of the reason for this difficulty is because the novel is "the first modernist novel published in English by a West African writer". But when Enekwe (1975:80) projects the view of *The Interpreters* as a difficult work, he believes that it is not only that the language is difficult but that the language is replete with abstract and vague expressions. When however, Alan Friedman (1972:414) uses the image of the cobweb to characterize the features of this novel and define its structure, he raises immediately a strong feeling of uneasy entanglement which derives from sophisticated exploitation of the rich and adaptable linguistic instruments. Whether critics and readers applaud Soyinka's verbal dexterity or not, the fact is that everybody acknowledges his power over words and where he over-indulges this power, "it is with the deliberate intention of achieving a poetic resonance or seeking to express in words, a mystical and sometimes surrealistic experience which is difficult to articulate" (Maduakor 1987:83)

In fact, Biodum Jeifo (1987:xi) started the argument in the introduction of Maduakor's book where he hints that

> the idiosyncratic and often solitary expressions of Soyinka's socio-political commitment find something of an analogue in the assertive aesthetic individualism of both his conception of the function of literature in African society at the present time and the actual paradigms of commitment discoverable in the protagonists of his major works in the quintessentially Soyinkan imaginative universe in which they are made to act.

It is difficult to take a full account of the whole range of linguistic experimentation which Soyinka engages in this novel. What is done, therefore, is to examine "Elegant Variation", not just as a form of discourse pattern, but also as an important strategy for character delineation. In this way, we can see how, according to Fowler (1971:9), "linguistics remains closely attached to textual discussion" in a union that sustains the much cherished mutual dependence between linguistics and literary studies.

THE CONCEPT OF ELEGANT VARIATION

Both literary critics and linguistics acknowledge the technical innovations in *The Interpreters* and an important feature of the innovation is Soyinka's linguistic experimentation. It is not surprising that a modernist novel like *The Interpreters* with a "tremendous density of texture" (Moore, 1971:78) and a net-work of criss-crossing themes can only yield its meaning with several readings. Part of the density of texture of the novel derives from its recourse to what it technically referred to as "Elegant Variation".

Elegant variation is a linguistic device which engenders

multi-dimensional consciousness. It is a technique that employs an alternative expression as a replacement for an expression in the content. This linguistic device is firmly anchored on the principle that variety is the spice of life. Too much repetition of lexical items or names can be boring and Elegant Variations are therefore, chosen to serve as an important method of cross-referencing. Leitch (1983:229) remarks that this form of discourse pattern involves doubling back, synthesizing and divagation. The re-appearance of narrative unit, lexical items and expressions in different linguistic habiliments, is a strong factor that gives *The Interpreters* the much talked-about density and complexity.

ELEGANT VARIATIONS: SIGNS TO INTERPRETERS

The Interpreters employs an infinite number of references and cross-references through a process of elegant variations. This device which serves as "signs to interpreters" is employed, not just for character delineation but also to delineate a group linguistic code.

Elegant variation assumes two dimensions in the novel: the simple and the complex. Elegant variation is simple if it involves a variation with a primary referent which can be explicit or implicit. An explicit referent has a denotative connective with its variation. For example, Dr. Lumoye, is referred to as 'this fuckin quack' (p. 244). While 'Dr Lumoye' is the primary referent, 'fuckin quack' functions as its variant. In a different episode, Sagoe is referred to as a 'Gambari' (p. 36). This euphemistic expression is a variation of the primary referent 'Sagoe'. And implicit reference, on the other hand, can only be decoded by bringing together fragmented bits of information. In an encounter between Egbo and Simi, the expression 'raw cotton plug' is an implicit primary referent for any impotent penis. Ultimately a connotative relationship exists between the form of a referent and its variation.

Elegant variation takes a complex dimension when an explicity primary referent has two or more variations. For

example, Sir Derinola is referred to, on different occasions, as 'the Morgue' (p. 18), the 'ex-judge' (p. 18) and the 'dead chairman' (p. 18). Similarly Joe Golder, the black American Scholar becomes 'the Stroller' (p. 139), 'the Stranger' (p. 184) and 'that disgusting cessation of nature' (p. 341) on different occasions. The semantic relationship of the primary referents and their elegant variations can be denotative or connotative depending on the context in which they are employed. In short, relational over-lapping is an integral aspect of semantic density in *The Interpreters*.

The functions of elegant variation in *The Interpreters* take different perspectives. For example, it is employed to delineate various levels of social relationships as well as the degree of intimacy existing between the characters. This is exemplified by the fact that Sekoni is referred to as 'Sheikh' or 'Alhaji' and Faseyi as 'Fash' by the members of their social group. Nwabuzor, Sagoe's editor and Dehinwa call Sagoe "Biodun'. Faseyi is also addressed as 'Ayo' by his wife, Mother and Bandele. Faseyi's wife is referred to as 'Moni' by his mother-in-law.

The mother-in-law is referred to by Faseyi's wife and friends as 'mummy'. Dehinwa's mother, according to the Yoruba tradition, refers to the aunt, a relation of Dehinwa's father, as 'Sisi'.

Elegant variation is employed to delineate a group linguistic code. In *The Interpreters*, this dimension creates an ideal dialogic literary form. The young interpreters interact as a close-knot social group and the environment in which the characters interact embodies an oasis of mutual comprehension. Halliday and Hasan (1976:36) aptly refer to it as 'a common context of culture'. The linguistic codes employed by Kola, Egbo, Sagoe, Sekoni, Bandele and Lasunwon while they are discussing Kola's sketch of the woman dancer depicted a reservoir of shared experience emanating from a 'common context of culture'. Lexical items such as 'orange slices', 'oranges' and 'butter' used by Sagoe (p. 27) refer to the breasts of the dancer. The word

'original' refers to the dancer herself. To Egbo, the dancer is 'Owolebi' and 'the Black Immanent'. Speaking to Dehinwa who has come to find out whether he has passed out in the bath, Sagoe refers to his genital organ as 'that which scared the hell out of you when you opened the door just now' (p. 105). Joe Golder's homosexual behaviour is referred to by Bandele and Kola as 'his stuff'.

From the preceding linguistic explication, it is observed that the primary referents are not only implicit but largely connotative. They function as linguistic codes for mutual understanding among interlocutors and also as euphemism to avoid what Omole (1989:28) calls 'downright vulgarity'. As an evaluative linguistic device, elegant variation is employed in *The Interpreters* to delineate the motives, intentions, mental constructs and attitudes of the characters. The primary referent may become explicit as a result of the evaluative linguistic function of the device.

To Egbo, the members of the Osa Descendants Union who have to persuade him to accept the traditional role of his ancestors are 'tempters from home' (p. 12). This expression is an indication of Egbo's inability to resolve the choice between 'the warlord of the creeks' and the 'dull grey file cabinet faces of the foreign office' (p. 10). Egbo's unresolved choice is a paradigm of the text and the uncompleted pilgrimage to Osa symbolizes his moral state. His failure to choose and accept the reality of the past and present is characterised as 'apostasy' with its semantic variations as 'absolute neutrality' (p. 11) and 'objectivity strained to its negative limits' (p. 12). Again, Water assumes a diabolic implication for Egbo as a 'thing of death' (p. 6). This phrase refers to the demise of Egbo's parents in 'the still water of the creek' (p. 6). In Kola's consciousness, Sekoni's ingenuity appears disparagingly as a 'stuttering dark horse' (p. 101). Sekoni's artistic display evokes kola's respect and envy.

The use of elegant variation in *The Interpreters* is well illustrated in character delineation. The variations of references

are complimentary and they help to project a multidimensional awareness of characters and their values. In the words of Leech and Short (1981:107)

> Such references are not merely longwinded substitutes for a name! They draw attention now to this, now to that aspect of the same person, and so build up a many-sided picture of each character.

Elegant variation in its complex variations is employed to build up the many-sided picture of characters and situations. It moves in satiric dimensions as the text exposes the avariciousness and hedonism of the political and intellectual elite.

In *The Interpreters*, Sir Derinola is the 'dead chairman' (p. 18). According to Sagoe, the lawyers nicknamed him the 'Morgue' as a result of his corrupt attitude. Sir Derinola is also referred to as 'the ex-judge' (p. 18). In a state of delirium, Sagoe refers to him as 'the knight'. This encounter in a state of hallucination is a memento; an exemplum of the final comment of death on a judge who sold himself to a corrupt system. In this connection, the narrative voice consistently refers to him as 'the Morgue'. Through the device of elegant variation, sardonic amusement is intensified to disgust. In this sense, when the narrative voice refers to Sir Derinola as 'Sir Derin', it is in response to his collusion with Chief Winsala, a sot, to obtain a bribe from Sagoe. Thus, Sarcasm is tinged with humour to show the incongruity of the man and his title. Chief Winsala is referred to as 'the old rogue' (p. 77) and a man in 'a state of deep alcoholic amorousness' (p. 73).

The character of Professor Oguazor as well as the value system of his society is explored through elegant variation. Eldred Jones (1978:161) is of the view that Professor Oguazor is 'the novel's main satirical but of the Ibadan establishment'. Ayo, Bandele and his contemporaries refer to him as 'the professor'. By referring to him as 'the professor', the narrative voice

modulates into farce; thus, Oguazor is ridiculed for aspiring to the manners and cultural habits of Europeans. Oguazor emerges as a caricature and a comic butt. He is grotesque in his odious concern with 'merals', especially, in his fiery denunciation of 'moral terpitude' in the university after a young student has become pregnant. However, the morally conscious professor is not only a philistine but his profligacy is ridiculously expressed:

> Professor Oguazor had three sons and one five-year-old daughter only and the daughter gave him much sorrow and pain because he could not publicly acknowledge her since he had her by the house maid and the poor girl was tucked away in private school in Islington ... (p. 150).

The device of juxtaposition is employed to show how the professor has failed to connect Salubi's moral terpitude' (p. 148) with his own illegitimate child. There are other occasions when he is simply referred to as 'Oguazor' or 'J.D. Oguazor' in order to ridicule the veneer of professorship among academics.

Mrs Oguazor is referred to as 'Ceroline' by her husband while the narrative voice and other characters call her 'Mrs Oguazor'. At other times, she is the 'professor's wife' or 'a black Mrs professor'. Their plastic cornucopia is scorned by Sagoe. In a bid to persuade the intrepid and unconventional Monica Faseyi to go upstairs with the other ladies, Mrs Oguazor becomes angry:

> This should have been the end, and a few days before it would have been. But this was her first social evening as the professor's wife, and the scene it could no longer be disguised – had become public. And she, a rare species, a black Mrs. professor was faced with the defiance of a young common housewife, little more than a girl, in her own house, publicly and the code of etiquette was on her, Mrs Oguazor's side! 'you

> will come with us at once', said Caroline, 'or don't ever expect to be invited to my house again'. And the girl said simply, 'Oh, I understand that' (p. 146).

Monica Faseyi is commonly known as 'Mrs Faseyi'. Sagoe and the narrative voice refer to her as 'a young girl', during her remonstration with Mrs Oguazor. Her indiscretion at the party is juxtaposed with the comportment of the other 'ladies'.

Ayo Faseyi presents a comic and ridiculous picture of a social climber. The wife's indiscretion and non-conformity to the social etiquette of his group lets him down and placed him in an awkward position. He is left emasculated:

> Sweat had broken free on the neck of a husband. Nothing kept him earthed but the desperate wish that the floor might open and swallow him. His motions became palsied and his palms clammed on a cigarette until it snuffed out (p. 147).

Monica Faseyi becomes a social 'outcast' and a 'mere girl' among ladies. Her obduracy and lack of compromise stigmatize her: her husband feels awfully disappointed.

Moving in satiric dimensions, the narrative voice refers to Peter, the Odious German journalist, as 'a pink oval', ' a hairy pink wrench' and 'the same zoo' (p. 136). Peter's behaviour is expressed in despicable terms. In the same way, a group of traditional musicians who perform at the night club during the rain is referred to as "Wanderers" by Egbo (p. 20). The manager sees them as 'those people' (p. 19). The narrative voice depicts them as 'the small apala group' (p. 19). Similarly, Simi is referred to as 'mammy wata', perhaps, as a result of her beauty and alluring but fatal influence over men. She is also the 'Queen Bee' (p. 52).

Elegant variation takes the form of figurative locution or synecdoche tainted with sarcasm in 'two wildly gesticulating gloves' (p. 143), and 'forty odd moral supports'. These are

despicable expressions employed to satirise Mrs Oguazor's friends at the party. A group of potential converts passing by Lazarus' church is referred to as 'a ripe field of corn' (p. 181) probably as a result of the exploitation and deception inherent in the system of religious conviction.

Joe Golder is referred to as 'the stroller' which is a reference to his usual habit of prowling round the university campus in quest of an unfortunate victim for a homosexual escapade. He is also known as 'the stranger' because of his peculiar nature. Pinkshore who describes himself as the professor's son-in-law is referred to as 'the plague' (p. 151) by Sagoe. It is through him that we know about the professor's illegitimate daughter. The narrative voice refers to him as a "shawl".

Kola is referred to as 'a quivering raindrop on the roof-edge'. This metaphoric expression is used to show his emotional instability when Lasunwon makes a disparaging remark about Sekoni's artistic work.

The minor characters are also explored through elegant variations. Lazarus, identified with his complexion, is referred to as "the Albino". The name Lazarus is not only biblical but represents the 'resurrectional experience' of the bearer. Noah is another character who is variously referred to as 'the youth', 'the boy', and 'Barabbas'. Our encounter with him is on the day he is pursued by an irate mob. The narrative voice is in sympathy with him and irked at the mob's action.

> Sagoe leapt off the bus and joined the throng - Run Barabbas, run, all underdog sympathetic. Run, you little thief or the bigger thieves will pass a law against your existence as a menace to society (p. 114).

Like the biblical Barabbas, he shows penitence and is consecrated as an apostle by Lazarus. The young university student who is disvirgined by Egbo is another synonymous

character. She is variously referred to as 'a shy girl' 'the girl' and 'the strange girl'. Her individuality and peculiarity are predicated on her strength of resolution. She accepts her pregnancy with a remarkable sense of equanimity. Another minor character is Usaye. She is referred to as 'a warm yellow moth' (p. 47), 'an albino girl'. To Kola, Usaye is such 'a fluffy, thing' (p. 48) and 'Obaluwaiye's handmaid'. Obaluwaiye is the name for Sopona, the Yoruba god of smallpox.

Elegant variation is also used to explore other aspects of the novel that are unrelated to characterization. In the opening section of *The Interpreters*, Egbo watches 'as dancers dodged long chameleon tongues of the cloudburst and the wind leapt at them, visibly malevolent' (p. 5). Here the text employs pathetic fallacy to refer to the rain and the wind by imbuing them with life and spirit; thus, animating them. The word 'plop' is also used to refer to the rain.

The experimental power station built by Sekoni is referred to as 'junk' by the chairman of the Board. To the village chief, it is a 'funny thing' (p. 29). During Egbo's amorous escapade with a female university student at the Ogun River, the palm tree is referred to as 'The Lord of Spiral rib' (p. 132), while its neck is 'the god's neck' (p. 132). The palmwine is the 'milk' (p. 132). At the same time, the disvirgin of the female student is referred to as "the centre pure ran raw red blood' (p. 135). To Sagoe, Oguazor's house is 'the house of death'. It is equally referred to as 'a petrified forest of artificial flowers' (p. 142). These structural artifacts imbue the text with linguistic complexity and semantic density which account for part of the much talked-about difficulty in appreciating in full the literary merit of the text.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion so far, Soyinka's exploitation of elegant variation to encode a wide range of semantic and linguistic relationships between tropes, events and fictional characters is clearly illustrated. In *The Interpreters*, elegant

variation is a fusion of the literal, the figurative and the analogous to create a multi-dimensional vision through a net-work of cross-references. In this way, the author varies the manner of referring to a situation, to avoid unpleasant repetitions. These variations, as we can see from the analysis, are mock-dignified or mock-debased complementary labels employed to delineate the motives, intentions, mental constructs and attitudes of the characters. Through this device, the writer projects and intensifies some form of sardonic amusement to show the level of incongruity between the primary referent and its complementary appositives. For instance, Sir Derinola, the 'ex-judge', is also the "dead chairman" and the 'morgue'. He is that welcome and unwelcome character at the same time and in this way, the author combines sarcasm and humour to paint a serious picture of a decaying personality or system.

In all, elegant variations are structural artifacts which imbue the text with linguistic complexity and semantic density and, of course force the readers to participate in the events of the text through close reading.

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DON BURNESS

Letter from Mozambique

Forty years ago Ulli Beier came to Mozambique. That paladin of African cultures returned to Nigeria intoxicated with the vibrant, symbolic paintings of Malangatana. In BLACK ORPHEUS he referred to the man from Matalana as "one of the great artists in Africa." He also praised Bertina, whom he described as a "painter of talent."

Forty years on and one can safely assert that it is Mozambique's painters and writers who have been the best advertisements for the country. Mozambique (the name "Mozambique" comes from the Portuguese mispronunciation of Moussa al-Bik, an Arabic trader of renown), like too many countries in Africa, has walked down paths of anomy. The struggle for independence, a particularly savage (un)civil war, a growing apartheid between the corrupt rich and impoverished masses — this is the story of Mozambique in the last half century.

Malangatana, however, is still alive. Bertina is being exhibited in Rome. Other painters such as Naguib and Mankeu have captured in color and images the stories of ordinary Mozambicans who have walked down history's roads where mines continue to maim. Malangatana and his fellow artists can be seen at the National Museum of Art along with the elegant maconde statues. Mankeu-like Brazilians, many Mozambicans of note are known by a single name — offers extraordinary images of a people's *via doloroso*. Born in 1934, not far from Malangatana's town, about 20 miles north of Maputo, he is

quite a few of his poems and had included him in two collections of poetry that I edited.

In a language accessible to ordinary people, in a language that flows with the power of rivers, in a language that is punctuated with images from differing spheres of Mozambique, Craveirinha celebrates people and places and rejects European imposition of values and European dominance. He expresses in an individual voice the collective sorrows and hopes of a people. The poet chronicles the struggles of workers including those sent to the mines outside of Johannesburg and young prostitutes and the men and women of barrios like Mafalala. His imagery captures zambezis of a people's experiences.

Tenderness is a quality of this poet and when his wife died, flowers of tenderness were his gift. His collection MARIA is the best book of love poems I have ever read written by a man to his wife. Over the years he honored her and celebrated her through poetry.

Craveirinha at 80. I visited him at his modest home on Avenida Romão Farinha within sight of Mafalala. "Djichili, "I greeted him in Changane. His home is filled with paintings and statues and books. On his walls Malangatana and Bertina and João-Paulo. Craveirinha himself continues to paint. With pride he showed me his trophies that he won as a distance runner. There is a photo of a 15-year old José Craveirinha and fellow members of a soccer team. Like Okigbo Craveirinha married poetry to sport and excelled in both.

Craveirinha does not speak expansively. He prefers the elliptical comment. Interviewing him is like trying to catch the wind. When I asked what explained the extraordinary achievement of his generation not only in Mozambique but throughout Africa, he smiled, paused, and said, "there is a link, an interdependence — when a man needs wood, he seeks out a woodcutter". On the need for a tragic vision —" someone who is unthinkingly happy does not realize that tomorrow a car can hit him. The tragic vision is transposed into art, into a painting, a sculpture."

All this with a twinkle in the eye. He handed me a sculpted knife. I playfully asked him if this was for use as a weapon. "For self-defense, "he parried.

He remembers his father, showing me photos of the handsome, bearded colonial military policeman from Aljezur in the Algarve in the South of Portugal. His father came to Mozambique, eventually marrying a Ronga woman. There is a lovely poem published in *KARINGANA UA KARINGANA* in the late 1950s, "Ao Meu Belo Pai Ex-Emigrante" (To my handsome ex-emigrant father). In this tender letter-elegy to his dead father he sings a love song to the man from "luso-arabic Aljezur" who died in a colonial hospital as poor as when he disembarked in Africa. There are many Craveirinhas today in Aljezur With pride the poet showed me a plaque honoring him — a tribute from Aljezur. In May 1999 the African poet came to his father's town where a street, Rua José Craveirinha, was named in honor of Mozambique's national poet. This was an emotional pilgrimage for the poet who asserts that despite his ronga-iberia blood, his heart is "Africa-puro."

It was his father who took him down rivers of poetry. His father wrote poems and read to his son lyric poetry of Guerra Junqueira and Antero de Quental. Poetry accompanied his father on his emigration from Portugal to Mozambique and on that May day in Aljezur poetry again united father and son. Craveirinha is the only African poet to be honored with the Camões Prize, Portugal's highest literary award for writing in the Portuguese language. I got the feeling, however, that the "homenagem" from his father's hometown means more to him.

Craveirinha spoke glowingly about his friend Malangatana. He recalled times they spent together — and his face lit up. "He's a chameleon. One moment he's in Maputo, the next in Lisbon." Craveirinha told me that of the poets of his generation the one he admires the most is — Malangatana.

I was pleased to connect for an hour or so with this poet I have admired for so many years. Too many of my literary

friends are dead — Andrew Salkey, Camara Laye, John Munonye — and I miss them. I was fully aware of the opportunity I had just had speaking with the man who for a half century has sung hymns to Mozambique. Craveirinha too seemed to value the moment. He smiled at my wife (it was obvious he continues to like women) and gave her from his collection a statue of a bird – a francolin. He gave me a maconde statue of a snake coiling around a tree. I was later informed that both pieces are quite old since artists no longer produce such sculptures. We parted. "Khanimambo," I thanked the great poet. "Etabonana." I had exhausted the few Changane words I made a point of learning!

A character in Lília Momplé's novel NEIGHBOURS asserts, "the only wealth of this country now is its culture, its art. The Mozambican is a born artist. Only unfortunately the artist here is not sufficiently valued." That is not the case with Malangatana. That is not the case with José Craveirinha. Everywhere I went people with emotion spoke of the poet as a great national treasure, a "great Mozambican."

The Civil War traumatized Mozambique and like its painters, the country's writers responded to the madness. Mia Couto, Nelson Saute, Lília Momplé, Ungulani Bar Kai Khosa, Suleiman Cassamo, Paulina Chiziane, and Lina Magaia — these are among the principal story tellers, who in the late 1980s and 1990s came into prominence. Mia Couto, Nelson Saute, Ungulani ba Ka Khosa, Suleiman Cassamo and Paulina Chiziane are published in Lisbon and therefore are known to Western readers and scholars who happen to read Portuguese and are interested in African literatures.

Mia Couto, in particular, has become the most recognized voice of his generation. The author of three novels, *Somnabulent Land, the Varanda of the Frangipangi,* and *Last Flight of the Flamingo*, five collections of stories and tales, several children's books, and one collection of poetry, Mia Couto has won various international prizes and awards. Along with Luís Bernardo Honwana he represents Mozambique in the Heinemann African

Writers Series.

However, in Maputo voices of criticism are heard. Mia Couto tends to play with words, to create neo-logisms, for instance, making nouns into participles. Like Luandino Vieira of Angola, Mia Couto has brought fresh spice to the Portuguese language. Luandino frequently marries Kimbundu and Portuguese roots and structures to create a unique linguistic vehicle that transports African thought and African rhythms into the Portuguese language. Not so Mia Couto whose word play is not rooted in anything African. "He is too white," a woman commented to me. "His playing with words makes him unaccessible to many readers," said a leading critic. "He is an excellent writer, but not at all in the class of Craveirinha," was the comment of a thoughtful woman.

Mia Couto surely dominates Mozambican fiction today. He writes elegantly and his works, often ironic, where the natural and supernatural worlds come together, constitute a chronicle of his time. In addition, he is a prophet warning his people that abominations do not go unpunished. There is a moral underpinning that once violated, results in alienation, anomy, and personal and collective plagues. In addition, Mia Couto is one of the few African writers to explore the many and varied landscape of love. In this sense his is like the Russians.

The Civil War-children captured by Renamo and forced to be killers. Not just killers of the innocent but mutilators as well. Breasts, hands, noses, sexual organs cut off. The Civil War-homes burned with people in them; cars burned with people in them. The Civil War-villagers fleeing out of terror, choosing to live in the wild with leopard and lion. The Civil War-bedraggled refugees walking hundreds of miles hoping to find security with relatives in Maputo.

Lílian Momplé in her stories captures the season of a thousand abominations with particular sensitivity. Heinemann has agreed to publish her novel *Neighbours* (the original title is in English).*Neighbours* tells the story of three families in Maputo

whose destiny comes together when South African terrorists come to the city seeking to destabilize society and to destroy support for ANC anti-apartheid combatants.*Neighbours* is as good as any African novel I have read in recent years.

In Mozambique in 2002 the principal publishers is Ndjira, established five years ago by Fernando Couto, the father of Mia Couto and a noted poet in his own right. "Ndjira" is a Sena (people in Sofala province) word for "path." Ndjira's books are attractively presented. Ndjira and Caminho in Lisbon often work together as certain Ndjira publications appear in Portugal with the Caminho logo.

Ndjira publishes writers with different masks. One of the most outstanding and surely the most interesting is Pedro Muiambo whose *Bestiario* was published in 1999. Twenty-six satirical sketches of various aspects of Mozambican life. Muiambo has spent a good deal of time in Italy and perhaps his commedia dell'arte flavor of writing was inspired by Italian writers. His satire on the pretentiousness, sycophancy, and shallowness of literary critics is a tour de force. In his "Apocalyptic Genesis" he offers a creation myth. God was bored. He fed manna to a pig who shot out great loads of shit. In time the shit came to life and became a politician!

The Association of Mozambican Writers has a series Karingana ua Karingana. This is a Changane phrase from oral stories. The Karingana series publishes novels, stories and poetry by contemporary writers as well as writers from earlier generations like João Dias. The average Karingana book costs between three and four dollars. Ndjira books can cost three times as much.

Far more poetry is published by Ndjira than by the Association of Mozambican Writers. Poets of an earlier generation like Gloria de Sant'Anna, a contemporary of Fernando Couto and José Craveirinha, continue to have their works reprinted. Her *Solamplo* ("sol" is "sun" and "amplo" is "vast") was published in 2000. Among contemporary poets published by

Ndjira is Júlio Carrilho from the Island of Ibo in the North of Mozambique. His most recent book *Nonumar* (an untranslatable title that plays with sound) came out in May of 2001. Carrilho's collection is a poetic meditation on remembrance, remembrance of childhood, remembrance of people, places, sounds and scents of his beloved island. There is a melancholy Mozambican poet, the most noted being Rui Knopfli, whose books date from 1959 to 1997. The name "knopfli" is from Swiss German and means "little button." Carrilho writes sonnets, prose poems and free verse.

An important figure in contemporary Mozambican literary life is Francisco Noa, a professor, a critic and the editor of *Proler*, an exciting and visually attractive literary magazine. Noa is serious, hard working and knowledgeable. Trained in comparative literature he is keenly aware of literary developments throughout Africa. *Proler* costs 20,000 meticales, a bit less than $1. The first two issues with colour photos include interviews with contemporary writers, essays on literature from Angola and Brazil, information on recent publications and commentary on a variety of literary subjects from the African continent but with emphasis on the lusophone countries. Noa hopes to come out with six issues a year. Three thousand copies of each issue are printed. Francisco Noa's e-mail address is francnoa@spu.ac.mz

Mozambicans who are serious about African literature know about Soyinka , Achebe, and Osundare and other Nigerian writers. But there are very few translations (there is no Portuguese translation of *Things Fall Apart*) so that there is a hunger for greater access to such writers. In talking with Francisco Noa, one can feel the desire to hear the drumbeat of poetry of writers like Okara, Okigbo and Osundare.

As I write this I am sitting beneath the elegant and tall Mauritius bottle palms, graceful like maconde statues. I think of Ulli Beier and his efforts to bring to the arena writers and painters from throughout Africa so that there can be a greater appreciation

of the richness of African creative life. I think of Wilfred Feuser and his noble efforts, first at Ife and then at Port Harcourt, to bring lusophone African writers into Nigeria's consciousness. And I think of Graça Machel, who told me that Chinua Achebe is a hero of hers. "Reading Achebe gave me a sense of confidence, a sense of self-esteem," she remarked. I can think of no greater tribute to the beneficent possibilities of literature. From the Niger to the Limpopo, from the Nun to the Zambezi, from the Benue to the Nkomati, boats of the word, boats of the imagination travelling down Africa's rivers.

A.B.C. DURUAKU

Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*: Artistic Exploration or Didactic Impulse?

INTRODUCTION

Set in an oil-rich riverain area, *Hangmen Also Die*[1] explores an energetic dramaturgical trend whose content projects a society bedeviled by *joblessness*, fear of the future, and alienation. Perhaps the malaise that Irobi portrays is not so new or isolated, but it is larger than life and threatening to destroy contemporary African society that has steadily featured insecurity in its corporate existence, especially since no attention is paid to welfare.

In the traditional setting, "*Onye aghala nwanneya*"[2] took care of the economically less fortunate relatives and ensured the mutual survival of all. Again, job availability was certainty in the farms. Not so in contemporary Nigeria where atomization of families is fast catching on in the face of economic and social realities. In showing this trend, Irobi acknowledges that theatre does reflect the "social relationships of our times ... it is part and parcel of changing society"[3].

SYNOPSIS

It is hanging day for condemned prisoners. For once, the Chief Prison Hangman, Yekinni, refuses to do his job because he is fed up with hanging people and living a life of fear. Moreover, he sees the newest set of six young men as having fought a just battle in which they had lost to the establishment, the authorities

of Izon State. For him, the Suicide Squad, as the six are called, are heroes who tried to fight an enemy of the larger but ill-treated majority.

As the plot tumbles into the past, we learn that the six men were graduates of "glittering citadels" who were without jobs for over six years after graduation. They band together and pilfer people's property. Essentially a nuisance group, they have a doubtful record of having killed before. However, Tamara, a strong-willed woman stumbles onto them and convinces them to do something worthwhile and recover the compensation money meant for the people but embezzled by one Chief Erekosima. They accept to do this, but in the confusion of questioning Chief Erekosima, he dies and the boys are culpable. They are arrested and promptly condemned to death.

Yekinni absolves them of all previous guilt since their latest cause, in his opinion, is heroic. Besides, the young men are unmoved by their impending death. This unusual behaviour strengthens Yekinni's argument that the boys were serving the people and their killing Erekosima was justified. Instead of hanging them, Yekinni chooses to lose his job.

COMMENTS

X-raying societal problems in order to call attention to them as a step towards finding a solution is a common feature of drama. Narrowing it down to the joblessness and the different responses to it is quite another matter. In the early part of the 20th century, Arthur Miller used the literary ambit of his work, *Death of a Salesman*, to explore the issues of commitment to family, goal and job satisfaction. According to Charley, "When the smiles stop coming back (to a salesman), that's an earthquake..."[4] Olu Obafemi has noted that "man's problems originate from man, and not from the metaphysical realm of the gods"[5]. Duruaku treats the issue more succinctly in his play, *A Question of Choice*, and offers a way out. In *Hangmen*, this is not the case.

There is no way out. Irobi does not have one character battling to even things out; he presents a bunch of wild, educated young men who lose to an authority more determined, more purposeful than they. The boys believe that they are engaged in a revolution until someone in school bawls out:

> A revolution is always organized.
> Its strategies planned out. Its aims
> and objectives mapped out...(for)
> There is a desert of difference
> between revolutionary tactics
> and meaningless anarchy...(p. 26).

Anarchy wins and the boys lose out and die. It is instructive that these young men try to get a job:

> R.I.P.: Seven years later, we met again.
> This time at the office of the Directorate
> for Employment which claims that the
> Government is giving loans to unemployed
> graduates who want assistance for
> self-employment for small-scale industries (p. 30).

They tense for days in vain and decide to form the Suicide Squad rather than remain the "flotsam and jetsam... graduates of glittering citadels...(whose job) is to look for jobs" (p. 30). They take to anarchy. This is hardly the answer to the problem, but that is Irobi's story. Their argument for forming the "Suicide Squad" (rather a melodramatically morbid name) falls flat. What is surprising is that people of such high education and ideals could degenerate to solving societal problems by brute force applied on the masses. Is Irobi exploring man's basic degeneracy and atavistic tendencies in spite of the "superficial" polish of higher education? Or is this a characterisation-content aberration on his part? The sobriquets or operational titles are morbid

enough: R.I.P. HCL, MORTUARY and so on. Perhaps Irobi chooses to temper the seriousness of the problem by trivialising the characters and giving the over teenage personages "babyish" attitudes and fantasies. Whichever, Irobi succeeded in at least bringing the problem of unemployment to the front burner. In doing this however, the method used may well reduce the sympathy we would otherwise have had for the protagonists.

The Suicide Squad may have revolutionary ideas but they are misdirected and largely offer impression of self, transformed into ego trips. We see them do little violence that paints a comic picture of them, reducing their worth and sense of mission. As Tamara rightly observes, if they do not serve the society/masses, they could not be the 'Suicide Squad" but the "Stupid Squad". The Squad contradicts its perceived goals, actions, and preferences: at once villains and heroes; directed and misdirected; clearheaded and confused; infantile and adult.

It is little wonder that Yekinni sees them as having executed a heroic act, (though this gesture is subsumed in villainous lifestyle) even after the "facts have faced". Their hero image clouds their long-lasting nuisance value. They had murdered Dr. Ogbansiegbe on the mere suspicion of having been used unwittingly by him years ago. This gory act is replaced by frustration-assisted rejection of society and self-pity. Their lifestyle comes full circle when they again murder a man.

Uyovbukerhi has decried the presentation of young men in despair. He notes that *The Night Before* (Sowande) presents a "candid despairing picture of society... (It hopes) to force society to change its ways and allow young men to make their contribution to society development. (But) the play will only succeed in driving most young people... to greater despair..."[7]. *Hangmen* is almost such a play. Deftly, Irobi manages to present protagonists who rise above despair, even though their choice is hardly praiseworthy. Therefore, they will at worst generate anger for their base option.

Perhaps Irobi's style of writing offers an opportunity to

view the circumstances that change a man, or that environment is solely responsible for man's actions. Even though university campuses are fast becoming arenas for violent action and acts of bestiality, it is difficult to accept that the group (later Suicide Squad) acted in that manner because that is the kind of response prevalent in a university environment. Rather, it is more satisfying to believe that Irobi prepares our minds to accept the violence as a basic trait in all of us. Herd feeling is more easy to manifest; and when it combines with environment, control of atavism is limited. The Dionysian energy of the protagonists reminds one of Euripedes who "equates the liberation of the human psyche with the harmonious resolution in nature...(evoking) modern malaise of meaningless violence and the diminution of human life..."[8]

The time referencing in the play is sometimes worrying. R.I.P. says that they had met in their first year in 1975. He goes on to say that Dr. Ogbansiegbe, their ideological mentor from that year, had taken part in the Gubernatorial elections in 1970 and failed. Again, the young men meet again seven years later. This is difficult to swallow as academic courses hardly take the same period. It does not make sense that Accidental Discharge was sacked for being overqualified (p. 35) yet the flashback suggests otherwise (p. 59); and he is forced out for killing seven drivers by 'accidental discharge'. But he is supposed to have finished school and been unemployed for several years. However all these pale when one considers Esiaba Irobi's linguistic talent. In his rapid composition, he was bound to be careless, emphasizing only those things that interest him. Language and structure seem to, and these are given vibrant expression.

LANGUAGE

There is little doubt that Esiaba Irobi is essentially a poet even though he writes prose drama. From the almost musical cadence of the Suicide Squad chants, through the affected bombast of the Prison Doctor, to the sometimes overbearing metaphors and

imagery, Irobi is certainly extravagant in his use of language. What linguistic devices he uses in *Hangmen Also Die,* he could have used for three plays. R.I.P., in enunciating the problem that led them to revolt against the system (even though they are no revolutionaries) says:

> ..At school sometimes, we did not
> know where our next meal was coming
> from. So we became pregnant.
> Pregnant with ideas. Pregnant with
> dreams. Dreams to change this nation.
> Change its leadership...

Again,

> Dr. Ogbansiegbe was
> a great ideologue, a compelling
> demagogue...(who) used words
> like a loaded pistol. He knew how
> to hit the target of your heart with
> his verbal bullets (p. 25).

When the boys are convinced that they are being used by Dr. Ogbansiegbe, one of them says:

> ...We are just tools in Dr. Ogbansiegbe's
> hands. Spanners and hammers in the
> hands of a political mechanic...(p. 28).

After the hypnotic chant (p. 36), they conclude:

> But we understand the language of
> fear. We know its secret alphabet,
> its traffic signs, its magic spell over
> a city. We know how it feels when
> fear creeps into the ribs of a city and

grips its heart, constricts its veins,
congeals its blood,... Stops the rhythm
of the heartbeat... Then the music
ceases, the dancing stops, the drinking
halts and the singing ebbs. And on
every face a frown, in every heart a
tremor, in every mind a fear...

That's when we come in secret feet.
Like cats we come... Like panthers
and tigers... Like hyenas after carcasses...
We growl like beasts, and
prowl like ghosts, we grope like
ghouls, like jaguars on the scent
of blood. We crawl, we creep, we slink....

We lurk in the dark and wait to
wound?...we leave on your flesh
the insignia of our grief, the sign
of our venom, the anthem of our
fury... (pp. 36-37).

The engaging trance-like atmosphere created by the images is obvious. The overriding overlaps in the use of short uncompleted lines by the characters do not give a staccato effect that many of such lines usually give. In the hands of Irobi, they give a racy, refreshing quality that moves the action forward, (even though sometimes it warps the seriousness of the situation by creating a comic effect). The Superintendent—Yekinni exchange (p. 22), Erekosima —-Tamara diatribe (p. 84) are lucid examples.

It is in the supreme effort to excel in the power of the spoken word that Irobi also falters. It is likely that in his hurry to arrest his most seminal moments, he loses grip of the perfect welding of language and character, Yekinni vacillates between pidgin, standard English, and surprising philosophy in his

argument with the Doctor, the Superintendent and the Prison Warden in Phase I

This shift is more acceptable with the Suicid Squad who grope from the hypnotic esoteric chants through high-faulted language, to ordinary speech (including pidgin). There seems to be no reason for the latter two, but the chants are understandable in their more charged marijuana-induced moments. Creditably, local colour is injected through references to riverain features and animals.

A deliberate effort to inject humour in the play is obvious in the inclusion of the almost irrelevantly elaborate Phase Five, the pre-coronation ceremony, which merely serves to show the problem of oil spillage typified in Ibiaye's blindness, and is the plank for the abduction of Erekosima. The arrest of the "Suicide Squad" is also untidy and imposes unnecessary rowdy, physical towards the end of the play. The long quotation from Machiavelli's *The Prince* (p. 85) is intrusive, slows down the movement, and in no way suits the tension of the moment.

CONCLUSION

Esiaba Irobi is searching for a dramatic form in order to stand apart from the rest, but the restive spirits of contemporary African societies have manifested themselves in the approach he adopts. There seems to be too much to say in so little space. The bubbling restlessness to let out steam against a system that has failed us and has given false hope to the credulous, is reminiscent of Rotimi's intellectual characters (Banji and Hamidu) in *if..a tragedy of the ruled*[9] . But while Rotimi's characters are highly articulate, educated and philosophical, (even though inactive), Irobi's are educated, highly physical, confrontational and juvenile. In *Hangmen Also Die,* Irobi has remained faithful to his linguistic talents. His genius that is sometimes marred essentially by careless haste in integration of language and character, and poor time sequencing, will no doubt flower better in time.

NOTES

1. Esiaba Irobi, *Hangmen Also Die* (Enugu: ABIC Books, 1989) (all references to this book are by page).

2. *"Onye Aghala Nwanneya"* is an Igbo philosophy of welfarism and fraternal consciousness. It literally means "We should not abandon one's relative".

3. Ciive Barker, "Theatre and Society" in John Russel Brown, *Drama and the Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 152-153.

4. Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (London: Heinemann Educ. Books), 1949.

5. Olu Obafemi, "The Development of Nigerian Dramatic Literature" in Yemi Ogunbiyi *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature,* vol. 1 (Lagos: Guardian Books, 1988), p. 57.

6. Toni Duruaku, *A Question of Choice.* (Owerri: Readon Publishers Ltd), 1987.

7. Atiboroko Uyorbukerhi, "The Responsibility of the Theatre to the Nigerian Community" in Sonny Oti, *Nigerian Theatre Journal,* No. 1 & 2, vol. 2 (1985), p. 115.

8. Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage* (Ibadan: New Horn Press 1988), p. 67.

9. Ola Rotimi, if... a tragedy of the ruled, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educ. Books), 1983.

P.J. EZEH

Ex-centric Christianity and Oyibo Eze's *Carcass of the Vulture*

TITLE:	*Carcass of the Vulture*
AUTHOR:	Norbert Oyibo Eze
PUBLISHER:	Felly Press, Enugu
PAGES:	57

The relevance of Oyibo Eze's *Carcass of the Vulture* is that it is probably the first serious drama on the subject of the curious variety of Christianity which has been burgeoning in Nigeria these past ten years or so. I know of indigenous and foreign social researchers who have studied the phenomenon and visual artists who have works on it but literary and performing arts treatments of it are still rare. It is in this regard that Eze's effort will not be forgotten in a hurry, whatever defects it may contain.

Of course abuse of Christianity as a theme of plays is not totally new in Nigeria. One could go from such ones as *The Trials of Brother Jero* by the world-class master playmaker, Prof Soyinka (Parsons, 1979:5-13) to all sorts of lesser known ones. What is lacking, maybe because of the relative newness of the phenomenon, are plays or other fictions focused on the practice of Christianity which some writers see as that religion's answer to the so-called postmodernist proclivities in other social issues.

Ex-centricity, as Glen Bush (1993:185) would say, is the rallying cry, and as a rule, content not form, is the emphasis. It therefore enables the neo-Christians of such a category to replace selflessness with which their forerunners where known with

whatever antics that might help them eat this life's cake, as it were, and still have it; and to bask in the greatest luxuries without bothering to work. *Terasphilia*; from the Greek *Teras* (miracle) and *philia* (mobid love of) and self-regard replace the dignified modesty, hard work, and self-sacrifice which were hallmarks of the ways of Christ and the early Christians.

Looking at them you think T.S. Eliot (1961:121) was not a poet, but a prophet foretelling *fin-de-siècle* Nigeria when he said in "Choruses from the Rock, VII", "Men have forgotten/All gods except Usury, Lust and Power".

The protagonists of *Carcass of the Vulture* are good sketches of these Nigerian neo-Christians. Moses, the only son of his parents, joins one of the self-seeking milleniarist sects, not because of piety but because he believes it will solve his employment problem. It does, but creates a bigger problem of its own. The pastor joins him in a marriage of convenience with Agnes, an affluent menopausal member of the sect. When it becomes clear that the couple cannot have a baby they adopt a girl to the disappointment of Moses' Igbo kin, back in the rural community. Moses and Agnes live in the city.

Ikoha, Moses' father, dies of heartbreak having failed to persuade his son to see reason from the cultural perspective. The possibility of his line closing stares him in the face. Moses returns to join in his old man's funeral and runs into a thoroughly humiliating experience that jolts him back to cultural reality. He is a virtual outcast among his kindred.

But Agnes will not accept his plan to marry a second wife. Nor will a determined epistemically changed Moses budge. He elopes with his second fiancée but when the information leaks to Agnes she sets in motion the macabre chain of events that bring the hapless young man to his sudden end — hacked to death by hitmen hired by the sanctimonious lady.

Typologically the play is pretty difficult to place. I expect critics to quarrel over where to put it among the three pigeonholes of tragedy, tragi-comedy and melodrama. But clearly

the play does have its merits beyond the topicality of its subject. For instance, it is to the credit of the playwright that he manages to put so much message across without obstruding such on his audience. He employs such devices as irony and mimicry, among other strategies, to achieve this.

In one episode, for instance, Agnes has just been pronounced menopausal by her doctor and she is practically hysterical in her desire to have a baby of her own. She is the next patient after a commotion in which the doctor has raised hell over the inability of a teenager with an unwanted pregnancy to pay for a hush-hush abortion. One person is here dying to have a baby and cannot while the one that has in fact conceived is spending beyond her means to remove the pregnancy.

The liturgical mannerisms of the milleniarist churchpeople are consistently parodied in a rib-poking way that makes it impossible to hold back guffaws. Barely tutored pastors and their followers stand Bible passages on their head, the linguistics of the liturgy oscillates between curious mispronunciation of certain expressions to coinages of outright nonsensicalities to bamboozle the gullible. Thus at the point where Moses is being led to accept that his mismatched marriage with Agnes is ordained by God, the congregation is told that the young man has been "freed from the spirit of 'Sanballat', and from the state of 'Ichabode'".

Perhaps a future re-issue of the play will deal with the few errors of grammar and facts contained in the present one. For instance, one of the characters appears as Udemba in some episodes and Udoye in others, without apparent stylistic reasons. Grammarians may not accept his use of the expression "native doctor" in the place of the less debatable usage "medicineman" (p. 43). They are even some who feel that the African terms which these expressions refer to should be left untranslated since their analogues do not exist in Anglo-American societies.

The play takes its name from the counsel of one of Moses' kinsmen, a pro-tradition elder, whose advice regarding Agnes the young man ignores to his ultimate peril. "There is no gain in the carcass of a vulture" (p. 25). This is a common saying among

some Igbo groups, the nearest equivalent in English of which is the sneer of "fools rushing where angels fear to tread". But the play remains a question rather than an answer. Although Moses at last gets re-converted to the African tradition he is slain by the forces of the invading foreign culture represented in Agnes and her hitmen. He does not live to witness the birth of his child, by his second wife. The confrontation between the ill-adopted foreign ways and the vital autochthonous ọnes reaches a stalemate, and the playwright has no predictions.

But it is eminently important that Oyibo Eze has dared at all to write on a major issue of today's Nigeria. Maybe it will spur other creative writers to contribute to either side of the debate. What is dangerous is to ignore it altogether. As Albert Einstein is reputed to have said in a different context: "The important thing is not to stop questioning". And stiffling questions is the one thing dogmatism in whatever form loves but which the critical mind of the artist loaths.

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CHIKA NWANKWO

Book Review

TITLE:	*Makinga*
AUTHOR:	Chi Chiazo
PUBLISHER:	Cogito Publishers, P.O.Box 4203, Enugu, Nigeria
PAGES:	101

The travelogue is an ancient form that lends itself to allegorical and symbolic literary use. It portrays life as a journey between one point, sometimes of naive innocence, badness, or suffering to another point of experience, bliss, or goodness. John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress,* Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* and Swift's *Gullivers Travels* are distinguished examples of this genre in English literature. In African literature, the travelogue is as ancient as the oral tradition itself. Oral fiction is replete with characters, some human, some spirit, some part-human, part-spirit, who traverse the boundaries between the living and the dead, the human and the superhuman, gleaning insights, providing redemption, or paying compensation for excesses or blunders. *Ozoemene Mdive* and *Ameke Okoye, Equianoe's Travels* and *The Palmwine Drinkard* are among the earliest examples of this genre in African literature. Our indigenous language literatures have distinguished examples in Pita Nwana's *Omenuko,* and Fagunwa's *The Forest of A Thousand Demons.*

It is therefore not surprising that Chi Chiazo has come up with *Makinga,* an exquisite "Fable about a journey to the self". Like John Bunyan, Chiazo creates a perfect pilgrim, Masai Leita,

who is innocent, that is, inexperienced, but highly motivated to move, "to cross a boundary" by the call of a voice that the medicine man Liabon identifies after divination to be that of the Lofty One. Having been brought up to see his people's land as the holiest, his people as the best, and his people's tradition as impeccable, Masai is scandalized when Liabon explains that the Lofty One wants him to leave his people and cross a boundary. "But should I leave our holy land?" (p. 14) he asks Liabon. The medicine man's reply sets out in plain language one of the truths the fable is meant to illustrate:

> Every ground upon which you stand is holy. From where the wind comes and where it goes. It is the great soul that lies in every human being and in everything that makes a land holy. The great soul follows you wherever you allow her to accompany you (p 14).

However, it is not this truth expressed by the "wise man of the spirit" that eventually propels Masai to leave his people, his land, and his precious herd of cattle. Two things finally convince him to move. One is the suggestion by Liabon that crossing the boundary will bring him invaluable new treasures:

> 'The voice is just for you and no other person can carry your legs. No other eyes or ears can see or hear what is meant for you. When you have told us what you heard and saw we shall become richer with the new treasures. 'Treasure?' Masai exclaimed 'Yes, great treasures', the old man said. You would be great if you know what we know. But you would be greater if you knew still more. Something new, something different. You would be greater if you cross the boundary (p.15).

The second and more decisive is the voice of the Lofty

lands and traditions different from his own but strangely unified in a kinship that transcends all geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries. The Lofty One of his home becomes progressively identified as Allah, God, and Nature.

He overcomes, with the help of holy men and women, series of temptations to stop his pilgrimage and accept as his treasure, material, sensual alternatives such as marriage to the delectable Sarafina, keeping the diamonds and the donkey from Ibrahim, settling down to the cosy spiritual life in the seminary, accepting the job of a Christian missionary to his people, enjoying his sudden wealth in Nairobi, etc.

In one of these temptation episodes, Masai finds in his bag left with Sarafina by Ibrahim the fig branch he plucked from Liabon's grave, and twelve pieces of diamonds, the narrator describes Masai's feelings:

> His heart failed
> He held them, his hands
> shaking and looked at
> Sarafina in astonishment.
> Diamonds!... Were these
> the treasures? Would he
> travel so long with the
> donkey to sell the diamonds
> and become a rich man?
> Had he already found
> the treasure even before he had crossed the boundary?
> ... 'We have found the treasure'
> he finally announced to Sarafina.
> There was silence after which
> she looked at him and asked:
> 'And the boundary?' (p. 46).

Yes, Sarafina reminds him as she had done when he had so passionately proposed to her that he is a pilgrim and must

cross the boundary *alone*. The secret knowledge of the self is to be found only in one's self as one relates to others. He overcomes this and other temptations. After just a few minutes he realizes that he must leave all behind — Sarafina, her sweet songs, the diamonds, the fig branch, the pregnant donkey — and go for his goal. He announces to Sarafina "my heart burns for the great treasure beyond."

It is significant that Masai has to resist each apparent or false treasure with tremendous self control till he painfully parts with the cat Makinga. The blind cat, who although brings him no economic value, generates in his heart a 'warmth' greater than any warmth he had ever experienced. This warmth changes him. It makes him lose his desire for material treasure, sell off his belongings, and buy a donkey for the great journey back to his people with Makinga. However, this goal also proves elusive. After seven days and seven nights of travelling, Masai, Makinga, and Dorrie get to the boundary separating his people from others. They cannot cross the river as easily as he thinks. First, he has to part with Dorrie the donkey as no boat paddler would bargain to ferry it. Saddened by the situation, Masai seeks out a man of the spirit in the village and gives the donkey to him.

At the dock the same evening, none of the operators is ready to cross the river in the dark. So Masai constructs a tent for his Makinga and himself. Alone with Makinga in the moonlit night, Masai goes into ecstasy over the moon hanging over their tent to the background of the sound of cascading waters and the songs of the night bird. He says, "I thank you Makinga that you've awakened me to behold this beauty pouring gold over millions of heads" (p. 94). With Makinga on his thighs, he goes to sleep. While he is asleep, Makinga wanders off and is eaten by a cobra. He awakes to find Makinga missing and a cobra with a bulging stomach nearby.

Thus, stripped once more of all that is dear to him, Masai mourns deeply for three days. He questions the meaning of his life. In this state of confusion he longs to see or dream of any of

his past spiritual guides: Liabon, Ibrahim, Sarafina, Peter Eckhard, and Arundhati. He wants to tell them his story and seek their advice, but he neither sees nor dreams of any of them. In this crucial moment, at this very determining point in his life when he needs them most, they abandon him. He is all alone.

On the third day of his mourning, he falls into a trance and sees Makinga, the golden grasses and the springing antelopes of the Serengeti Prairie. He also perceives the sweet smells of acacia trees. A voice begins to console him. The voice reminds him that dead friends are not lost but begin to be more present with us and to live deeper in us. It concludes by saying that:

> As Nature has the strength to purity itself so has it given birth to a few individuals just a few to hold to its faith... We shall be renewed by that infinite power of love in us, love which is the costliest jewel and one which we all can afford (p. 99).

Finally, Masai is strengthened to cross the river back to his people and Sarafina, the first object of his love.

Chi Chiazo's *Makinga* is an allegory piecing together several religious traditions in an attempt to prove that they all stem from one source and should lead to one destination — love. Some of his characters are biblical characters barely camouflaged. Masai is Moses; Ibrahim is Abraham; Sarafina is Sarah. Biblical allusions also form the skeleton of his Fable. Moses crossed several boundaries. From being an Israelite baby, he was adopted into Pharaoh'March 6, 1982s household and grew up to be an Egyptian prince. Forced by circumstances, he fled to Midian where he worked as a shepherd and got married. He later came back alone to lead his people across numerous boundaries on their way to the promised land flowing with milk and honey. Before him, Abraham also left his people in Ur in obedience to the call by God and crossed boundaries. Even God is presented as having crossed a boundary by becoming a man

and coming to the earth to die. This must be an allusion to the birth of Jesus Christ by the Virgin Mary, a birth that entailed the crossing of the immense boundary separating humans and spirits to build a bridge between the two. The three days it took Jesus to be raised back to life is alluded to in the three days mourning of Masai.

Even the setting, the wilderness of Serengeti where men, elephants, lions, leopards and Giraffes co-habit peacefully because the gentle breeze lulled the gaming spirits of the hunters/predators is an allusion to the garden of Eden. It is also significant that Chiazo, a Nigerian, sets his book in East Africa. This confirms his interest in reaching out to other peoples and cultures.

Finally, Chiazo's language is richly evocative. This is the first impression that strikes a reader of *Makinga*. The image of womanhood and love-making permeates the book and renders it immensely readable. Its very beginning sets the amorous tone:

> In the wilderness of Serengeti the evening stroked the heads of wandering herdsmen like the fingers of a woman on her lover's head picking lice away (p. 7).

The plain is 'as beautiful as young virgins taking a bath in a distant waterfall, giggling to the silvery sound of water pouring over their heads' (p. 1). The whole scene between Masai and Sarafina is delicately couched in amorous language yet the latent symbolism of the encounter redeems it from being pornographic. For example, when Sarafina notices Masai admiring her physical beauty:

> She took his right hand and carefully placed it on her right breast. Masai felt it, held it, his eyes closed, his heart wildly beating... Then she carefully took the hand away and bent to embrace

> him on the bed, *an old life-giving act among her people*... (p. 29).

However, due to the allegorical nature of *Makinga*, it lacks the robust realism which has become the hallmark of Nigerian fiction. The characters are almost flat, representing certain qualities or attributes and the events lack plausibility. For example, Masai's encounter with Ibrahim contains a lot that is not plausible. First, Ibrahim knows his name without being told, and he is able to read his mind and materialize out of thin air as shown in chapter eleven when Masai is remonstrating within himself after being attacked by strangers. We are told that:

> He blamed himself for having abandoned his people and their tradition. That was the price for deserting his people, he believed. And moreover, if he had kept his poisoned arrows, he said to himself, the attack couldn't have been. He must go back home and make atonement he concluded. He wiped his tears, and when he raised his face he saw the old man who had rescued him standing right in front of him. Masai wondered how he got into the room without his noticing. The old man grinned and Masai saw that his eyes gleamed rather mysteriously. 'Regrets?' he asked and sat beside him exactly at the place Sarafina had always sat (p. 34).

This and other mysterious elements added to the exotic setting creates a plot that is hardly convincing. Yet, it is a tribute to the author's creative ability that demands of realistic fiction being made of a work clearly called a fable. The fable does not deal with realism but is a myth or legend dealing with supernatural or unusual persons. The narrative style of the author is what almost transforms this fable into a novel!

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ngozi AGUJIOBI studied fine arts in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She teaches in the School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Don BURNESS is a Professor of English at Franklin Pierce College, Rindge, New Hampshire, U.S.A. He is author of *Red Flowers in the Sand* (poems), and *Horse of White Clouds,* translations of African Poetry from the Portuguese, which attracted a Kwanzaa Award from Africa Network in 1990. He is Editor of *Echoes of the Sunbird: An Anthology of Contemporary African Poetry published by the Center for International Studies, Ohio University (1993).*

A.B.C. DURUAKU is a fine actor and a theatre educator based in Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri, Imo State. His publications include 5 Moral Plays for Boys and Girls *(1998),* A Handbook on Drama and Theatre *(1997),* A Study of Selected Literature (1996), and *Farewell Academia & Other Poems* (1995).

Gloria MT EMEZUE teaches Literature at Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. She is the author of *Mastering Poetry: A New Approach for Nigerian Students (2002), and Comparative Studies in African Dirge Poetry (2001),* both Published by Handel Book Publishers.

Ginika ENEKWE is a student of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

P.J. EZEH lectures in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is a Linguist and Journalist. He is author of *Knowledge and Society.*

Chika NWANKWO lectures in the School of General Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Osy OBI is a Practising Writer and Poet, and an art illustrator. He has published feature articles, poems and short stories in several Nigerian Newspapers and Journals. His story was featured in the anthology: *Frontiers: Nigerian Short Stories* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1991).

Sam ONUIGBO lectures in the Department of English, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Onwuchekwa JEMIE, founding editor of *The Guardian Newspaper,* co-author of *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature,* and author of numerous essays and articles, is celebrated for his critical study of the poetry of Langston Hughes. He currently teaches Literature at Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Ola ROTIMI, a leading playwright, theatre director, and Professor of Dramatic Arts at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, taught in many universities and Hubert H. Humphrey Visiting Professor of International Studies, Dramatic Arts and Dance at Macalester College, in the United States of America. He died in August, 2000.

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