

Nigeria's Third-Generation Literature

This lively and timely book addresses broad theoretical issues surrounding the evolution and characteristics of Nigeria's third-generation literature. By sifting through the vast panorama of Nigerian literary history, Ode Ogede tries to discern patterns. He affirms that the third-generation literature emerged between the late 1980s and the early 1990s and is marked by expressive modes and concerns distinctly different from those of the preceding era.

Nigeria's third-generation literature reflects new sensibilities and anxieties about the country's changing fortunes in the post-colonial era. The literature of the third generation is startling in its candidness, irreverence as well as the brutal self-disclosure of its characters, and it is governed by an unusually wide-ranging sweep in narrative techniques. Six key texts of the oeuvre in particular are the focus of the investigation: Maria Ajima's *The Web*, Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The texts interpret contemporary corruption and other unspeakable social malaise; together, they point to the exciting future of Nigerian literature, which has always been defined by its daring creativity and inventive expressive modes. Even conventional storytelling strategies receive revitalizing energies in these angst-driven narratives, the examination establishes.

This book will be of interest to students and researchers of contemporary African literature, Sociology, Gender and women's studies, and post-colonial cultural expression more broadly.

Ode Ogede is past Vice-President of the Modern Language Association of Nigeria and Professor of English at North Carolina Central University, USA.

Routledge Studies in African Literature

Autobiography, Memory and Nationhood in Anglophone Africa

David Ekanem Udoinwang and James Tar Tsaaior

Mazisi Kunene

Literature, Activism, and African Worldview

Dike Okoro

Nigeria's Third-Generation Literature

Content and Form

Ode Ogede

African Women Narrating Identity

Local and Global Journeys of the Self

Rose A. Sackeyfio

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Routledge-Studies-in-African-Literature/book-series/RAL

Nigeria's Third- Generation Literature

Content and Form

Ode Ogede



ROUTLEDGE

Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2023 Ode Ogede

The right of Ode Ogede to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The Open Access version of this book, available at www.taylorfrancis.com, has been made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 license.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-26842-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-26843-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-29018-6 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003290186

Typeset in Goudy
by MPS Limited, Dehradun

An electronic version of this book is freely available, thanks to the support of libraries working with Knowledge Unlatched (KU). KU is a collaborative initiative designed to make high quality books Open Access for the public good. The Open Access ISBN for this book is 9781032268422. More information about the initiative and links to the Open Access version can be found at www.knowledgeunlatched.org.



This book is affectionately dedicated to the memory of:

Professor Eldred Durosimi Jones who, in 1984, sent me my first publication acceptance letter that instantly made me believe in myself;

Professor Samuel Omo Asein, my external examiner, who saw promise in a young graduate student many, many years ago and birthed a career;

And Professor Richard Bjornson, a kind, generous, and thorough editor's editor, who taught me a lot about writing and about developing confidence. His beautifully-crafted letters, much like warm missives from an old friend, remain some of my most treasured possessions.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1 New Wines and Old and New Bottles: Art and the Pulse of the Nation	1
2 Parable, Metaphor, the Pictorial Frame, Emblem of Moral Decadence: Fiction in Revolt, Washing Dirty Linen in Public (Maria Ajima's <i>The Web</i>)	47
3 Allegory, Migration, Mock-Epic, and Unspeakable Subjects: The Lure of Glamour, Empire of Material Things (Okey Ndibe's <i>Foreign Gods, Inc.</i>)	71
4 Allegory, Elegy, Prose, the Labyrinths of Disquietude: Art and the Wellsprings of Discontent (Teju Cole's <i>Open City</i>)	113
5 Subverted Narrative of Disappointed Expectations: Immigration, Chattel Sex Slavery or Prostitution, Horrors of the Unutterable on the Borderline of Magical Realism (Chika Unigwe's <i>On Black Sisters Street</i>)	157
6 Ethnography, Patriarchy (or Male Dominance), Anecdotal Portraiture, and the Unspeakable Subject of Co-Wife Rivalry, or the Dilemma of the Western Educated Woman within Polygyny (Lola Shoneyin's <i>The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives</i>)	202

7	Anecdote, Allegory, and the Pictorial Frame II: The Short Story as Forum for Documentary Realism (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's <i>The Thing Around Your Neck</i>)	247
8	Signing Off/Out: The Politics of Language, Nigerian Literature, Now and in the Future	286
	<i>Bibliography</i>	300
	<i>Index</i>	309

Acknowledgments

This book began with the invitation of Leanne Hinves, former Routledge African Studies Commissioning Editor; it was brought to completion by her successor Helena Hurd, who welcomed the project with heart-warming enthusiasm. I am grateful to both of them and to the production staff Rosie Anderson, Alexandra de Brauw, and Jyotsna Gurung.

I am deeply indebted to the two anonymous readers who reviewed the manuscript for Routledge and gave me sound advice. Their eagle-eyed assessments and gracious wisdom helped me identify many errors of fact and steered me in the right direction. I thank my colleagues and friends who offered encouragement and criticism. I alone am responsible, however, for any errors or misjudgements that remain.

Heartfelt thanks are due to my incomparable wife Shianyisimi, my sounding board and prayer warrior, for all her support. Throughout the study our lovely children Ochuole, Ogede, and Michael stayed in touch and provided family support.

My overwhelming debt is to my lord and savior Jesus Christ, the king of kings and the maker of the heavens and the earth and all that there is in them. Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, attests: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulations, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8: 35–39).

Throughout, my Five Oaks Seventh-Day Adventist Church family has anchored me in the word of God, the Bible, and I am grateful for this spiritual source of strength.

1 New Wines and Old and New Bottles: Art and the Pulse of the Nation

The object of this book is to throw some light on the thematic and the stylistic nuances that define Nigeria's third-generation literature. That genre emerged in the 1980s, marking a substantial shift in literary explorations of social and political life in Africa. The book's arguments are that to read this literature is not only to encounter some of the country's most innovative writing but also to run into a variety of stories of a failed nation state, all pointing to very awful realities. Some of the authors that are discussed give attention to the devastating effects of economic marginalization, immigration (or we might call it exile), oppression, and exploitation of women through the institutions of prostitution and polygyny. Quite a few enlist their narratives in a mission to paint pictures of the nature of the terror of the Islamic insurgency, the new wave of Christian fundamentalism, kidnappings, and the resurgent new mercantilism. Others, yet, chronicle the spate of corruption, police brutality, armed robbery, ritual murder, sectarian violence, and the culture of insecurity and mismanagement that make living in Nigeria feel like being in hell for many people. The looming shadow of the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967–1970 that won't go away is incipiently at the background of the social turbulence of this era.

By all account a case can be made that Nigeria meets the definition of a failed nation state. This republic for most of its existence has not lived up to the expectation of its citizens to deliver public services to them, fueling profound and extended dissatisfaction among the population. In studying the third-generation literature one notices that it is a response to crises in all the modes of existence during an exceptionally fated age, and one will inevitably find its most dominant distinguishing stylistic feature to be worry. The anxiety is sometimes cloaked as subdued outrage or exilic angst. At all times the writers articulate this frustration by employing and breathing new life into the conventional structures of literature: allegory, anecdote, emblem, fable, folktale, parable, personal testimony, magical realism, mock-epic, and other literary forms.

The method employed in the book's investigation of this literature is both critical and explanatory within the epistemology of close reading and the sociological approach, grounded in the notion that one can best appreciate any nation's literature's accomplishment by placing it in the context of its literary history. In pursuit of this objective, an attempt is first made to engage the extensive writings

2 *New Wines and Old and New Bottles*

on age patterns in Nigerian and African literature with concrete references to literary texts. Moreover, for mapping out the differences between the generations to take shape, it bears specifying what can be said to be unique to each generation within the overlapping techniques and thematic concerns. Within this exercise, an overarching account of the context of the third-generation literature begins to unfold itself. After broaching the issue of the increasingly diminishing and not on a few occasions outright devaluation of evaluative criteria accompanying approaches to Nigerian literature, the focus shifts to the highly vexed topic of gender representation. The deliberation closes with a consideration of the contributions of third-generation literature.

As anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with Nigeria knows, the histories of the country and its literature are embossed with major literary honors.¹ Remarkably, generation after generation, Nigerian writers continue to make a mark all over the world. The poetry of Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka; Okinba Launko's verse; the parables of D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, and Chinua Achebe; Onitsha Market Popular Literature; Ben Okri's modern ghost stories; the classical drama of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, and John Pepper Clark; and Femi Osofisan's popular dramatic art, all testify to the scope and scale of experimentation in Nigerian letters.²

It is a thing of wonder and awe to behold the constant paradigm shifts in Nigerian writing. Both in African-language and European-language texts, there is always an element of surprise in Nigerian literature. Innovation is visible whether one is referring to Igbo-language writer Pita Nwana's efforts at mixed forms in mother-tongue creative writing, utilizing proverbs, wise sayings, prayers, and invocations, or looking at D.O. Fagunwa's Yoruba-language creative writing. This extends to the deformed and highly unconventional English language of Amos Tutuola's bush ghost fiction in his *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* or Gabriel Okara's poetry of *The Fisherman's Invocations*, all written in forms of English language which require translation to be comprehensible to someone only versed in the "Queen's English."³

To the reader's astonishment, through several decades, Nigerian writers have continued to emerge in their clines with all their insignias of eccentricity, and they have never exhausted new forms to try out. Experimentation is in exhibit whether one is talking about the first-generation writers Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, Flora Nwapa, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, and John Pepper Clark; second-generation authors Ben Okri, Okinba Launko, F. Odun Balogun, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Isidore Okpewho, Kole Omotoso, Paul Ndu, Festus Iyayi, Zainab Alkali, Chimalum Nwankwo; and now the third-generation authors included in this study as well and others like Chris Abani, Heron Habila, Atta Sefi, Helen Oyeyemi, Okoye Ifeoma, Toyin Gabriel-Adewale, Tade Ipadeola, and Amatoritsero Ede. As Nigerian literatures have been marked with epochal variations in subject matter, so they have also always demonstrated massive realignments in technique.

Since its inception, the national character of Nigerian creative writing has accommodated a matrix of forms. These range from mythological poetry to light-hearted verse; eulogy; folk drama; popular traveling theater; folkloric and bush ghost fiction; proverb-laden parables; fables; myths; pastoral tragedy; festival drama; epic saga; funeral dirge; romance fiction; Onitsha Market pamphleteering; epistolary form or letter writing; ritual drama; and poetry in the form of what this author once called “billets of prose.”⁴ Most recently, marvelous or magical realist fiction has been added to this long and varied list, even if to some it may bear an uncanny resemblance to where things all began: ghost fiction.

There is a universal realization that many of the developments in cultural monuments seem motivated by reactions to the existing traditions. In regard to this practice, the great Gilbert Highet has much that is useful to say. In a chapter revealingly entitled “The Battle of the Books,” in his influential book *The Classical Tradition*, he presciently notes the generational tangles that attend the cultivation of tastes across time periods. The changes in attitudes behind major cultural inventions cannot be ignored, he states. “The very long-drawn-out dispute in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which agitated not only the world of literature but the worlds of science, religion, philosophy, the fine arts, and even classical scholarship,” he points out, dramatizes the operation of the ordering of tastes, the bumping of heads for what he calls “the transmission of culture.” He emphasizes that “The battle waged in France and England at the turn of the seventeenth century was only one conflict in a great war which has been going on for 2,000 years and is still raging ... the war between tradition and modernism; between originality and authority.”⁵ The terms of that debate were: “Ought modern writers to admire and imitate the great Greek and Latin writers of antiquity? or have the classical standards of taste now been excelled and superseded? Must we only follow along behind the ancients, trying to emulate them and hoping at most to equal them, or can we confidently expect to surpass them?” (262).

Professor Highet memorably poses the question another way: “In science, in the fine arts, in civilization generally, have we progressed beyond the Greeks and Romans? or have we gone ahead of them in some things, and fallen behind them in others? or are we inferior to them in every respect, half-taught Barbarians using the arts of truly civilized men?” (262). His answer is that within each era people will answer one way or the other. On one side of the debate some will succumb despairingly to the notion of their own inferiority. Overawed and “charmed by the skill, beauty, and power of the best Greek and Roman writing,” they presume that the past “could never be really surpassed, and that modern men should be content to respect it without hope of producing anything better” (262).

However, the moderns disagree with the apologists of the classics. They not only won't accept their inferiority, but proclaim a superiority based on their own self-authenticating parameters: unfavorably comparing the religious sensibilities and moral bearings, as well as the levels of knowledge of things beyond their own immediate surroundings of the classical writers with those of the moderns;

and finally claiming, paradoxically, the immutability or constancy of some things. This last index is so critically important it deserves elaboration; the idea that “the great things of life, out of which art arises, change very little: love, sin, the quest for honour, the fear of death, the lust for power, the pleasures of the senses, the admiration of nature, and the awe of God” (269). In his accurate explanation, the “ability of men to create works of art out of these universal subjects depends largely on the character of the societies in which they live: their economic structure, their intellectual development, their political history, their contacts with other civilizations, their religion and their morality, the distribution of their population between various classes and occupations and types of dwelling-place, even the climate they enjoy” (269). The examples he offers in defense of the environmental imperative in art are apt. Clearly, to overlook the roles that nurturing, religious, legal, moral, or political prohibitions can play in determinations of the kinds of art a society can or cannot produce is to turn a blind eye to reality—a great mistake one should avoid at all accounts.

That’s why the final assumption those who see themselves at the cutting edge make about the classics is a direct attack, “saying that they were badly written and fundamentally illogical” (270). These modern artists poohpoo the elevated pedestal on which society places tradition, referring to “an exaggerated admiration of the classics” (270). The bohemians belittle the long-established arts and opine that to regard them as infallible, sacrosanct, and above rebuke is nonsensical. As a consequence, a “common expression of this reaction is parody. Parody was common in antiquity, particularly among the Sceptic and Cynic philosophers, who used, by parodying Homer’s greatest lines, to attack his authority, and through him the inviolability of tradition and convention” (270).

The “attacks on the authority of the classics” sum up what Highet dubs “the Battle of the Books,” the practice of interrogation that provides the motivation for inventiveness among the avant-gardists, who are not at all convinced that tradition is above improvement. In the process, the modernists ratify their inclinations to seek renovation of the classics in ways that suit their own tastes and dispositions—aesthetic, spiritual, moral, and even political. He concludes that the good that comes out of this dueling exercise is immense: The modernists “did not succeed in convincing anyone that modern literature, even if elevated by Christian doctrine, must be better than the classics. But the real benefit of the battle for both sides was that it discouraged slavish respect for tradition, and made it more difficult for future writers to produce ‘Chinese copies’ of classical masterpieces, in which exact imitation should be a virtue and original invention a sin ... The idea of progress may sometimes be a dangerous drug, but it is often a valuable stimulant; and it is better for us to be challenged to put forth our best, in order to surpass our predecessors, than to be told the race is hopeless” (288).

The case is not different in Nigerian literature with the interaction between old and new works, which brings up the inescapable question of periodization in the country’s literary history, the sense(s) in which the term “generation” is applied in this study, and indeed why it is necessary to establish epochal boundaries. This is

particularly salient because there has been a lot of discussion of generational paradigms in literary studies generally, not least of whether they are even useful at all for reading the overlapping techniques and thematic concerns of literature. In terms of dates and authors, and of concerns that distinguish the generations, Nigerian and African literatures have not been spared from these often-heated debates.⁶

Among all these discussions, this statement of Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane is the most germane to this book's purposes. "Cultural seismology—the attempt to record the shifts and displacements of sensibility that regularly occur in the history of art and literature and thought—habitually distinguishes three separate orders of magnitude," they write:⁷

At one end of the scale are those tremors of fashion that seem to come and go in rhythm with the changing generations, the decade being the right unit for measuring the curves that run from first shock to peak activity and on to the dying rumbles of derivative Epigonentum. To a second order of magnitude belong those larger displacements whose effects go deeper and last longer, forming those extended periods of style and sensibility which are usefully measured in centuries. This leaves a third category for those overwhelming dislocations, those cataclysmic upheavals of culture, those fundamental convulsions of the creative human spirit that seem to topple even the most solid and substantial of our beliefs and assumptions, leave great areas of the past in ruins (noble ruins, we tell ourselves for reassurance), question an entire civilization or culture, and stimulate frenzied rebuilding.

To be sure, when literary scholars talk about creative works and writers in generational terms, they are seldom in agreement about the indices for establishing how literary "generations" are defined, either in terms of thematic and stylistic contents of texts in the literary histories of continents, nations, and regions or of time capsules and their relevance to literary categorization. A social generation lasts fifteen to thirty years, for example. Is it fair to apply that time frame to literature as well; to consider literary generations as taking equivalent time spans? Also, in literary history, are there any clear-cut breaks in subject matters and technical properties of literature through such movements of time in history, across time periods?

In wrestling with this subject, relating to the making of traditions, however, Bradbury's and McFarlane's use of terminology usually reserved for natural occurrences like earthquakes and volcanoes has instructively formulated an important strategy to help us comprehend the complex processes involved. This fresh approach helps us understand that transformations in art, literature, and sensibility can be just as explosive and unpredictable as the forces of nature. Changes can often pass by like a whimper but at times they come with a bang, generating effects that are momentous, confusing, even unsettling, and overwhelming.

Within its relatively short life, Nigerian literature has undergone all the three orders of change in the forms of development or at times violent decline which Bradbury and McFarlane associate with movements of history of human art, literature, and thought across vast spans of time. Their key terms and phrases all evoke occurrences anyone conversant with Nigerian literary history should have some familiarity with. The literature of this country has gone through occasional “tremors of fashion that seem to come and go in rhythm with generations”; “the curves that run from first shock to peak activity”; “dying rumbles”; “derivative” imitativeness; “larger displacements”; “extended periods of style and sensibility”; “overwhelming dislocations”; and the “cataclysmic upheavals of the creative human spirit that seem to topple” established traditions, leaving “great areas of the past in ruins.”

Upon reflection, we see that all orders of change boil down to the particularities of the relations that the writers individually and collectively establish with their literary inheritance. They could gently push it forward as it was handed down to them, modify, re-write, copy or mimic, satirize, mock, inflate, cannibalize, or blow it up entirely and introduce a new culture—the choice is theirs, depending on their abilities, predispositions, goals, and purposes.

It is often unquestionably difficult to come to definitive conclusions about the changes, especially while they are still in progress. The seemingly discrete movements may be hard to pin down as they are taking place. However, if observers painstakingly keep their eyes on broad outlines, investigating emerging trends, they can notice patterns; on the one hand, the persistence through the years of familiar literary forms which to some extent loads the dice against seeing literary eras—in Nigerian literature in particular, and elsewhere generally—as anything other than phenomena of shifts in the circumferences, orientations, and objects of textual properties as works are made through the creative alchemy of shedding of old skins. This is the commonest order of change, and it principally involves acceptance of literary inheritance. The building blocks of creative writing—allegory, burlesque, comedy, chant, dirge, elegy, epigram, emblem, metaphor, simile, eulogy, epithalamium, nursery rhyme, fable, hymn, mock epic, incantation, praise, parable, pastoral, proverbs, lyric, lament, lullaby, tragedy, tragi-comedy, sonnet, and the pictorial frame—if not immutable, all transcend time periods. They thus inform the spirits and shape the patterns and sensibilities with which these forms are infused, as well as the degrees of emphases, goals, and objectives of the practice of writing in any context.

Within the climate of continually interlocking patterns of aesthetic and thematic threads running through Nigerian literary history, the present is perpetually shot through with the ubiquity of the past. In this context “current” seems an appropriate critical term to connote some of the flow of ideas, forms, and practices that may take place with no sudden breaks, as old attitudes and manners fade or undergo transmutation with the taking over of new spirits, new angles of vision, perspectives, tasks, objectives, and ends. To a large extent, this is the order W. Jackson Bate calls “the burden of the past” in reference to the

painful trials of invention that are every aspiring author's good fortune to have because of all the resources of productivity at the command of the forebears.⁸ In discussing "what it can mean to the artist to stand in competition with an admired past," Bate therefore acknowledges the difficulties that go hand in hand with the possibilities in the provision made for the perpetuation of tradition: "the intimidating pressures, on the practicing writer, of great models of the past—those great models on whom the writer has naturally been educated" (56).

Of such relationship there is evidence that, while third-generation Nigerian writers all adopt the embryo of works passed down to them by their predecessors, causing the old and the new to collapse into each other, for all intents and purposes, this genre is responding well to the challenge of adjusting that inherited foundation on the fly, modifying it with a massive degree of success. This literature thus primarily straddles several robust traditions, and so generational classification of it is complicated by the fact that literary forms associated with one era or tradition might not necessarily come to a halt and fall out of use with the emergence of another era, although sudden breaks do occasionally happen, as with second-generation literature's areas of separation from its predecessors in many significant dimensions of style. Indeed, as will be shown, the literary forms in use in Nigerian literature generally have no fixed expiration dates, and there are more relatives than absolutes among the distinguishing features of the literature of the periods. The structures display ever-shifting and altered outlines, continually open to either minimal or substantive revisions depending on the abilities and objectives of the artists during the procedures in which each author sets his or her own signature on them. That is the sense in which it is reasonable to talk of gradual modifications.

On the other hand, one fully agrees with Bradbury and McFarlane that radical adjustment or remodeling does occasionally occur. Conventions can gradually shade from one into another in re-fashioning across malleable generational or chronological borderlines, but less often traditions experience instantaneous massive shake-ups in which one abruptly supplants another. It is true that there are no literary forms and topics which are exclusive to one era and are strictly without mixture, which exist in undiluted shapes and vanish into thin air when a new era takes over. However, literary transformations also infrequently take the form of immediate and dramatic displacements in subject matter, temper, and technique.

The fact that orders of change can be defined by publication dates is indisputable; Achebe the author *Things Fall Apart*, usually considered a landmark foundational text of Nigeria's first generation, for example, does not belong to the same generation as Achebe the author of his last-known major published work, *There Was a Country*.⁹ The same can also be said of the Soyinka of *The Interpreters*, a brooding first-generation satirical work on ideas about an imperfect polity and peoples, and the Soyinka of the more relaxed, tongue-in-cheek, and at times celebratory as well as caustically satirical *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*.¹⁰ Consequently, to talk of "Achebe's Periods" and "Soyinka's Periods" is to acknowledge that if generationally

transformative writers live long enough and remain active in the business of writing for the duration, they can catch the ends or beginnings of eras in which they live their careers, creating works which traverse multiple time spans.

However, as will by now have become evident, the evolutions which inescapably transpire in writing lives are not necessarily unattended by the presence of the past in the present. The processes of renewal which regularly occur in some orders of change habitually embed insights into the ways in which the old is made new within the intersecting patterns of textual features which unavoidably flow through generational blocs. In third-generation literature, the unrestricted circulation of long-established textual features which inescapably move across eras can be quite easily illustrated with Maria Ajima's deployment of the short story form, for instance. If we take *The Web*,¹¹ a text in which Ajima draws from properties of the folktale tradition and its reliance on the *deus ex machina* and the parabolic, as an example, internal evidence suggests a structure built through the blending of resources of orality with the modern story's brevity and unity of effect. The result is an astonishing measure of variety, as the text grafts concepts from early Soyinka and early Achebe, redeploying them in new contexts with an entirely novel objective. Through the inseparability of these forms, the author ingeniously sets the short story format, by way of the instrumentality of *The Web*, an important task: to articulate her attack on corruption via strategies of characterization, symbolic language, setting, and plot construction that project a portrait of a federation on the brink, so that readers have a stark view of the sketches of happenings there.

In *The Web*, Ajima utilizes pictorial frame, allegory, emblem, quizzical irony, subdued anger, parable, and underhand humor. The story explores the progressive institutionalization of evil as a way of life in a fictional Nigeria, putting in plain view not only the pervasiveness of fraud in the national character and the multidimensional manifestations of its incarnation throughout the entire infrastructure of government, but also the processes of initiation of new inductees into the practice. An imposing picture emerges of a contaminated community, from the very grassroots at local government level, the entrenched doctoring of contracts, the forging of fake contracts and projects, through to the criminality of the republic's law enforcement, drug peddling by struggling common folk, the duplicity of citizens entrusted with any form of authority, and the subversion of the law by hoodlums. Amidst a general state of insecurity these people will do anything to satisfy their animalistic materialistic urges: ritualists hunting for human beings to decapitate to meet the insatiable demands for human body parts, people seeking to palliate their hunger to make money, the new god that the country worships.

By the time Ajima took on the topics of corruption and ritual execution in Nigeria, both issues had become cancerous. The country was a long way from the days when Achebe and Soyinka tackled the same issues in their respective early works. In Achebe's novel *A Man of the People*,¹² the conscience of the community had not been completely blunted; and in Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed*,¹³ communal uplift was still the prime object of the annual village scapegoat ritual.

In the aggressive and universal pursuit of money in more recent times, by contrast, corruption is no longer a problem confined to the elite. Dishonesty has infected ordinary people too. In the collapse of the nation state, the human body has been reduced to a piece of merchandise. The disappearance of communal spirit is complete, and the village which once was the seat of communal cultural, economic, political, and social organization has receded into distant memory, replaced by individual atavistic instincts.

This country-wide institutional decline of Nigeria is also metaphorically and literally projected in the diminished status of traditional religion. Of the various changes that have taken place over time, given that religion controls the soul of any community, none is as consequential as the supplanting of the indigenous religions of Nigerian peoples by a new wave of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. In the past the worship of deities was supreme; in the early first-generation Achebe novel *Arrow of God*,¹⁴ to the extent that the main character Ezeulu, the priest of the deity Ulu, would sacrifice his own life to defend it. But in more recent times we witness the vandalization with impunity of a reincarnated deity's shrine by former worshipper Ike, the protagonist of Okey Ndibe's third-generation novel *Foreign Gods, Inc.*¹⁵ Here, Pentecostal Christian charlatans also wreak havoc to a degree hitherto unimaginable, defrauding the gullible devotees of the new religion of money they do not even have, inflicting untold burdens of debt.

Like early Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is a tour de force in its investigation of the psychology of religious worship, each novel invested with a sense of form, balance, and artistic control. As in Achebe's book, particularly prominent in Ndibe's is the ability to venture into the heads of characters, to get to the center of consciousness, and to unveil implacable human willpower. Achebe depicts Ezeulu as a man in devoted loyalty to his religion and society that will stop at nothing to preserve the divinity of a god; similarly, Ndibe ironically characterizes Ike as someone who will allow no obstacle to stand in his way of satisfying his craving for money—the new god. Ike even goes so far as to desecrate a deity in order to attain his own selfish end. While Ezeulu runs completely mad in pursuing his goal of staying true to his community, Ike almost loses his moral sanity in betrayal of his society. How Ezeulu and his descendant Ike conduct themselves in their different circumstances reminds readers of the resplendent quip made by Farouq, a friend of Julius, the bi-racial protagonist of another Nigerian third-generation novel, Teju Cole's *Open City*. The Moroccan narrates a tale of ironic juxtapositions. Two diametrically opposed ethics emerge in the self-defense philosophies of Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah. Farouq tells a disturbing lesson on coming to terms with danger, ascribing to King Solomon “a teaching about the snake and the bee”—the snake which “defends itself by killing” while “a bee defends itself by dying.”¹⁶ The issue hammered home here, of course, is the fundamental difference in world-view which calls for the adoption of unusual *modus operandi* capable of meeting the desired objective. One annihilates the self in its method of attack, but the second utterly obliterates the enemy to protect itself.

As will be elaborated in this study, an intriguing pattern is conventionally repeated in great literature. This concerns the over-arching object of making something new, achieved through alteration of tradition, feasting on a precedent. Text-making becomes a site in which to retell an old story because nothing is really “new under the sun,” as an adage has it. An emerging literary composition metaphorically devours an ancestor, its origin or source, reconciling the two apparently divergent methods of self-defense reiterated in Farouq’s observation in Cole’s *Open City*. The rebirth causes the death of the parent in order to come into its own. In this way, a new text brings itself to life through a method one can only call, for lack of a better term, a form of cannibalism. The practice of one text nourished by eating up another, feeding off a relative, becomes recurrent.

Subliminal relationships among texts require a literary-anthropological approach to the study of third-generation Nigerian literature which is scrupulously attentive. A present-day local informant, depending on some of the old forms but reshaped and redeployed in newer contexts, gives vibrant afterlife to echoes of old aesthetic patterns, manners, and other articles inherited from the past. These elements hover and linger on as residuum. The immediate past is never a distant space. The old exists across different time spans simultaneous with the emergence of new patterns. These allow unprecedented originality to shine forth. An illustration is Chika Unigwe’s signifying of Achebe in her novel *On Black Sisters Street*.¹⁷ It will be remembered that in the final pages of the archetypal first-generation Nigerian novel of clash of cultures, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the British District Commissioner reacts strongly to the suicide of the novel’s hero Okonkwo and in his view the community’s mishandling of the dead man’s body. That response finds him committed, after “turning to the student of primitive customs,” to a plan to write a book, “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of The Lower Niger,” with “the story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself.”¹⁸

The Commissioner’s book was promised. But it was not delivered by him—as far as one can tell. However, it may be fair to say that Achebe effectively wrote a local version of the British colonial administrator’s book in *Things Fall Apart*. In so doing, Nigeria’s founding novelist ironically laid the very foundation of the country’s first-generation literature on the grounds of the truly premier full-scale existential threats its primordial communities faced. Having a focus on responding to colonization and its aftermath, his text recounts the mostly negative consequences that came with it while documenting noteworthy aspects of his native Igbo (Nigerian) culture. If one sees the country as the sum total of the cultures of its constituent, ethnic groups, the substance of Achebe’s novelistic accomplishment is its symbolic significance in gesturing toward the narrative of nation. The nation does not exclude the imported ways of life that are followed. The fact that Achebe wrote not one book but two on the anthropological subject of which the British District Commissioner spoke adds a further notch to his towering achievement in developing the origin of narrational consciousness, the fund of nationalism.

One of these novels is *Arrow of God*, the story of a spiritual leader of his community—Ezulu. Out of devoted service to his deity and his communal office, he refuses the appointment of warrant chiefship offered him by the then colonial administration in an ultimate act of defiance. His act has enabled Achebe to document, in tandem with his telling of Okonkwo's story in the earlier novel, a manifold history of the resistance that Africans mounted to colonization of their continent. He thus provided a standard against which subsequent Nigerian novels are to be measured in terms not only of technical merit but also of the governing values and behavior of the characters.

Third-generation author Okey Ndibe takes up the challenge thrown down by Achebe. In his novel, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, he re-writes Achebe's master-text in a subtle and haunting way, conducting a form of textual repetition and revision; or recycling, as it were. In his reverse story of recolonization, Ndibe has the offspring of the victims of colonial rule put back on themselves the same shackles which their wiser ancestors had fought so hard to shake off. The sinister motives of his novel's main character Ike are shocking. He jettisons the principles of honor and dignity which motivated Okonkwo and Ezeulu in Achebe's novels to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their communities. He reflects with numbing accuracy the horror of the warped values which over the years in-between the precursor text and the progeny have taken a firm hold of contemporary Nigeria. Ndibe wrote *Foreign Gods, Inc.* as a pastiche of the discourse of colonial resistance which informs Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. His act of subversion expands the dialogue on nationalism and patriotism as well as on colonization and its discontents, thereby inviting audiences to read his text and its forerunners together. Both Achebe's suicides, Okonkwo and Ezeulu, would no doubt look up from their graves (were they able to do so) with consternation at the cruel irony of their descendants, the Ndi Igbo today, like Ike, doing the very reverse: going to any length, even to the desecration of sacred sites, in order to obtain the new insignia of title: money. The older novels are narratives of colonial conquest and failed resistance or the thwarted struggle of African peoples for decolonization; the new novel reads like a parody of the older texts as the story reconstitutes its predecessors with its emphasis on an African people's voluntary cultural re-entry into the old colonial arrangement in self-surrender to the former colonial masters.

Likewise taking a cue from other writers of her generation, and acting more like an author entrusted with precious tales than a poacher with a different intent, another third-generation novelist, Chika Unigwe, has signified on another first-generation master-text, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*. She is an outsider looking in. And she bravely takes on the subject of prostitution in her work of in-depth investigative reporting *On Black Sisters Street*. It is a unique novel: the only work of fiction by an African writer containing an authenticating statement referencing the accounts as documentation of information entrusted to the author for custodianship by real Nigerian women enmeshed in prostitution. These individuals talked to the author about their lives, giving her the permission to write about them. Their yarns expose the most private sectors

of lives that reveal the inner workings of the world's oldest profession, supplementing the muted male perspectives on the trade offered earlier in Cyprian Ekwensi's pioneering depiction of the subject in his tale about the corroding temptations of city life in *Jagua Nana*.

Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* is a true original, often harrowing but an exciting and highly enlightening read. Its subject is comprehensively covered by the author with impressive scope and detail. It deploys cultural studies and sociological investigation in conducting sympathetic observation of a number of prostitutes and reporting on the findings with perspicuity. The subject is one that cries out to be covered. In it, Unigwe joins others such as second-generation writer Catherine Acholonu and Flora Nwapa. She expresses herself adeptly, inserting her writing into the Igbo anthropological novelistic tradition pioneered by Chinua Achebe and extended by those who have come to be known as his sons and daughters in conveying experiences that advocate for the abrogation of customs where all those who call the shots have always been men.¹⁹

Unigwe goes about planting her writing into the Igbo novelistic tradition through the use of interpolated words and phrases in Igbo with their equivalent English translations. It is significant that such usages come at key moments and passages in the novel. They powerfully lend the authority of tradition to the subjects under deliberation, grounding the swell of the poignant matters implicated in the quest for women's emancipation in Nigeria. In this she carries over some elements from first- and second-generation literature. As will be demonstrated in this study, she serves as a reminder that we cannot always rigidly pigeonhole writers because the chains linking one generation to another inevitably contain several complex patchworks, patterns structured as a pot-pourri of disparate elements which mesh into creative connections stressing continuity and innovation: a collage of the makeshift and improvisatory with established convention.

Surely matters are not always quite that simple, and it would be a dereliction of duty if we forget that, in the third order of change, sometimes, if rarely, there may appear a handful of works which, though produced at about the same time within the literature of a nation, remove themselves from the realm of their contemporaries both stylistically and thematically. Such works may be so idiosyncratic that they frustrate the impulse to classify them. These are works that turn everything around them completely upside down. They may exhibit properties either more or less in alignment with some remotely distant predecessors, for instance. But not infrequently they contain features so inventive as to be far ahead of their times. In Irish literature, James Joyce's *Ulysses* serves as an eye-opening illustration of a work that made such a drastic alteration of Homer that it seemed nothing had paved the way for its emergence.²⁰ Within the context of African literature, whenever the subject of trailblazing writing comes up the poetry of Christopher Okigbo is repeatedly cited as an example, and for good reason, because of his strident iconoclasm and the way his work apparently overturned the system into which it emerged.

Okigbo's poetry is like a volcanic eruption. It embodies extreme experimentation; it is the exemplar of a drastic makeover of the structures of poetic expression by a distinctive, towering talent, who first knocked everything down before reassembling the new edifice. We proudly identify Okigbo among Nigeria's first-generation poets, the pioneering modernists. Yet, apart from the lyrical quality, his audacious imaginativeness, especially in his idiosyncratic verse in *Labyrinths: With Paths of Thunder*, stands so radically alone as to share few major features with those of the works of any other poet of his generation. By the same token, it is remarkable that imitations of Okigbo's verse reverberate in Nigerian, and in African writing more broadly, to this day. Okigbo's singularity can easily be confirmed. The contrast between his poetry and that of his contemporaries is vivid. Okigbo lacks, for example, the majestic flamboyance of the John Pepper Clark, in heavily anthologized pieces such as "Okokun," "Ibadan," and "Abiku"; the high-flown complexity of the Wole Soyinka of "Telephone Conversation," his own version of "Abiku," which is a counterweight to Clark's, and his "Death in the Dawn"; the loftiness and grandeur of Gabriel Okara's "Piano and Drums," "One Night at Victoria Beach," and "The Snow Flakes Sail Gently Down," all collected in his singular book of poems *The Fisherman's Invocations*, to say nothing of the triteness or dry and humorless tenor of Michael J. C. Echeruo's *Mortalities* poems and Okogbule Wonodi's mysticism.²¹

Obscurantism may be said to be the only element that Okigbo's verse shares on any sustained or meaningful level with the pieces by his contemporaries. When he is compared in depth with the dynamic Soyinka, in particular, the differences become magnified: whereas the difficulty with Okigbo is referential, primarily because of his wide range of sometimes mysterious allusions and flights of fancy, the thundering Soyinka's indeterminacy is linguistic on account of his frequently old-fashioned word combinations, inversions, and highly elevated and provocatively wayward thoughts and language. While Soyinka was still enamored with the notion of poetry rigidly composed in conformity to the tradition of the Metaphysical poems of John Milton, John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, and Richard Crashaw, Okigbo surreally found his original voice in both the non-esoteric language of ritual or religious worship and the conversational style of the Igbo people. Okigbo, too, can occasionally indulge in word coinage, but in a different frame since he seldom mangles the normal structure of word combinations in his sprightly, fresh, and sparkling use of the English language. Inversion and irregular sentence structures are also rare in Okigbo, if not entirely alien territory.

Christopher Okigbo bucked the trend of the poetry written in his time. He rejected not only uncritical deference to imported convention but also callow obedience to his contemporaries. Once he found his own voice, Okigbo turned toward his ethnic oral forms before any of his compeers realized their value. Marching in line with what was faddish in poetic composition was not his path. Okigbo's poetry, naturally, bestrides several eras while always maintaining its distinctiveness. Okigbo's transcendence over period divides makes it problematic

to determine to which generation he can be truly considered to belong. It would be a misjudgment either to cocoon him in a clean past or place him only in the present. There is more than a likelihood he will be tied to the future. In like manner no one can rule out the prospect of continuing echoes of his work in the future, as they have haunted the past and continue to haunt the present. All three categorizations therefore can apply in Okigbo's idiosyncratic case: past, present, and a strong possibility of the future. Literary historians have frequently debated to which generation should be attributed the works of authors who are freaks of nature, like Okigbo—artists either so strikingly forward-looking in perspective or consistently engaged in taking backward glances, or who combine both dynamics. Like the Igbo minstrel it is hard to consign them to any specific time period.²²

The foregoing discussion may have given the impression that, in factoring in generational boundaries, delimiting thematic and stylistic patterns can be protean, whether from a broad view or a streamlined perspective. Since there are few if any undiluted elements which are not carried over across time, in light of literary structures' border-crossing proclivities, this could lead one to wonder how helpful such generational placement of writers may be, particularly for authors who are amenable to categorization within the multiple eras into which their works cross over. How useful is generational classification if it depends on the often-unstable perspectives of readers, on the vagaries of angles of reader perception?

This author's own view on this is that occasional moments of quibbling should not discourage us from the search for elements that account for period divides, whether they remain embedded in the matrix of texts or are sitting prominently on the surface for the reader to access. We must persist in this pursuit as a painstaking labor of love. Period divides may be largely arbitrary constructions, but readers still risk distorting the integrity of texts if they deny or overlook their contexts of production, the surrounding sources of influence, or the predominant elements which typically accompany these literary time capsules.

While bearing in mind the fluidity of timelines involving art works in a state of flux with variously inflected modes and the difficulties in drawing the boundaries of generations, when all things are considered there is clearly a case for pegging the development of the genre now called Nigeria's third-generation literature to the late 1980s.²³ Within this context, one can indeed reasonably take the 1988 publication of the ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors) poetry volume edited by Harry Garuba, *Voices from the Fringe*,²⁴ as marking a milestone in the formal national emergence of this venture. The caveat is that the volume includes several well-known writers who are now identified as members of the second generation—Phanuel Ekejuru, Tunde Fatunde, Sam Ukala, and Dubem Okafor, among others—clear testimony of how amorphous generic outlines or how gradual generational shifts can often be. They may be so thin as to be not immediately as distinct as scholars might expect or want them to be, or they can be problematic to ascertain at all, especially at their formative stages. In these early days the cumulative details have not yet fully coalesced around blocks of issues and techniques, and scholars must begin to configure the

changes which are beginning to establish themselves. But it remains clear that the maturing of the genre of Nigeria's third-generation literature revolved around the 1980s.

It must be conceded, however, that the publication of the Garuba/ANA volume, as august an offering as it is, was only a harvest, albeit a bountiful one, of quietly emergent creative efforts spread across the country in the years prior. There is no question that it signified a watershed moment in the official recognition by one of the country's major literary organizations, the Association of Nigerian Authors, of the evolution of writing by a new crop of writers, such that its role in the acceptance and popularization of the genre of Nigeria's third-generation literature should not be understated. It is a grievous oversimplification, nonetheless, when scholars definitively attribute the establishment of this branch of Nigerian literature to the work of any one individual or any one specific region of the country.

This deeply troubling error of oversimplification is precisely what many emerging Nigerian critics seem to be making. This is not entirely to be unexpected in a society habituated to deifying obas, emirs, imams, spiritual leaders, and chiefs, now hungry for cultural heroes to celebrate. The misattribution to a single individual and to a specific location as providing the chief impetus for a wind that at the time was blowing across the entire country, East and West, North and South, including the Middle Belt region, however, is self-serving and wrong-headed in the extreme. So is another exaggeration that locates the city of Ibadan as "the acclaimed meeting point for the main actors of the cultural renaissance of postcolonial Anglophone Africa."²⁵ These people are certainly creating their own realities, and they do not tally with the actual truth.

This writer was living and working at Ahmadu Bello University, in Zaria, during the flowering of third-generation literature in the 1980s. As that wind of change in Nigerian literature was sweeping across the country, he felt it in the air then and participated in it, and will return to the subject momentarily. But it might be profitable to first spend some time on a more distant past and the undue prominence given to Ibadan as the heart of artistic creativity in English-speaking Africa in the formative stages of modern African literature in English during the 1960s and the early 1970s. It is paramount to clear this error, which is so egregious that it completely flies in the face of the publicly documented facts. We might begin by pointing out that Okot p'Bitek, who wrote two of the most outstanding poetry volumes to have graced African literature in English in this era, *Song of Lawino and Song of Okot* (1970) and *Horn of My Love* (1974), for example, was not a presence at Ibadan.²⁶ Neither did Ibadan play any part in nurturing Taban Lo Liyong, author of *Fixons and Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs*,²⁷ among many others; and the notable novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of Africa's greatest writers, who launched the modern East African novel in English with the publication in quick succession of his *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), did not get a head start at Ibadan.²⁸ Not even Lenrie Peters, practicing surgeon, poet, and novelist from the neighboring West African country of the Gambia, had any Ibadan roots or

affiliations, but he would go on to help establish the foundation of the modern literature of his country with the 1965 publication of his novel *The Second Round* and a series of important poems, including “Homecoming,” part of his 1967 poetry volume *Satellites*.²⁹ From Ghana, of course, Ayi Kwei Armah of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*³⁰ fame was not at Ibadan, nor was Kofi Awoonor, author of *This Earth, My Brother*.³¹ One can go on and on: the list of Anglophone African writers who made an imprint in the 1960s and 1970s without any connection to Ibadan is endless. All this hype, the sparkling and attractive fantasy of Ibadan as the nerve center of the African literary renaissance, under which so many have fallen, is totally nonsense.

It must be granted that some of the key figures at the foundation of modern Nigerian literature, such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Mabel Segun, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Christopher Okigbo, and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo all have roots in Ibadan during that time. But we should not forget that artistic creativity flourished at centers of learning in other parts of Nigeria too, as it did at several major centers of higher education across the entirety of English-speaking Africa. Prominent among these eruptions within Nigeria were activities of the Nsukka arts movement and the Zaria arts school, the first degree-awarding art institution in Nigeria. The works of Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu in Nsukka, and S. Irein Wangboje, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, Jimo Akolo, S. A. Adetoro, Richard Baye, L. T. Bentu, Dele Jegede, and later James Ewule, Tonie Okpe, and Kolade Oshinowo, and others in Zaria, clearly belie the impression that there was only one center which could be considered the colony of high literary culture for Nigerian and African writers and artists.³²

Beyond the shores of Nigeria, other hubs of artistic creativity flourished in Africa during this period, at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, and later at the University of Nairobi, in East Africa. The most famous literary event of the era, the monumental hosting of the first Conference of African Literature on the continent in 1962, took place at Makerere. It was subsequently followed by the high-energy cultural work surrounding the activities in Nairobi of Okot p’Bitek and a group of three scholars, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, Taban Lo Liyong, and young patrons of the arts such as David Cook and James Gibbs as well as Michael Etherton and John Reed at the University of Zambia. This is to say nothing of the historic cultural activity reported in another West African country, at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone by Eldred Durosimi Jones in his last published major work, *The Freetown Bond*.³³ In a nutshell, there were centers for the grooming of artists all over Africa during the ferment of independence movements, among which the Ibadan project was just one example, as important as it undoubtedly has turned out to be.

When one turns to 1980s Nigeria, specifically, undoubtedly the dominant literary occurrence—the emergence of third-generation literature—was a national movement in which many actors and locations spread across the length and breadth of the country were active participants. Unquestionably, to misattribute a commanding role to any single location and individual actor as the

originators of this genre is to miscomprehend Nigeria's literary history completely, and to fail to give careful attention to the flowering of this literature. The bogus claim cannot even pass the litmus test of ordinary commonsense. Indeed, the overblown claims made for Ibadan and any specific individual there at the time clearly do not reflect well on home-based African academic journal publishing, for how such an outlandish claim comes to be peddled in the pages of a journal that touts itself as a reputable academic publishing outlet without being caught by the peer-reviewing process is embarrassing. This author would, of course, not be surprised if a colossal error such as this was in fact brought to the attention of a journal's editor yet was overruled, having had an unforgettable experience recently when a South Africa-based journal sent him an article to review. As one of two reviewers who had rejected the article, the editor wrote to inform him that a third reviewer had accepted the submission, and so the editor had gone ahead by using the editorial chair's vote to break what the email referred to as "the tie" in favor of publication. He still cannot understand the arithmetic of a "tie" when two out of three readers are on one side of a recommendation, but he is keenly aware that these are unusual times in academic publishing. With the mushrooming of run-for-profit academic journals and the pressure to sustain high-profile academic careers into which journal editorships propel scholars, too many of the publishing outlets now open to Nigeria's fourth-generation critics, working under a publish-or-perish syndrome, are simply looking to fill up their pages—annual and quarterly subscriptions must be fulfilled. Notwithstanding, this disastrous situation of sub-standard ethics in journal publishing should not in any way absolve authors of culpability for their own errors, and so it would be remiss not to reiterate that Nigeria's third-generation literature did not originate at Ibadan. And just as no one specific site can lay claim to being the exclusive treasure-house of talent, no one individual was the fountainhead of inspiration.

It must, nevertheless, be acknowledged that the Nsukka group of writers has legitimate claims to have participated in the collective national origin and formation of this genre of Nigerian literature. So does the Zaria group of writers. Literary activities one can only describe as robust took place at the time in writing workshops there, leading to a rush of publications of many excellent materials by both students and faculty in the journals *Work in Progress* and *Saiwa*, and the English Literary Association student journal *Kuka* housed in the Department of English at the Ahmadu Bello University. Noteworthy among those who gave their creative writing an early hearing in *Saiwa*, for example, should be mentioned Ghanaian playwright Ama Ata Aidoo, who published three poems—"Now That the Weather Man is Gone Crazy," "Heavy Traffic," and "From the Only Speech that was not Delivered at the Rally"—in the maiden issue of the journal in 1984. The Malawian poet Jack Mapanje made an appearance in issue number 4 (1987) with his piece "Smiller's Bar," as did the critic, novelist, and poet J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, who had his poem "Tears of Laughter" printed there; also, Femi Ayeboode, with the piece entitled "Poem"; and the then-fledgling poet Niyi Osundare, who contributed "Echoes from the

Rural Abyss” to the same issue. The *Okella* magazine, which later became the official mouthpiece of the Creative Writers Workshop, a campus-wide student organization, offered another publication outlet for new work from both within and outside the Ahmadu Bello University campus.

There was also a similar kindling of the creative spark at other universities around the country, at Ife and Lagos, then Nigeria’s other main centers of higher education, soon to be joined by the University of Benin and the University of Calabar. The list of contributors to the Garba/ANA volume *Voices from the Fringe* speaks volumes in itself about the national character of the creative temper. Indeed, the title of the collection was something of a misnomer, because verse published in newspapers across the nation at this time demonstrated the dominance of the free verse form, which had wholly replaced the regular meter of the poetry of the preceding era. In hindsight, the poetry collected in that volume was at the center of the national consciousness in Nigeria and anything but on the fringe.

In general, people were tired of elite poetry, and so the most dramatic artistic innovations took place during the earliest phase of third-generation literature in the new poetry. The emerging writers dispensed with conventional English and regular meters entirely in favor of unrhymed compositions, in pidgin on occasion, and irregular verse lines conspicuously employing the language of everyday conversation. They were not content with just challenging the received notions of standard English and regular meter as vehicles of poetic composition associated with the blank verse of their predecessors. In the article, “Resisting Repression in Nigeria: The Lyric Poetry of Femi Osofisan,” situating the artistic transformation in progress during this era in its socio-economic and political context, this writer outlined the following conditions as the raw combustible elements which were to light the creative fires for two consecutive generations of Nigerian writers³⁴:

Nigeria gained political independence from the UK in October 1960 but the military have ruled for over twenty of the thirty-five years of the country’s post-independence history. The first military coup, by General Aguyi Ironsi, took place barely six years after independence, on 15 January 1966. When Ironsi was overthrown in a counter coup in July 1966, another officer, then Lt Colonel (later Major General) Yakubu Gowon came to power. Gowon’s nine-year-rule was terminated by the coup of General Murtala Mohammed in 1975. When Murtala Mohammed was killed in the unsuccessful coup of Lt Colonel S.D. Dimka of 13 February 1976, his second-in-command, General Olusegun Obasanjo, took power and ruled until October 1979, when he handed over power to the first elected civilian president of the country, Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Upon re-election for a second term of office, Shagari was ousted from power by the coup that brought General Buhari and Brigadier Idiagbon into the limelight in 1983. On 27 August 1985 the nation was again shocked with the news of another coup, when General Ibrahim Babangida ended the rule of Buhari and

Idiagbon. Babangida stepped aside on 25 August 1993, only to be replaced six months later by his former colleague, General Sani Abacha, who is now holding on tenaciously to power.

Throughout the period of military rule, but especially during the Buhari and Babangida eras, the soldiers projected themselves as powerful, benevolent leaders who were in power to “restore law and order” and, above all, were themselves beyond the rule of law. Every form of dissension was banned. In practice, the military (mis)rule was marked with ostentatious lifestyles and outrageous displays of wealth by the junta, escalation of corruption in national life, reckless embezzlement of public funds, nepotism, favoritism, patronage, godfatherism and an abysmally low morale among the general populace, the majority of whom were uneducated, unemployed and destitute.

The unrest prevalent during the Babangida dictatorship spread desperation, confusion, fear, panic, and social and economic insecurity, as well as tyranny. The turbulence gave Nigeria’s third-generation fiction its creative spark, although its vehicle as an institution for engagement with history was a legacy that it inherited from first- and second-generation writings. The distinguishing marker of this expression is the exilic angst that it brings to the exploration of life for its protagonists. The turmoil led to the flight not only of Nigerian academics but of the expatriate faculty in many Nigerian universities, also creating a huge subject for third-generation writing. This was the setting in which Nigeria’s third-generation literature was birthed, some of it also utilizing pidgin, the lingua franca of the uneducated people, in an unabashed show of solidarity with these underprivileged elements.

In Zaria, for instance, the 1988 publication of Egwugwu Illah’s pidgin poem, under the title “Kabukabu,” rode on the wave of this movement. Illah’s “Kabukabu” was the foster child of one of the most challenging moments in Nigeria’s then short time as an “independent” country. It was a time of near-total collapse of all the institutions of government and witnessed economic disenfranchisement of the working class and the high-handed dictatorship of a military junta, which later turned in the uniforms and camouflaged itself under civilian clothes but continued to operate the same policies. Oil gloom and environment degradation were other rampant human rights abuses. Illah’s “Kabukabu” arose from the work of the Zaria Creative Writers Workshop, where the author’s prodigious talent was first noticed:³⁵

I no blame di man
Sam-sam
Di time e been buy dis 305
E take anoda loan
From first bank
Abi na UBA Sef
Take join am

Before him money reach
 To give the Peugeot distributor.

Now nko?
 Na two times
 Dem de commot money
 From im salary
 College commot dem own
 Bank too follow
 Not to talk PAYE,
 Housing
 And 'economic recovery'.

Before e fit recover
 Na Kaduna be dat
 E go get 8–9 Lecture
 Kon run Kaduna 10–11
 Den come back for im 12-1 tutorial
 So if tyre no burst
 Or police delay am
 To show im patricula
 E go fit 'make ends meet' (86)

Topically, Illah's "Kabukabu" covers all but one of the central concerns of the genre of Nigerian literature soon to acquire the appellation "third generation," though it anticipates that loudly missing topic—immigration—implicitly as well, particularly the flight of academics in droves looking for better lives outside the country because of the intolerable economic and social conditions at home. The author, Egwugwu Illah, was then a lecturer in the former Department of English and Drama at Ahmadu Bello University. The poem captures eerily the horror stories of the hustle and shuttle of academics for survival under the terrible economic atmosphere of the Babangida era. The title of this poem refers to the illegal use of private vehicles by citizens of the country for the commercial purpose of public transportation. The poem evokes the sense of the extreme nightmare of lecturers struggling unsuccessfully to stretch their meager salaries to meet basic necessities, forced to find supplementary sources of income by taking on the role of taxi drivers using their own cars to move passengers around while juggling this work with their teaching, which unavoidably took a devastating hit.

"Kabukabu" became a favorite pastime for many academics, not only at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, but across the entire country of Nigeria, especially those from one-income families. Because there was such extreme difficulty in obtaining credit, it took not only herculean effort but almost needed a miracle to get one. Interestingly, of the two banks where the lecturer in the poem secures the requisite multiple loans, "First Bank" and "UBA," the latter was particularly notorious for the long lines of lecturers queuing up along its

corridors for hours on end in search of overdraft loans from month to month between one payday and the next, only for the manager to reject their petitions outright. The poem's snide remark, "UBA Sef," is a swipe at the harshness of the bank's disdainful treatment of intellectuals. This bank's notoriety for not responding sympathetically to the pain of the lecturers reflects in a nutshell the attitude of the military authorities at the helm of affairs of the country. The multiple car loans secured by the lecturer in the poem would have required an enormous exertion of energy to obtain. But the sourcing of these loans was not followed by any reprieve at all because the repayment that the borrower must now provide involves immediately carefully balancing it against the liquidation of his other debts. Among these were automatic payroll deductions of University Housing Rentals for faculty living on campus housing, all of which follow after the massive hole dug into the salary by the bank's installment payments. Alongside these payments are the mandatory "PAYE" ("PAY AS YOU EARN") graduated house charge and the "Economic recovery" which refers to an unpopular levy attached to the aid package requirements of the World Bank's IMF (International Monetary Fund) Structural Adjustment Programme instituted by the repressive regime of Babangida on the country. Civil servants and lecturers bore the brunt of the IMF debt.

Police corruption—call it police brutality, what many now see as the unofficial violence of the state, later featured at greater length in Maria Ajima's short stories—was implicated as well in the obstacle the lecturer had to contend with because law enforcement officers too were scavenging for survival. These parasites wrested bribes from road users by demanding what was called "particular" or appropriate official registration papers for commercial vehicles, which they knew all too well owners using their private cars as "kabukabu" could not possibly have. The poem references the operational procedure of the Peugeot Motor Vehicle Plant. The Peugeot plant was located in Kaduna, no more than 50 kilometers from the university town of Zaria, but the company prohibited the direct sale of its products to customers, thus requiring the prospective customers instead to buy the vehicles through mercenary car distributor networks. Often these dealers were located hundreds of miles away from the intended buyers, and third-party buying also came with grossly inflated prices to allow the distributors to maximize their own profits. Using any vehicle obtained through such a torturous process was an act of will, but the use of the Peugeot 305 model, the smallest family sedan and a symbol of financial struggle, for commercial purposes was a measure of this lecturer's ultimate desperation. By Nigerian standards at the time, the Peugeot 305 was the antithesis of the luxury Peugeot 505 used by the elite and later as long-distance cabs. The constant fear of a burst tire arose because of the treacherous conditions of Nigerian roads, with their crater-sized potholes rearing up so frequently and unexpectedly that a driver would try to dodge them at his or her own peril.

Illah's "Kabukabu," therefore, defined the mood of an era and encapsulates the style of the literature being written particularly across college and university campuses. Around the time of its publication, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, then a

lecturer at the Anambra State College of Education, in Eastern Nigeria, also published his slim poetry book collection, *I wan bi president: poems in formal and pidgin English* (1988).³⁶

Among the other individuals that also similarly made their publishing debuts there, exploiting these escalating socio-economic and political states of morass, a former Ahmadu Bello University English Department student, who later became the editorial director of the Ahmadu Bello University Press, Audee T. Giwa, is deserving of special mention, as someone who went on to write the promising novel *I'd Rather Die*, a tale of the fatally injurious effects of the new commercialism on love.³⁷ The established poet John Haynes, a British national then lecturing in the School of Basic Studies and the English Department at Ahmadu Bello University, joined the fray, writing under the pen name of Idi Bukar and conceptualizing the economic and socio-political devastation of the country in the image of a drought rapaciously ravaging the homeland in his impressive self-published poetry volume, *First the Desert Came and Then the Torturer*.³⁸

First the Desert Came and Then the Torturer is an extended poem composed using the formula of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*,³⁹ a modernist work of literary expression with which Bukar's free verse bears much resemblance. One of the movements is entitled "Words" and refers in a concrete sense to the deep troubles of the times spiraling out of control:

They jailed intellectuals
They shot workers and students
They imported electronic equipment from Brazil
with instructions for the Torturer

As the poor got thinner
they shouted the slogans louder

In the noise
the silence came
a dispersed rustle of textbook pages

In the sentence no-one was permitted to utter
or copy
or even know
the words began to mean

In their whispered sound
in the shapes of their letters
in their very ink
the screams of life had been placed.⁴⁰

Here, utilizing parallel verse lines and suggestive, carefully selected words and image-laden language to powerful effect, Bukar rummages through the issues of the times. He begins with the persecution of intellectuals. This was particularly

close to home for many lecturers at Ahmadu Bello University as a result of the mistreatment of a sociology lecturer there, Jamaican-born, Yale and Vanderbilt-educated Patrick Wilmot, who was abducted at night by the State Security Service (DSS) at gunpoint. A major cause of insecurity was the way the Wilmot arrest was handled by the DSS, who illegally took him away shortly after he left his home and was on his way to a club, and not only whisked him from his friend's car but deported him overnight to London in 1988, without due process. The callous signature of the DSS was all over the episode. Not only were Dr. Wilmot's whereabouts never even disclosed to his Nigerian-born wife the entire night, but he was taken out of the country without being allowed to take any property with him other than the light tropical clothes he wore, arriving in London in zero-degree temperatures.

The next line references the escalation of police brutality on university campuses country-wide. In an effort to suppress student uprisings the police went rogue, leading to the killing of many students in a manner recalling the murder of the country's first university student martyr, the late Kunle Adepeju, an agricultural undergraduate in his second year shot by police during protests at the University of Ibadan in 1971. Idi Bukar next zeroes in on the draconian policies of the government to clamp down on student agitation which spread negative consequences throughout the country. One was the fear among farmers and market forces that led to an epidemic of hunger and malnourishment. He then brings up the issue of the silence imposed on students by repression of ideas, rounding out with the retrograde regime of censorship and propaganda and slander of opposition that unleashed a concerted wave of disinformation on the country. This is an obvious reference to the tactics that earned Babangida the nickname of "Maradona," an ironic reference to the legendary football dribbler.

It is not a coincidence that three years earlier, Patrick Wilmot, the subject of the DSS midnight raid alluded to by Bukar, had published a poem in the maiden issue of *Saiwa*, one of the two faculty journals housed at the then Ahmadu Bello University Department of English and Drama. This poem, "Untitled,"⁴¹ conveys the growing radicalization of the intellectual elite at the university, which the teaching and lectures of Yusuf Bala Usman in the Department of History epitomized. Usman clashed repeatedly in public spaces and intellectual fora on campus with conservative lecturers like Joseph E. Inikori, an economic historian teaching in the same department who would later become president of the US-based ASA (African Studies Association of America). This was a moment of dynamic cultural ferment, when conflicting ideologies frequently collided on campus, between the teaching of other conservatives like the eternally turbaned Ibrahim Tahir, author of *The Last Imam*,⁴² and the cheeky criminologist Femi Odekunle, both in the Department of Sociology, garnering national attention on the Ahmadu Bello University as a hotbed of conflicting ideas and ways of life.

Some lines in Wilmot's anti-bourgeoisie and anti-Western poem, "Untitled," succinctly capture the spirit which was in the air. These lines speak of the petrifying bourgeois avarice causing the disinheritance of the working-class people, the group without capital, tellingly called in the poem the "untitled."

Such dispossession by the middle classes is the main issue at the center of the radical Marxist framework of class analysis—the notion of the monkey who works while the baboon chops:

traveller of days and nights and seasons without end
 The Magi take their nails
 from the glove compartments of Mercedes 280s and
 Citroen CX200s
 then consult the public Relations Experts
 of the British High Commission
 and American Embassy
 Diplomats in Danshikis
 wash their hand with Lux Toilet soap Imperial Leather
 and watch the man in the battered Volks
 with a bowl of fish soup and a loaf
 do we need Eau de Cologne
 to mask the odour of Crucifixions
 in 1978? (7)

The Wilmot poem vibrates with the energy of the decaying anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-local, lackeys-of-imperialism rhetoric of the first and second generations of Nigerian literature, soon to achieve modulation and redirection by the third generation. Wilmot invokes the rallying cry of the socialist movement on Nigerian university campuses across the country, from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, which claimed to speak up on behalf of the down-trodden masses against their oppressors, the bourgeoisie. The screaming was raised against the symbols of affluence of the elite, allegedly acquired at the great expense of the working-class people. The outward manifestations of these were the chauffeur-driven long and luxurious limousines imported from the West, like the German Mercedes-Benz 280s and the Citroen CX200, which at the time was the French diplomats' equivalent of Britain's Rolls-Royce and Jaguar, which the privileged local Nigerian elite lounged around in as they consorted with their international sponsors, "in Danshikis," the long, flowing gowns donned by the local agents of imperialism as lip service to national consciousness. While the masses who eke out a living were squeezed up in "the battered Volks"—a scornful reference to the Volkswagen Beetles commonly associated with poor people—the elite, who disdained locally manufactured cleaning agents in preference for imported luxury hygiene ones, were using these to cover their moral filth and the shame of their distasteful conduct. The "odour of Crucifixions in 1978" references the brutal massacre of eight students by the soldiers at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in the nationwide "Ali Must Go" student protest against the unpopular policies of education minister, Ahmadu Ali, during the Obasanjo regime.

Crucially, the poems by Egwugwu and Idi Bukar, on the one hand, and on the other the piece by Patrick Wilmot demarcate the respective boundaries between

Nigeria's third-generation and first- and second-generation literature. From a panoramic view what is obvious is that the third-generation literature has weaned itself off the coat of the imported Marxist/Leninist social analytical framing of the sensibility of authors of the two preceding generations seen in the piece by Wilmot, even while continuing to speak up—take up arms as it were—on behalf of the ordinary people against the presumed depredation of the political elite. This localization of the idiom of Marxism is one effect of the ongoing indigenization project which was initiated after political independence but which was intermittently stalled by the authoritarian culture with its incessant military interventions in politics. Through its interest in the relationship of content and form, third-generation literature asserts its continuity with the first-generation writers' emphasis on the duty of style and aesthetic excellence to match the content. This is where this genre separates itself from the weaker second-generation literature.

Yet the poems of Bukar and Wilmot in turn and collectively also bring up a related issue of nomenclature, of the definition of African/Nigerian literature itself. Jamaican-born Patrick Wilmot and British-born John Haynes (Idi Bukar) were both married to Nigerian-born women. Bukar's contribution to the subject that would come to be defined as the centerpiece of Nigeria's third-generation literature, like Wilmot's poem, is couched in the idiom and style of the previous generations, merging the style to be adopted by that generation with the sparse locution of British high modernist literature, and forcing a cross-examination of the definition of African literature: what it means to refer to writing as African/Nigerian/Ghanaian/Kenyan/Sierra Leonian literature, and so on. Is writing called African, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Gambian, or Senegalese based solely on who wrote it, the nationality of the author, or is it determined by its subject matter and mood?

In her penetrating sociological study of Nigerian readers, writers, and the novel in their country, *Bearing Witness*, Wendy Griswold weighs in on this subject, asking "What is the 'African' novel? Are we to think of a book as being a novel, first and foremost, but one that happens to be written by an African, or as an expression of African culture, first and foremost, but one that happens to take the form of a novel?"⁴³ Griswold classifies "[c]ritics discussing the African-ness of the African novel" into three categories: the "universalists," who opine "that African fiction treats the human condition and that it should be evaluated no differently than fiction from anyplace else"; the "traditionalists," who emphasize "a specifically African aesthetic, interpreted as a cultural conjunction of racial and historical elements"; and "the neo-Marxists," who, "regarding the first two as just different forms of idealism, emphasize the social and economic contexts of African literary production."⁴⁴

So difficult is the question of what is "African," Griswold is not exactly able to say what it is, but her question is applicable with modification to what goes by the name "Nigerian literature" too, especially if we take Nigerian to mean, in her words, "an artificial but operationally useful designation."⁴⁵ The poems of Idi Bukar (John Haynes) and Patrick Wilmot seen in this book surely complicate

the definition of Nigerian literature. British by birth, Idi Bukar (John Haynes) is married to a woman from Southern Zaria, in Kaduna State. Is Idi Bukar's *First the Desert Came and Then the Torturer* white British literature on account of the author's country of origin, or should it be counted as Nigerian literature because of its subject matter, artistic temperament, aims—its preoccupation with local, Nigerian issues from a perspective sympathetic to the downtrodden peoples of the country—and its inspiration, or both? The same question can be raised about Patrick Wilmot's poem, since he is Jamaican by birth but also married to a Nigerian woman.

These questions are pertinent because there is a long line of literature on Africa by non-indigenes of the continent, mostly Western visitors, settlers, and colonialists in the African service.⁴⁶ One might hesitate to call this African literature, being written from the perspective of outsiders and often derogatory in its treatment of African characters and subjects. Correspondingly, this uncertainty regarding the identity of writing on Africa by Westerners raises the issue of the place of the critical response to the literature of Africa by writers of other nationalities, literature which is not only supportive of the struggles of African peoples but is carried out by scholars with some experience of living in the continent.⁴⁷ Some might say that one solution to this terminological problem is to simply retain the current typology which divides the field into two main arms: the indigenous and the expatriate, the local and the international.⁴⁸

While scholars in the field continue to grapple with questions regarding the intractable identity of African writing in general, other issues arise which are bound up with them, such as the evaluative criteria by which the works we are reading should be judged, and who is best positioned to make the call. The question of assessment standards was at the very foundation of this literature, made prominent partly by the fact that reading and writing about the literature of not just each generation but each regional or geographical space or nation or continent come with different sets of challenges. Few readers can do justice to texts produced in contexts unfamiliar to them, for example. Neither can a non-discriminatory intelligence help other readers much in making critical judgments regarding the determination of textual quality. All these matters, but particularly the latter, apply to third-generation literature uniquely. They were not only there at the foundation of the field, but they gained even greater significance with the emergence of second-generation writing which turned the notion of what makes a text literary on its head. More than twenty-five years ago this author first drew attention to this noticeably yawning imbalance of matter and manner in second-generation Nigerian literature, in a critical response in which the cultivation of aesthetic appreciation was prioritized.⁴⁹

In an article titled "Poetry and Repression in Contemporary Nigeria," published in editor Eldred Jones' *African Literature Today*, in order to contextualize what he called "the upsurge" of creative writing in the 1980s which provided a point of departure for the literature soon to be labeled the third generation this author designated the defining element in the tone of the poetry of the era under the umbrella term "outrage."⁵⁰ The essay acknowledged the "spurt of

poetic creativity,” in particular, during the period now granted as the beginning of third-generation literature, referencing “the ferment of the economic turmoil of the Babangida regime,” which made poetry “a handy idiom for carrying the burden of social commentary” that compelled a crop of younger Nigerian writers to use versification as a platform for “voicing social discontent.”⁵¹

“As the economic difficulties aggravated by the introduction of the IMF-imposed Structural Adjustment Programmes in the country began to show their sorrowful effects on the lives of the ordinary citizens,” the article stressed, “Nigerian writers have increasingly turned to poetry as a platform for expressing their grievances.”⁵² A major shortcoming of this plebeian rush to the platform of poetry, the essay pointed out, was demonstrated in the crude way that, largely, “the writers dispensed with the subdued ornamentation” identified by the article as a key aspect of the “refined elements in the compositions of the earlier groups of poets,” who over the years have come to be known as the first generation: “the late Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, and M.J.C. Echeruo.” A lament rang throughout the presentation concerning some of the second-generation writers. Its focus related to the fact that “Outrage became such a key mood because the poets needed to speak with passionate, angry tones, defying all the previous conventions of restrained art.” From their perspectives, “These younger poets learned that they must not only make powerful indictments protesting against their dismal state of affairs, but suggest clear measures to remedy it because the military rogues who preside over the maladministration of their country are hard of hearing and can only be moved with insults, full-throated and clamorous, not beautiful images.” The gripe the article had was that the writers fell into a deadly trap set by circumstances. The cries of the suffering and the oppressed calling for justice could not go unheeded, the writers feeling obligated to take a stand against the growing depravity. But the desire to keep pace with the revolving door strains the relationship between content and style in their works as the authors caved in much too readily to the social pressures around them. The “need to sound factual and down-to-earth in recreating the real mood of the downtrodden peoples born out of their deprived status” overpowered the writers to the extent that many of “the poets have been unable to resist the temptation of making recourse to the use of plain prosaic language as a natural discourse of poetic composition,” which rarely yields great art. In the same forum, due acknowledgment was given to the work of this author’s compeer, the scholar J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, in illustrating what he too appropriately termed “the poetry of anger,” which provided a starting point for this writer’s discussion, even though the limitations in the scope of his contribution were not overlooked.⁵³

It gives this reader no joy that he still stands by those thoughts and maintains that in many of the works of Nigeria’s second-generation poets which he has read, with a few exceptions, art has too often been largely sacrificed at the altar of the expediency of political cant. Speaking to and on behalf of the underdog, showing solidarity with the masses, and things of that nature are important

projects. Of course, making the elite punching bag is going to be legitimate business for the petty-bourgeois intellectual class as long as the albatross, the divide between the haves and the have-nots, persists. The artlessness of these compositions decried by this author is that these things are done as though a pro-working class people's social stance on its own, arranged into awkward verse lines, is sufficient for serious poetry, without a sharp ear for captivating sound, assonance, consonance, the power of enchanting rhythm, engaging imagery, and startling phraseology such as are inherent in the oral tradition of many African peoples and in the compositions of the first-generation poets. He wished he had been wrong in the judgment of it in the now-distant past, for the benefit of Nigerian literature; but that's not the case. True, the second generation of Nigerian literature established a significant shift in the emphasis and agenda of representation.⁵⁴ Rather than simply reframing the colonial oppositional national narratives of the earlier writers, second-generation Nigerian literature is couched as a critique of the multiple, authoritarian, chaotic, and nightmarish nation which the writers observed. Thus, in place of the romantic recovery of an Edenic past presented by Achebe and his peers, the intimidation factor that those pioneers had created, through the production of fresh evidence added to the existing knowledge of a robust African civilization of the past, second-generation literature presented a new truth: the lost promise of independence. This was a truth that loomed particularly large on the horizon, one that was clamoring to be expressed in writing by a new generation of writers: the pervasive issues of moral confusion, ethnic polarization, and the excruciating economic and political marginalization of the underclass, to which the country increasingly fell victim. These new realities created, in Nigeria's second-generation prose fiction stylists and poets alike, a sense of duty to convey the simmering temper of post-independence disillusionment. Their works, therefore, identify them as activists who set their eyes steadily on matters concerning the failures of the indigenous leadership, ultimately consigning their attacks on the injustices that had been perpetrated by colonization and its aftermath to a remote and ancillary status.

Clearly, following in the footsteps of their predecessors, subsequent generations of Nigerian writers all can be seen to have pledged one form of allegiance or the other to writing the literature of social commitment. As a result, all these writers justifiably can be said to have conceived themselves as being in the thick of a fight to combat pathologies that politicians carried over from colonial rule and then compounded by adding others of their own. Sadly, too many second-generation writers have carried this social mission of literature so far as to completely lose sight of the aesthetic component which in every context should set all their self-proclaimed literary works apart from other forms of self-expression. And at some point, someone must have the guts to call the spade a spade and speak up against all the crap posturing promoted by the second-generation literature. In any event the reigning ideology of critical inattentiveness to this literature is both ingratiating and ploddingly boring. That it operates under the malignant guise of an underhand politics of politeness does

not help matters. It fails to hold the misguided writers to a higher critically discriminating standard. In many instances, this brand of criticism and analysis which is pursued from a moral rather than a literary point of view is mainly purveyed by self-interested scholars (not to be named in this forum) who wish to offend no one. The consequence of not finding a way to reinstate the authority of evaluative criticism is the current bland lumping of everything together as if all works are of equal aesthetic value.⁵⁵

However, speaking one's mind cannot continue to remain indefinitely a non-starter if a clear statement is to be sent that critical blindness will not be countenanced. The balance of content and form, or its absence, has always been a primary consideration in the formal studies of other national literatures. Nigerian literature should not be an exception. A broad-sweeping commentary published in Yemi Ogunbiyi's two-volume edited book *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present*, "Recent Nigerian poetry in English: an alternative tradition," takes the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 as marking a decisive alteration of the direction of second-generation poetry in both content and technique.⁵⁶ Its author, citing liberally the works of Paul Ndu, Obiora Udechukwu, Ossie Enekwe, Dubem Okafor, Chinweizu, Catherine Acholonu, Odiá Ofeimum, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, and others, makes a claim for what he calls the change from the pre-war "excessive preoccupation with the poet's private grief and emotions over and above societal tragedies and triumphs ... an undue eurocentrism, derivationism, obscurantism and private esotericism" to an Africanized, socially oriented poetry.⁵⁷ But his bold statement is of course not supported by poetics of nationalism fashioned by first-generation Nigerian creative writers such as the public stances in Gabriel Okara's dirges for the nation in his poetry; not to mention Wole Soyinka's lament for his country in his plays, and John Pepper-Clark-Bekederemo's concern for the state of the union in his poetry.⁵⁸ Clearly, many first-generation Nigerian writers did not conceal but hashed out their grievances in public, leaving it all out on the floor. Yet, against the prevailing evidence, a claim is made which is immediately contradicted by the statement that follows which effectively admits that it is the later Okigbo who indeed has provided the second-generation poets their main model for social commitment. In part, the trend observed by the critic is generally true in regard to the younger people putting together works packaged in prosaic language and purportedly employing oral forms. In a few exceptions, however, the poets identified by him actually sideline the aesthetic component that should go together with content to make a text a work of art; poetry as we conceive it. This is the point referenced in this author's review of the Ogunbiyi volume.⁵⁹

Surely, if writing calls itself a poem, a novel, a short story, or a play, then the question of art, of technique, must be pre-eminent. The failure to take technique seriously is the problem of many a second-generation creative writer. Timely as the political statements have been, the bulk of what passes itself as "poetry" in second-generation literature has in many ways been decidedly short in its aesthetic dimension. Mere verbiage has generally been taken as sufficient, and a manifesto or public statement of a writer's poetic method assumed to

compensate for the deficiencies in the actual practice. But matter needs to be matched with manner to make enduring poetry. Just as obscurantism on its own does not constitute poetic excellence, the simple absence of difficulty—accessibility on its own as a package conveyed in the idiom of trite, commonplace, simplistic messages—is insufficient to make a statement into high-order poetry. Targeting universalism per se and replacing it with localism and moralizing on internal problems of self-government are misdirected acts; removal of privatization alone is an absurd strategy of poetic composition. Denying the distinction between art and political sloganeering cannot be a viable way of going about building a robust literary tradition. Absent a mutual interaction between form and content, literature is canceled out.

The charge that an active interest in form and technique is largely absent in second-generation poetry, however, cannot apply to an isolated body of works under this nomenclature. These rare works include Niyi Osundare's oeuvre, Okinba Launko's *Minted Coins*, and Chimalum Nwankwo's *The Womb in the Earth and Other Poems*, among others.⁶⁰ This claim is supported by a careful look at the non-recondite but complex poetry-making methods of the three authors. They are typified in Osundare's case in particular and in Launko's in part by incorporation of resources of the charming Yoruba oral tradition as found in proverbial expression, ifa divination wordplay, ofo incantations, alo apamo riddling, Ijala chanting, oriki appellation, agglomerative fluidity of structure, manipulation of the craft of ideophone, naming by association, and parallelism, all of their inventive uses resulting in startling thought and phraseology that hit the reader like a thunderbolt with their imagistic power.⁶¹

Osundare takes in all these effects, borrowing from his predecessor Wole Soyinka, while wisely avoiding some of the excesses of the older poet such as his recondite expression which is not written to be understood by the faint-hearted or those with prosaic minds. Osundare recognizes that every viable tradition builds upon the works of its founding fathers and mothers, hence to have a wholesale rejection of one's ancestry is nothing short of insanity. His own affinity to the wealth of both Yoruba oral tradition and Soyinka's rich use of it is reflected in his tribute to the Nobel Laurette's word-smithing conveyed in his essay on the older poet's language use, entitled "Words of Iron, Sentences of Thunder: Soyinka's Prose Style," which appreciates Soyinka's prose as being actually more poetic than the billets of prose passed off by some second-generation "poets" in Nigeria now as poetry.⁶²

To a large extent, Okinba Launko (Femi Osofisan) has one foot in this tradition and the other in that of Christopher Okigbo and his reliance on Igbo ritualistic verse as well as Yoruba oriki verse, the blend of both sources proving explosive in the playwright's so far only published poetry volume, *Minted Coins*. It should be pointed out that, likewise, Chimalum Nwankwo, by not severing the umbilical cord linking him to Christopher Okigbo and the Igbo oral tradition, partakes frequently of the older poet's magic in his expressive range in his verse volumes *Toward the Aerial Zone*, *Voices from Deep Water*, and *The Womb in the Earth and Other Poems*. Word coinage is as important for Nwankwo as it is

for his model, never distracting because the meanings of his newly minted phrases are constantly clarified in context. The strong dramatic element in Nwankwo's verse draws both from his roots in Igbo verse tradition and from its echoes and reverberations through Okigbo and Yoruba oral retentions in Okigbo's poetry. Nwankwo's verse, like Okigbo's, abounds in illuminating wordplay, in compelling and vivid images taken from observation of village life: the portraits of boisterous boys and girls in their idyllic state of childhood, free of the worry found in the corrupt adult world, sitting or happily playing under the "udala trees" (mango trees) on moonlit nights. Its contributions to nature poetry are therefore immense, and suggest faint echoes of the nostalgic tone of the cultural awareness of Gabriel Okara in his poems recalling the mystic drums which typified rural life in Africa before the onslaught of Westernization swept the tranquility away with pianos. In his best poetry, Nwankwo approximates in a limited way within the range of his chosen poetic medium the historical events of childhood play memorably recounted in Chinua Achebe's novel of the clash of cultures, *Things Fall Apart*, where the problem of balance between art and politics is brilliantly negotiated by a first-generation writer who taps into the oral reservoir. That is why, in this author's view, Donatus Nwoga misapplies the concept when he charges Okigbo with plagiarism for grafting oral poetics, along with other borrowings, into his poems.⁶³ Besides the fact that the plagiarism allegation against Okigbo is not fully substantiated, by Nwoga's standard much of what we now pass as success stories in modern African literature generally could very well fall under his category of stolen words too. The claims against Okigbo are unfair. This is underlined by the fact that a lot of African literature in the European languages amounts to nothing more than sophisticated translation very cleverly done by writers, something they have a license to carry out.⁶⁴ How can it not be morally upright to take from a form like orature which circulates freely in a community and is publicly owned? Orature is the common property of its community, hence its utilization is a free-for-all. It is not as if orature has the copyright protection which is offered by modern publications.

Naturally, orature also permeates much of Nigeria's first-generation literature, which in general was thoroughly steeped in the pre-independence nationalist politics of the country's founding fathers.⁶⁵ Since the inauguration of their writing in the 1950s, principally to answer back to the misrepresentation of Nigerian peoples and their native cultures in colonial fiction,⁶⁶ the pioneering Nigerian prose fiction stylists,⁶⁷ like their political compeers, all doubled up as capable artists, cultural and social theorists, historians, and political analysts, relying primarily upon copious incorporation of oral sources such as folktales, proverbs, maxims, and other devices of folklore to carry out their assignments. In that way, the works of Achebe, Soyinka, Okara, Clark-Bekederemo, Cyprian Ekwensi, and others have ably combined cultural affirmation with anti-colonial rhetoric, employing anecdotes, parables, proverbs, maxims, sayings, and other oral modes in debunking the pervasive myths and stereotypes through which European writers have observed and judged colonial subjects.

Landmark foundational first-generation narratives, like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Arrow of God as well as Soyinka's plays *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Kongi's Harvest* and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *Song of a Goat*, have been deemed most satisfying to high aesthetic tastes. These works have an edge on the inventive employment of oral forms through which they find effective ways to get under the skins of detractors of Africa. These works all place the bric-a-brac of housing, furniture, clothing, utensils, and house decorations, as well as the dominant occupations of the people and their technology suitably in harmony with the society's rituals of entertainment, foods, the protocols of greeting and etiquette, speech patterns, oratory, religious worship, work and play, methods of burying the dead, the social milieu, the flora and fauna, the landscape, sound and smell, and the paraphernalia of nature like the weather and the cycle of seasons. These are qualities they share with their East African counterparts Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino and the Song of Ocol*. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in particular, and Soyinka's plays *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Kongi's Harvest*, through adept utilization of the abundant resources of oral storytelling devices such as proverbs, native thought patterns, folktales, and myths, the character of traditional African cultures is arrayed in all its dazzling glories. The authors were interested in mapping the totality of African culture available to human cognition to expose colonization's lie of carrying the burden of civilization to a benighted African continent. This meant documenting the nature of play and love, the marriage institution, ethic of work, instruction, habits of thought, moral conduct, self-government, religion, the dispensation of law and justice, and the methods of burying the dead encoded in the funeral ritual of Africans.⁶⁸

It is quite tempting to view "outrage" as an invention of third-generation literature. However, picking the wrong signal can be misleading. If by that term one means the notion of a high-pitched, defiant, angry tone conveying frustration, then it is more proper to see this mode as an extension of a tradition that goes back much further, to an era before the emergence of the third generation. In all fairness, this cantankerous form was the initiative of irascible pioneering African poets, among them Nigeria's Dennis Osadebay and the former Gold Coast's George Armatoe and Michael Dei-Anang, writing imitative verse which lacked originality as it was largely patterned after the manner of Victorian English poetry.⁶⁹ This truculent style was later adopted by their modern successors the Senegalese Birago Diop and David Diop as well as the then Ivory Coast's (Côte d'Ivoire's) Bernard Dadie. These later writers, like their precursors, were never deferential or lacked belligerence either in railing against the injustices of colonial rule or in clamoring for political independence. Rather, they were all able to exorcise the spirit of dependence on a foreign model of poetic composition to the extent of having stripped their poems bare of the imported imitative idiom.⁷⁰

The transformation of the verse of Christopher Okigbo followed the same pattern. The master poet famed for the lyrical flourishes of his highly experimental compositions could not help but evolve into the indignant voice in his

later poems, which became a decisive juncture in the development of modern Nigerian poetry in English. The final movement of his verse volume *Labyrinths with Paths of Thunder*, "The Paths of Thunder," presents a side of Okigbo firmly in possession of the combative, declamatory style which is at the very foundation of all socially committed African poetry in the colonial languages, and which truly allows his voice to come into his own. His pugnacious tenor is now understood to be a carryover from the oral traditions of the Nigerian Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups.

This high-pitched tone was reignited during the suffering engendered by the Babangida administration. In employing this mode in expressing bitter discontent with the times, however, the second-generation literature was not always uniformly accompanied by the appropriate technique to harmonize content and form. Its revival, renovation, and amplification in Nigeria's third-generation literature, with a more broadened outlook and greater attention to form, has met with more nuance, as this study will demonstrate. Primarily, in this literature's mission to raise an outcry first against the economic and political repression of the time, and then against the social turmoil fostered under the military junta, in particular, later widening its canvas to incorporate happenings involving Nigerians worldwide, the authors reliably assert an interest in establishing and maintaining a balance which is fair and equitable between their targets of attack and the modes of their creative expression. Herein lies the artistic excellence of the third-generation literature under investigation in this study. This generous sample never pushes political commitment to the backburner either, but it harbors no discrepancy between a preoccupation with subject matter and an absorption with form. Unlike some of the infamous ranting and over-the-top habits of second-generation texts, this literature is not an "in-your-face" type of writing, as we say in America. It exhibits a sensible balancing act. It is without bluster. The third-generation literature we are looking at does not announce itself by brandishing or flaunting its aesthetic qualities. Rather than parading what it's got, this literature mediates art and politics by subtly devoting itself to undoing the distinctions between them. In this way, it grabs and holds the reader's attention with gusto.

Whether they are novels of reflection with great psychological depth, like Cole's *Open City*, Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, or stories of a complex variety such as Ajima's *The Web*, each of these uncommon works tends to stake out its turf in the same terrain of fever-pitch imagination.⁷¹ Collectively, the originality of their recitals and their elegant composition mark the difference between them and their run-of-the-mill counterparts, products of superficial imaginations and poor craftsmanship conveying commonly accepted banalities. The lifeblood of these first-rate works is undoubtedly infused with unconventional subject matters or routine topics treated extraordinarily. These outstanding works all carry their authors' deft stylistic signatures as well. As high-order compositions, they largely eschew platitudes and invest their materials not only with feelings and significances beyond their locales

but also in scenes that are vivid and piquant. These unconventional works of art are permeated with objects charmingly distinctive to their cultural settings.

Nigerian writers have a long history of success and achievement, but there is something exceptional about the third generation and the promise that these writers hold out for future greatness. What is genuinely new in the literary success of the third generation is that this was the first time a group of writers would forge such clear literary pre-eminence out of the crucible of the severe economic privations and hardships, not to mention depressing political and social turmoil, which bedeviled the country from the mid-1980s. The emerging novels and short stories of the period are governed by an unusually wide variety of narrative techniques, startling in their candidness and often evolving into brutal self-disclosure of the protagonists. Alongside acute verisimilitude in characterization, character typology, and the *dramatis personae* of the texts, the techniques on display include linguistic mimicry, the identifying force of dialect, graphic pictorialism, emblem, the elegiac mode, and lifelike dialogue. All are seamlessly combined with moral reference points embedded in the social axes of the works, whose sweep of formal innovations and new initiatives spread out in the gallery of this literature are all energized by unprecedented reflective moral indignation. The foregrounding of gnomic devices, pungent imagery, and symbolism keep company in this branch of Nigerian literature with the deployment of multivalent narrative strategies and realistic portraiture to give meaning to the aspirations, wounds, and agonies of people of a generation in combat with the world into which they have been thrown by forces larger than themselves—anger related to false hopes, disappointed dreams, letdowns, resentments, fears, worries, pressures of living, nightmares from which recovery is belated, and troubles of the heart and mind. Angst-driven descriptive details, embedded so thickly as to call attention to themselves, signal the emergence of distinctly new sensibilities equivalent to the burdens borne by a generation. A robustly pervasive and impudent temper, one which recognizes no sacred cows, is firmly established within the frame of this genre of Nigerian literature. It is this element that enhances the roles of the texts in performing the honorable service of tackling the pain of moral turpitude, emphasizing the exposure of this appalling failing, and in so doing bearing witness to it and thereby strengthening the mimetic claim of this fiction.

The place of this genre within the vast sweep of the country's literary history is yet to be determined. However, discerning its scope and outlines, particularly while they are still taking shape, and establishing the defining features of this literature, will be the first step toward an appreciation of its true significance. But it is clear that by the time Nigeria's third-generation prose fiction writers arrived on the scene, the economic and political clouds had darkened even further. This challenging period dragged the bleak realities into the prose fiction canon as the matters of the greatest magnitude in Nigeria's national life during a pervasive climate of fear and uncertainty, to invoke in part the title terms of Wole Soyinka's prescient book. The grim realities reflect an escalation of the economic disempowerment of ordinary citizens; the devastating effects of

entrenched hegemonic politics; the sad effects of repression unleashed by the authoritarian leaders; the greed and avarice of the politicians; and widespread violence, which created a general state of insecurity countywide.⁷² Not escaping the notice of the writers, too, are the unbridled corruption that penetrated all corners of society and the glamorization of disreputable behavior through the bestowal of honors such as chieftaincy titles and national and state awards on corrupt individuals. All these problems in various combinations precipitated the mass exodus of the intelligentsia to greener pastures elsewhere. As the challenges and contradictions came to light, they indicated to Nigeria's third-generation writers that the old forms and subjects passed down by their predecessors had reached a state of thematic and stylistic exhaustion. This necessitated a striving for innovation: newer expressive forms to process and articulate the rapidly expanding and increasingly bizarre and bewildering realities. In the writings of Maria Ajima, Okey Ndibe, Teju Cole, Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Adichie, and Lola Shoneyin, among others, therefore, the narrative of cultural reminiscence had to make way for a depiction of the hell into which the present had descended. This fiction deploys adroit uses of language and an array of images encapsulating and excoriating these sordid events.

The new generation of artists writes with a frankness previously unheard of, and with great imagistic power—not only about the pervasive culture of corruption which facilitates the lavish and ostentatious lifestyle of Nigerian leaders but also concerning the absence of political accountability, which has spawned a general state of chaos. They put the military and the political elite who rule without conscience on notice, and they also write with incisiveness about encounters with malpractice in law enforcement and the unpunished looting and stashing away of the nation's wealth in the rulers' foreign bank accounts.

A significant component of Nigeria's third-generation fiction is therefore stoutly engaged with the economic, historical, and socio-political matrices shaping the structure and direction of a rogue nation state, characteristically exposing its morally debased conducts and the commanding ramifications that extend far beyond its own borders. But all the time the writers keep a keen eye on the craft of storytelling itself. Typically, and without ever donning the mantle of ideologues in the midst of the profound and unrelieved suffering of a marginalized citizenry driven to the point of exhaustion by grinding poverty, the writers are able to show in this fiction how the unconscionable actions of the military and the political overlords precipitate aggressive competition within their own ranks—rivalries that only beget further depletion of the nation's treasury—and in turn provoke both envy and repugnance in the wider society. As a result, this fiction not only demonstrates the ways misguided class codes of conduct and other ideologies of oppression are created, maintained, and perpetuated. Just as graphically, bringing to light and starkly dissecting this disheartening situation, these novels unveil the inmost minds of characters which collectively send a stinging rebuke to the system that so rapidly created conditions in which the act of day-to-day living for Nigerian citizens is more like playing Russian roulette.

Thus, among the most cardinal contributions of this corpus of texts is that it dares to insist that the accounts of the woes of an almost completely failed state must be told. One gets the impression that this literature conceives itself as a space of struggle. It pitches its tent on the side of human dignity, raising a strident voice in denouncing corruption, bigotry, and inequity. Its representation of the heartache of law-abiding citizens therefore functions preliminarily as a memorial of the toxic fallouts of the misconduct, both clandestine and brazen, embodied in the corrupt state and the racist hegemonic order. Tribute is due to this fiction for one immediate achievement: giving unprecedented power to its readers to eavesdrop on the misery that a reprobate nation has set loose on its people all around the world and to hear the grievances of those victims, their emotional and psychological torture, as the polity indiscriminately not only moves but knocks down the goalposts of appropriate behavior.

The underlying factors in the enshrinement and escalation of systemic forms of inequities in Nigeria are without question the aggravating impacts of the Civil War, economic mismanagement, oil exploration, and increasing environmental degradation. At the forefront in the monumental cluster of issues that have unleashed the unrest and insecurity that have bedeviled this deviant postcolonial state are the consequences of conspicuous consumption by the high and the mighty, who mount assaults on integrity simply in order to burnish their economic and political fortunes. Alongside these are the rampant trampling on the rights of minorities, armed robbery, perennial student agitation, politically or financially motivated hostage-taking and kidnapping, and skyrocketing youth unemployment, and not least the unrestrained dishonor done to women. This is the sense in which third-generation Nigerian fiction contributes significantly toward the delineation of a composite picture of the immoralities committed by the military and political kingpins in their true constitutional outlines. This writing is emphatic in bringing into sharp relief the contrast that has developed over a relatively short period between the glory of the past and the degradation of the present.

No element in this daring literature's poignant representation of its subject has been more fundamental and attention-grabbing than its confident ability to summon up true life through its bold technique. Its salient formal innovations have proven themselves to be more than equal to the task of marshaling a compelling view of the darker side of its manifold preoccupations. The fatalistic paradox which underlines the internal evidence brought to light by the surreal happenings it describes is an element shared by all great literature, from Homer and Sophocles through Shakespeare, Achebe, and Soyinka to the present. But the third-generation Nigerian fiction captures the extent of the despair fomented by the decline in the quality of life in Nigeria not only graphically but in a new and distinctive way. For instance, a supreme irony that is not lost on these authors is the manner in which the festering disenchantment of the traumatized majority populace has foisted expatriation upon many as the only viable way out, leading to a massive brain drain, only for the emigrants to then come up against some of the greatest walls of history in the form of prejudice and scorn toward people of other nationalities.

The exile experience is portrayed consistently in many of the texts as a colossal misadventure. More often than not it causes a painful travail too difficult to ease for many a Nigerian traveler. In some cases, exile is viewed as somewhat like running into a lion's mouth. Exile, migration, and travel are not new subjects that third-generation Nigerian writers invented, having roots in the inaugural moment of modern African creative writing. However, the romanticization by the migrant of the native land seen in the earliest travel literature of Africa is completely absent in third-generation Nigerian fiction. Here, one thinks, for example, of the utopianism in the romantic self-fashioning of Camara Laye in his *L'Enfant noir* (translated as *The African Child*) and *The Dark Child*.⁷³ By contrast, the proportionally unanticipated and therefore crushingly disappointing outcome of travel explored in third-generation literature is the dashing of the hope that life away from the voyager's homeland will lead to better days, while the return is out of the question because of the inhospitable conditions at home. The recurrent defeat of the optimism that fired the mission to sally out of the homestead, under the belief that the sojourn will produce some gleam of sunshine in the lives of the travelers, is what places Nigeria's third-generation fiction about affairs beyond the shores of the country, such as Teju Cole's *Open City* and Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, predominantly within the corpus of testimonial literature of the burden of expatriation, comprised of loss of dreams, disappointment, and mourning as harsh reality sets in. To read novels like Cole's and Ndibe's is to witness first-hand what so many are up against.

Unfortunately, this can mean that the many truly heartwarming immigrant success stories that deserve to be heard far and wide don't find a place in this fiction. Among these forgotten truths are the intellectual elite, for instance, who have flourished. Amidst the predominant horror stories, however, as survival instincts take over within the unequal power structures migrants must battle, immigrant fairy tales are sadly buried in the dustbin of history. The heartbeat of this genre of Nigerian literature, instead, is the heartbreaking rage of many a traumatized quester who has had his or her enthusiasm drained by hopelessness and rootlessness.

They may have records of high accomplishments globally; but alas, the topic of exiled Nigerians, like other immigrants, as targets of concentrated hatred in foreign lands permeates the country's third-generation writing. They are viewed with suspicion and accused of taking away jobs from their unemployed host populations. In the focus of the fictional lenses of the travelers' tales we see tropes of erasure and unremitting disaffection without palliation, scenes of deep gloom and unnerving moments which are all too familiar to the writers themselves, many of whom are now resident abroad, especially in Europe and the United States of America, as part of a vanguard of the migrant educated elite. One can quite easily trace deep connections between the experiences of many of the writers and the predicaments of their anguished fictional doubles in these narratives of displacement. It is within this trajectory that the fiction of despair has made room for the aesthetic of insufferable anguish and pain and defeat, the

respective cosmological landscapes of affirmation and doubt yielding fully to an angst-ridden season of discontent. With the writers speaking from the heart through the voices of their characters about things that have gone so terribly wrong, they take full advantage of the anthropological sweep, effectively employing sustained evocative methods which range freely through the minds of their characters. Speaking through these surrogates results in unfolding the functioning of consciousness, using a montage of inner explorative techniques to document their reactions to the chaotic occurrences in which their society and its citizens are caught up worldwide.

That this fiction uncovers home truths and lessons everywhere might be considered a key sign of its fundamental difference from other Nigerian literature. In these works, the agonies, and the institutions and people who inflict them, live on and the vision of egalitarianism remains a pipe dream. But if the bulk of this literature on relentless interior life, as well as socio-economic unrest, is not suffused with longing, not filled with a yearning for a return to the abandoned homeland, it is because the deserted locale is not a lost paradise either. In the projected experience of the authors and of their characters, no perfect past has existed. It isn't just that the writers or their characters are too overburdened by their immediate past to recognize any splendor it might have possessed, but that the place the exiles are fleeing is itself rotten to the core.

At any rate, uprooted third-generation Nigerian authors like Ndibe and Cole, as well as Unigwe, feel and express no emotional attachments to their renounced fatherland, because their own lives have not given them any memories of having ever inhabited an ordered universe in their country of origin. For this reason, the writings are not afforded imaginative projections of anything other than disruptions of ethical behavior. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that this fiction cannot rewardingly be read as an example of art imitating life; not at all. More profitably, it should be understood as falling into the category of explorative art: an investigative literature. This is an art that shows it has ample enough reason to task itself with not only documenting but also making inquiry into the raw business of living so as to outflank the oppositional forces—the enemies of meritocracy. In choosing a mission to examine and expose the travails in the lives of illustrative Nigerian personages, both at home and abroad, it is essentially preoccupied with getting to the bottom of the wrong-doings which they either witness or are victims of, as well as the misdeeds that they themselves commit compulsively, even against their own better judgment.

This is not just a fiction of imagining but a documentation and interpretation of history. Inasmuch as it is literature about life over periods of uncertainty in Nigeria it is also a literature of travel, about the lives of Nigerians in transit; a literature of people in motion across wide expanses of space globally. It is a literature in which old forms like anecdote, allegory, fable, elegy, emblem, mock epic, and other forms take on new lives. Each text points up and encapsulates a vividly realized portrayal and examination of features of the torturous atmospheres of profound depravity illuminated in this project. In taking a hard look at these compositions, first, the discussion probes the economic, cultural, political, and social dynamics of the lives

and predatory circumstances in which Nigerians are caught up everywhere, crushed by the morally and ethically repugnant social mischiefs upon which the texts focus their searchlights. Along the way, the presentation then centrally falls back on the toolkits of literary analysis, commentary, and interpretation in order to bring to the treatment of this subject a heightened awareness of the immanent aesthetic and thematic conventions which assist in identifying the formal features separating these works from earlier Nigerian prose fiction. Particular stress is therefore placed upon how the genius of creative invention often stems from the continuum of tradition when an original mind comes into confrontation with established forms. The discussion of the literature of any nation must take into account that there are never complete generational breaks, of course, but only the process that eminent scholar Eldred Jones calls “borrowing and carrying,” resulting from the burden of the past or the inescapability of influence.⁷⁴ Professor Jones’ claim that no tool used as a periodizing device is impervious to border-crossing elements has much wisdom behind it and we ignore his warning at our own peril. It is hoped in this regard that this study will firmly establish its estimation that the third generation of Nigerian fiction possesses qualities that will enable it to stand proudly in the line of literature and enjoy a long shelf-life in the tradition of its predecessors.

This study’s argument is to have Ajima’s *The Web*, Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Cole’s *Open City*, Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street*, and Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* considered and listed among works, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*, which position themselves justifiably among the truly original corpus of Nigeria’s third-generation literature by blending potent and surprising images with vivid local detail, conveyed in novel turns of phrase in art that carries a seductive sweep. These works also find an edge in their designs; their structures exemplify tightly controlled plots. That is to say, the chains of events are in consequential order, with suspense managed so competently it is never predictable what’s going to happen next, or why. In these aesthetically gratifying texts, one is often struck by how often images of a location resonant with the sense of place, the textual situatedness supple and tangibly identifiable. Be they literal or metaphorical, rural or urban, local or national, mental or physical, the locations of their events all capture the interest of the informed reader. Their settings, cultures, and times are so befitting and painstakingly evoked, the meanings which they are made to bear never appear superimposed.

In the archetypal portrayal of character, readers demand that personality traits, whether strengths or defects, are accounted for so that the roles which actors play as constituent elements of the narrative do not appear unlikely. Be they “round” or “flat,” realistic or stereotypical/stock, the underlying motivations of their actions—what the people in each story think, say, or do; what others think, say, or do to them or about them—and the resolutions of their conflicts, whether with others, with social norms, or with nature, should not be lacking in logic. Thus, artistic competency must reach the highest level in intriguing characterization, with character depiction representing human nature in all its complexity and multidimensional facets.

Without laboring the point, it might be remarked that these writers all show a clear awareness that, for authors to have any hope of their texts being judged of more than average quality, the features of their chosen genres must be consistent and complementary. There is scarcely any great novel, for example, in which all the elements within it are not organically in lockstep with the other parts. The unit stands or falls depending upon whether or not everything within and connected to it, the sum of the narrative's composite fragments, is collectively knit together to make the text function as a vibrant unit. This is why, once an aspiring author can put the question of the politics of language behind him/her, next in importance is for the linguistic apparatus and stylistic range to match the scale and breadth of the project.

Besides the aesthetic excellence of this vibrant corpus, the most unmistakable quality associated with the crop of writing in Nigeria going by the name of the third generation is the gender balance in its composition and representation. At the inaugural moment of Nigerian literature, what is now referred to as the pioneering or first-generation writing of the country, women were conspicuous by their near absence. Not only was women's participation negligible, but women were so under-represented it was notable how disproportionate was the percentage relative to the demographic population of the country. Indeed, even what little role women played was relegated to an inferior status, as the few works by the occasional female writers never garnered the high respect accorded to the work of their male counterparts.

What a dramatic change it is that less than fifty years later not only is this no longer the case, but the roles have actually been reversed, with women attaining higher numbers and profiles than their male compeers. Nowadays, one finds, instead, that they have taken such a center stage whenever the subject of African literature comes up, pictures of women writers such as Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta, Lola Shoneyin, and Chika Unigwe and others immediately stand tall alongside images of Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, and Christopher Okigbo. Obviously, this increased public visibility of women is quite an occasion for celebration. As is well known, any country which holds its female population in bondage or subsidiary status is not yet liberated or free, since women always play a greater role than men in the education and socialization of children and therefore the perpetuation of culture.

This is indeed the era of women's creative leadership. After decades of lagging behind their male compatriots, women have moved forward to overtake men, rising from the bottom, where they were during Nigeria's first- and second-generation writings, to the top. There is a lesson here for other areas of Nigerian life beyond the literary sphere. A woman has never led in government in Nigeria at the highest level. That is to say, a woman has never been president of Nigeria. But after successive failures by men in leadership of the country in the highest political office in the land, clearly it is time a woman was president of Nigeria. If their artistic innovativeness tells us anything, it is that women know how to get things done well!

Women may have taken giant strides in education and literature, but real power still eludes them, for they remain excluded from terrains of political authority. Herein lies one nagging problem that stands out in Nigeria's third-generation literature. In a characteristically thoughtful editorial article published more than twenty years ago, Eldred Jones identified two new topics as the ones second-generation African literature generally had made its own in addition to the customary ones of childbearing, motherhood, polygyny, subordination to men, and freedom from male stereotypes: concern with women's matters and wars.⁷⁵ That list has widened considerably over time, so that the expanded table today must incorporate many other matters: economic disempowerment, immigration, racial profiling and racism, sex abuse, and prostitution, among others. Nor can we overlook the personal misfortunes and the desperation of women like Sisi and her mates in *On Black Sisters Street*, exported to Europe for such a debilitating trade as prostitution.

There is one other demoralizing issue in Nigerian women's experience enunciated in third-generation literature, and that is polygyny, an institution that allows one man to have multiple wives he can under no circumstance love equitably. "Dispiriting" must surely be the indisputable term that comes to a reader's mind in any discussion of this subject as it is projected in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, a novel about the unthinkable practice of male dominance in which several women are entered into an arrangement in which they share one husband. What are the effects of such an arrangement on the spurned wives? How does the situation make them feel? How are they able to handle the psychological wound of being made to feel lesser than another human being who is not a distant neighbor but a counterpart they must encounter on a daily basis in the intertwined paths which they must cross because they share a living space with her in a close-knit household?⁷⁶

The works of the women authors considered in this study are utterly enlightening, and they force a rethinking of men's leadership in ventures seeking for members of the fair sex to be liberated from the forces of oppression. African men are not entirely unsupportive of their womenfolk, as writings by their male counterparts show. It must be allowed, however, that the writings by female authors demonstrate beyond question that none can speak or act better than women on their own behalf. One would be criminally negligent not to see African women's troubles as connected not only to factors such as the inherent poverty in their societies, the fact that many African countries are too irresponsible to meet the needs of all their citizens, and patriarchal cultural practices within their societies which are detrimental to women but also to the issue of women not wielding the political authority to defend themselves. That is why it will take a woman in high political office, finally, to put in place the right policies to remove once and for all these enormous handicaps that women predominantly face; there is no question that it is time for a woman to be president of the world's most populous black country.

Notes

- 1 These stretch from the first publication of D.O. Fagunwa's Yoruba-Language novel *Igbo Olodumare* in 1949 – the progenitor of Amos Tutuola's English-language ghost stories, the maiden installment of which in turn was released to the public in 1952 – through a gamut of formal laurels including the Caine Prize. Nigeria's literary honors culminated in the 1986 award to the country's founding modern playwright, novelist, memoirist, poet, political activist, and literary critic Wole Soyinka of the Nobel Prize in Literature and the award to Africa's best-known novelist Chinua Achebe of the Man Booker Prize in 1987.
- 2 See, among other studies, Donatus Nwoga, ed. *West African Verse* (London: Longmans, 1967); Bruce King, ed. *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* (Ibadan: Evans, 1971) and *A Celebration of Black and African Writing* (Zaria and Oxford: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1974); Emmanuel Obiechina, *Onitsha Market Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) and *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Oladele Taiwo, *Culture and the Nigerian Novel* (London: Longman, 1976); Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981); and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 3 See Peter Nwana, *Omenuko* (London: The Atlantis Press, 1935); D. O. Fagunwa, *Igbo Olodumare* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1949); *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (London: Faber, 1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (London: Faber, 1954) and Gabriel Okora, *The Fisherman's Invocations* (Benin: Ethiopia, 1978).
- 4 See Ode Ogede "Billets of Prose: Ojaide's 'Poetic' Discourse in *Labyrinths of the Delta*," *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 17.2 (July 1995): 102–110.
- 5 Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 261.
- 6 For more recent revisitations of this age-old subject, see particularly Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Basserman, Lawrence, *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (New York: Garland, 1996); David Blackburn, "'The Horologe of Time': Periodization in History," *PMLA* 127. 2 (2012): 301–307; Emily Apter, Bruno Bosteels, Peter Fenves, Andrew Parker, and Suzanne Guerlac, "Forum: Conference Debates," *PMLA* 124. 1 (2009): 273–288; Russell Berman, "Politics: Divide and Rule," *Modern Language Quarterly* 62. 4 (2001): 317–3; and Harry Garuba's important thoughts on this topic, brought to this author's attention by one of the reviewers of the manuscript, which coincide to a large extent with some of his ideas on the matter. See Garuba's deliberations in a remarkable essay, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-Figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry," *English in Africa* 32. 1 (May 2005): 51–72.
- 7 Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, ed. *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 19.
- 8 W. Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1970), p. 3.
- 9 See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958) and *There Was a Country: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2013).
- 10 See Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965) and *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2020).
- 11 Maria Ajima, *The Web* (Makurdi: Fambi Nigeria, Ltd., 1999).
- 12 Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (London: Heinemann, 1966).
- 13 Wole Soyinka, *The Strong Breed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).
- 14 Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, rev. ed. (London: Heinemann, 1974).

- 15 Okey Dibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (New York: Soho Press, 2014).
- 16 Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2011), p.121.
- 17 Chika Unigwe, *On Black Sisters Street* (New York: Random House, 2009).
- 18 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), pp.147–155.
- 19 An elaboration of this is contained in Ode Ogede's *Intertextuality in Contemporary African Literature: Looking Inward* (Lanham: Lexington Books), 2011, pp.15–68 and "Exile and the Female Imagination: The Nigerian Civil War, Western Ideology (Feminism) and the Poetry of Catherine Acholonu," *Neohelicon* XXVI.1 (1999): 125–134; reprinted in *African Literature Today* 22 (2000): 90–99.
- 20 James Joyce, *Ulysses* rev. ed. (New York: Modern Library-Random House, 1961).
- 21 Compare, for example, Okigbo's *Labyrinth: With Path of Thunder* (London: Heinemann, 1971) with John Pepper Clark, *A Reed in the Tide* (London: Longman 1965); or *Casualties 1966/68* (London: Longman, 1970); Wole Soyinka, *Idanre and Other Poems* (London: Methuen, 1967); Gabriel Okara, *The Fisherman's Invocation* (London: Heinemann, 1978); Michael J. C. Echeruo, *Mortality* (London: Longman, 1968); and Okogbule Wonodi, *Icheke and Other Poems* (Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1964).
- 22 For a discussion of Okigbo's influence, see Ode Ogede *Intertextuality in Contemporary African Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2011).
- 23 Two special issues of the journals, *English in Africa* and *Research in African Literatures*, both guest-edited by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, devoted to the topic of third-generation Nigerian writing have done this, for example.
- 24 Harry Garuba, ed., *Voices from the Fringe* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1988).
- 25 Remi Raji, "Ibadan and the Memory of a Generation: From the Poetry Club to the Premier Circle," *English in Africa* 32. 1 New Nigerian Writing (May 2005), p. 21.
- 26 Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (London: Heinemann, 1970) and *Horn of My Love* (London: Heinemann, 1974).
- 27 See Taban Lo Liyong, *Fixons and other stories* (London: Heinemann, 1969) and *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs* (London: Heinemann, 1971).
- 28 See early Ngugi works, *Weep Not, Child* (London: Heinemann, 1964); *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1967).
- 29 See Lenrie Peters, *The Second Round* (London: Heinemann, 1965) and *Satellites* (London: Heinemann, 1967).
- 30 Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).
- 31 Kofi Awoonor, *This Earth, My Brother* (London: Heinemann, 1972).
- 32 See Bernice M. Kelly (compiler) and Janet L. Stanley (editor), *Nigerian Arts: A Who's Who and Bibliography* (London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1993), p. 578.
- 33 Eldred Durosimi Jones, *The Freetown Bond: A Life Under Two Flags* (Oxford: James Currey, 2012).
- 34 See Ode Ogede "Resisting Repression in Nigeria: The Lyric Poetry of Femi Osofisan," *Third World Quarterly* 16. 2 (1995): 329–339, pp. 330–331.
- 35 Egwugwu Illah, "Kabukabu," *Saiwa: A Journal of Communication* 5 (1988), p. 86.
- 36 Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *I wan bi President* (Enugu: Delta, 1988).
- 37 Audee T. Giwa, *I'd Rather Die: A Novel* (Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1994); see Ode Ogede's review in *World Literature Today* 69. 4 (1995), pp. 855–856.
- 38 Idi Bukar, *First the Desert Came and Then the Torturer* (Zaria: Rag Press, 1986).
- 39 T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1971).
- 40 Idi Bukar, *First the Desert Came* , p. 17.
- 41 Patrick F. Wilmot, "Untitled," *Saiwa* 1 (1984), p.7.
- 42 Tahir, *The Last Imam* (London: Kegan Paul, 1985).

- 43 Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 14.
- 44 Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers*, pp. 14–15. One cannot help but notice a sharp contrast between Griswold's honest approach and Albert Gerard's disingenuousness, for example. Gerard addresses this question of the definition of African literature in the introduction to his monumental edited book, *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa Vol. 1*, making a bizarre reference to what he calls "the radicalism of some Nigerian critics, for whom African literature can only be literature by blacks and should not even be subjected to appraisal by non-Africans because only black can understand black" (pp.23–24). Gerard's claim is odd, however, because he does not name a single Nigerian critic that purportedly has expressed such a view. Instead, as evidence in support of his claim, Gerard quotes the Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah out of context entirely. "For an extreme polemical example," Gerard says the reader should "see Ayi Kwei Armah's review of American scholar Charles Larson's *The Emergence of African Fiction* wittily entitled 'Larsony' ... where the Ghanaian novelist claims that 'Western scholars, critics of African literature included, are nothing if not Westerners working in the interests of the West. Their ideas and theories are meant to reinforce these interests, not to undercut them'" (p. 24). This is absurd because "Larsony or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction" is his reaction to four specific false claims the American critic Charles Larson made about Ayi Kwei Armah in two separate sources, "the false information he persistently peddles about Armah's art and personality, with claims in *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1971a) of Armah having forgotten his mother tongue, of his exile, and of debt to Joyce, graduating into the allegation" in the magazine "Africa Report of Armah's rejection by Africans" (Ogede, *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast* 20). Ironically, by Gerard's unsubstantiated allegation against unnamed Nigerian critics, he himself, in fact, unintentionally bolsters some of Armah's outlandish claims.
- 45 See Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness*, p. 13.
- 46 See, for example Rider Haggard's *Ayesha* (London: Ward Lock, 1905); Joyce Carey's *The African Witch* (London: Carfax, 1951), *Aissa Saved* (London: Carfax, 1952), and *Mister Johnson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939; new ed. 1962); Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Harpers, 1910); and Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (London: Heinemann, 1948); among others. But if writing by the likes of Idi Bukar (John Haynes) and Patrick Wilmot, in the tradition of others such as Olive Schreiner in her novel *The Story of an African Farm* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883); Isak Dinesen in her *Out of Africa* (London: Putnam, 1937); Alan Paton in his *Cry, the Beloved Country* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948); and Doris Lessing in her *The Grass is Singing* (London: Michael Joseph, 1950), identifies with the predicaments of common Africans, is it still not welcome on the list of writings one calls African literature?
- 47 To this list clearly belong Janheinz Jahn in his *Muntu*, Gerald Moore, and Uli Beier, in their several pieces, as well as their modern successors who are too numerous to be individually listed here.
- 48 Bruce King floats this idea in his essay, "Nationalism, Internalization, Periodization, and Commonwealth Literature," in his *From New National to World Literature: Essays and Reviews* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2016): 157–167 (p. 162).
- 49 See Ode Ogede "Poetry and Repression in Contemporary Nigeria: Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinth of the Delta*," *New Trends and Generations in African Literature Today* 20 (1996), 62–72. It has been quite interesting to see emerging Nigerian critics consistently adopting his terminology "outrage" from this article over the years following in discussions of third-generation literature. Occasionally the term is also disguised as "rage" by the younger critics in their publications, even though this adoption is consistently done without due acknowledgment of the original source. In one article, titled "art and outrage," published in the journal *Research in African Literatures*, when his essay

- was even quoted, it was left out of the Works Cited page, bordering on plagiarism or just plain scholarly sloppiness or a sign of the extent of effort to erase borrowed sources.
- 50 See Ogede, "Poetry and Repression," p. 62.
 - 51 Ogede, "Poetry and Repression," p.62.
 - 52 Ogede, "Poetry and Repression," p. 62.
 - 53 Ogede, "Poetry and Repression," p. 63.
 - 54 Good examples are: Ken Saro Wiwa, Isidore Okpewho, Ben Okri, and Zainab Alkali.
 - 55 To not adjudicate, as I. A. Richard warns, is clearly "to abdicate as a critic," because, as he sees it, "At the least a critic is concerned with the value of things for himself and for people like him. Otherwise, his criticism is mere autobiography" (*Principles of Literary criticism*, London: Routledge, 1924, p. 210). See, also Edgar Wright, ed. *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1973).
 - 56 See Funso Aiyejina, "Recent Nigerian poetry in English: an alternative tradition," in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present, vol. 1* (Lagos: Guardian Books Nigeria, 1988): 112–128.
 - 57 Aiyejina, "Recent Nigerian poetry in English," (p.112).
 - 58 Okara's lament is captured in his heavily anthologized poem "Piano and Drums," included in his volume *The Fisherman's Invocation* (Ethiopia, 1978). Soyinka's disappointment is expressed in the very play he wrote to celebrate Nigeria's Independence in 1960, *A Dance of the Forests* (Oxford University Press, 1963). While Clark's elemental anxieties are articulated in his pre-independence poetry volume *Poems* (Mbari, 1961), his next volume *A Reed in the Tide* (Longman, 1965) decries the country's socio-political post-independence problems, followed by *Casualties* (Longman, 1970), which grieves the gory aftermaths of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970.
 - 59 See Ode Ogede, "Review of Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present* 2 vols. Lagos: Guardian Books Nigeria, 1988," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 60. 4 (1990): 555–558.
 - 60 See Niyi Osundare, *Songs of the MarketPlace* (Ibadan: New Horn, 1983), *Village Voices* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers Nigeria, 1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1986), *Moonsongs* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1988), and *Waiting Laughter* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1990); Okinba Launko, *Minted Coins* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1987); and Chimalum Nwankwo's *The Womb in the Earth and Other Poems* (San Francisco: Africa Heritage Press, 2002).
 - 61 See S. A. Babalola, *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); Bade Ajuwon, *Funeral Dirges of Yoruba Hunters* (New York: Nok, 1982); Olatunde O. Olatunji, *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry* (Ibadan: University Press, Ltd., 1984); and Karin Barber, *I Can Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).
 - 62 Niyi Osundare, "Words of Iron, Sentences of Thunder: Soyinka's Prose Style," *African Literature Today* 13 (1983): 24–37.
 - 63 Donatus Nwoga, "Plagiarism and Authentic Creativity in West Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 6. 1 (1975): 32–39.
 - 64 See, for example, Tanure Ojaide's *Poetry, Performance, and Art: Udje Dance Songs of the Urhobo People* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003). As this author pointed out in his review in *Research in African Literatures* 37. 1 (2006: 130), Tanure Ojaide's translations are among the best of the lot that ever have been attempted in African oral literature.
 - 65 Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, President Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Premier of Western Region, Chief Michael Okpara, Premier of Eastern Region, Chief Dennis Osadebey, Premier of Mid-West Region, and Sir Ahmadu Bello, Premier of Northern Region.

- 66 Notable among the writers of colonial fiction are Joyce Cary, Joyce Carey, Joseph Conrad, John Buchan, and Graham Greene.
- 67 D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, T. M. Aluko, Obi Egbuna, Adora Ulasi, Flora Nwapa, John Munonye, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, and Onuora Nzekwu.
- 68 See Dan S. Izevbaye, "J. J. Clark-Bekederemo and the Ijaw Literary Tradition," *Research in African Literatures* 25. 1 (1994): 1–21; Emmanuel Obiechina, "Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel," *Research in African Literatures* 24. 4 (1993): 123–40; David Carroll, Chinua Achebe, rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1990); Derek Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1993); and Ogede's *Achebe's Things Fall Apart: Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2007).
- 69 Donatus Nwoga presents cogent arguments for imitativeness of these authors in *West African Verse* (London: Longman, 1967), pp. 5–22 and 121–141.
- 70 See also Nwoga, *West African Verse*, pp. 229–39.
- 71 For example, just as Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* makes a significant re-write of Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Shoneyin's novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* achieves a major revision of Soyinka's play *The Lion and the Jewel* as different as their genres are.
- 72 See Wole Soyinka, *Climate of Fear: The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World* (New York: Random House, 2005).
- 73 See Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (Paris, Plon, 1953); translated as *The African Child*, trans. James Kirkup (London: Collins, 1955); *The Dark Child*, American edition, with an introduction by Philippe Thoby-Marcelin (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955).
- 74 Eldred D. Jones, ed. *The Question of Language in African Literature Today* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1991).
- 75 Eldred D. Jones, ed. *New Trends and Generations in African Literature Today* 20 (1996).
- 76 See also Mariama Bâ, *Uni Si Longue Lettre*, tr. by Modupe Bode-Thomas as *So Long a Letter* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1981).

2 Parable, Metaphor, the Pictorial Frame, Emblem of Moral Decadence: Fiction in Revolt, Washing Dirty Linen in Public (Maria Ajima's *The Web*)

The most compelling arts of storytelling are never bland but are always expressed with special eloquence. Through the metaphor of the web, intellectually nimble third-generation Nigerian short story writer and poet Maria Ajima forms a web of her own, like the spider constructing its home, thread by thread, stitch by stitch. Totally in command of her craft, in her collection entitled *The Web*¹ Ajima intricately weaves stories that capture a meaningful, variegated tapestry of Nigerian contemporary life. Her stories unfold in the pattern of a fixed frame, like an emblem, pictorial frame, in the manner of John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," bringing to fictional life with a collage of images a disturbing panorama of events with a feel for the visual. Without having to call the country by its name in each story, facts and features identify the fictional world portrayed distinctly as Nigeria in the brand of interpolated pidgin; character names such as Bello, Salifu, and Fatima; city names like Jos, Lagos, Makurdi, and Onitsha; and the naira currency.

The web, or cobweb, as it is also called, is the notorious home of the spider. While providing a space of comfort and relaxation, of rest, and a safety net, as a site of habitation for the carnivore the web is simultaneously a haunting metaphor of imprisonment, a trap that the beast of prey sets for its enemy. Somewhat ironically, therefore, the web's ability to deliver the predatory home-owner with the provisions for its succor and safety is inextricably intertwined with the cobweb's capacity to keep out as well as ensnare its foes; to furnish the mostly carnivorous home-owner with sustenance; to serve as a barricade or fortress which not only helps the spider to keep intruders at bay but allows it to seduce and catch its prey without having to expend unnecessary energy pursuing it.

Terence Hawkes fittingly warns that the meaning and function of a metaphor, as a form of figurative language, cannot and should not be sought at the level of literal signification; rather, it is governed by the "pictures or images" that it paints.² Poetry tends to draw more "heavily on metaphor because of its involvement with the process of 'imitation', and its characteristic pursuit of 'distinctiveness' of expression," Hawkes goes on to point out, but prose too can deploy it for effects like "vividness" or "brevity," "to avoid obscenity," "for magnifying," "for minifying," and "for embellishing."³ It is worth remarking that,

to enhance the perception of an object or an insight into phenomena, there is no other resource comparable to the power of the image.

In Maria Ajima's short story collection *The Web*, the ramifications of the image of the web become apparent on all the planes outlined by Hawkes. It is of course actually the case that Nigerians do not in fact live in webs; they do not literally inhabit cobwebs. However, the metaphor of the web aptly paints pictures in the reader's imagination of the bewildering and conflicting maze of realities that are experienced in a country in a state of flux. *The Web* is a parable because it is collectively a moral tale presenting a composite view of a fictional Nigeria as a beloved homeland for many and a land of opportunity where fortunes are made by opportunists, while also depicting the federation in the collection as a place of aborted dreams; a land of woe, gratuitous pain, man's inhumanity to man bordering even on cannibalism. The stories expose the country as a space that unaccountably has hemmed in many of its citizens as though they were in prison; a land of insecurity and torment—a setting harboring so much danger, many of the characters betray a certain amount of anger, anguish, and bouts of fear. One could call its condition a state of instability, unpredictability, unreliability, fitfulness, changeableness, variability, fluidity—depending on the face of Nigeria one encounters—but the polity undoubtedly answers to all these characteristics, as this discussion will show.

Charles May makes an apt observation that “occasionally a short story writer will arrive on the scene at just the right time, with just the right voice and vision, to reignite interest in the form.”⁴ In the same passage, May cites the examples of Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Beattie, Jayne Anne Phillips, Richard Ford, and Tobias Wolf, who all emerged unexpectedly in the late Seventies and early Eighties with an original form which “critics had to create a name for ... ‘minimalism’ or ‘hyper-realism’—a critical affection that marked the end of the trend almost as soon as it had begun.”⁵ May means that these writers were the heralds of an inventive and distinct writing style that no other individuals after them were to successfully imitate or replicate.

Critics of Nigerian literature have not yet given a name to the style of writing associated with Maria Ajima's *The Web*, but the applicability of the nomenclature “minimalism” and “hyper-realism” might not be too far-fetched for the rare and adroit evocative prowess arrayed in it. Ajima is peerless in her pithy delineation of setting and character portrayal, especially her subtle penetration of human psychology and her ability to unveil it with a crisp, terse, and economical language that also gives a spacious evocation of the sense of a place. The evidence available to the reader in the piece “Gloss Over,” for example, about the aesthetics of fake projects, conveys within the space of merely a few pages justification for why the fictional world depicted in the story becomes synonymous with corruption.

“Gloss Over” is a spine-chilling tale of deception and fraud which reveals the tainting power of society in subjection to the alluring tyranny of materialism. Its object is to expose the sly methods by which the infection of corruption proliferates itself in such a setting. Corruption is shown to be entrenched within the

entire fiber, the heart and soul, of Nigerian national life. At the particular historical moment captured in this story the protagonist, who is later to become a local government administrator, suddenly becomes a different person, no longer “a firebrand Marxist ... from his fiery university days” (27). The transformation of the appointee into a money-grubbing personality reaffirms the life-altering potency of influence, conveying the hopeless outlook for public officials to remain true to their trust. He sees people all around him advancing their personal interests at the expense of their community, and the pervasiveness of dishonesty snuffs out the flame of radical reformist zeal in this once utopian man. So, he resigns himself to the belief that the ascetic lifestyle is inoperable, that the life of self-denial is a foredoomed aspiration.

“Gloss Over” throws a laser-focused beam on the ways that the pursuit of self-gain through fraud is promoted within the civil service. It is shown to be practiced and then spread by a well-oiled and syndicated system of patronage. For the newly appointed local government administrator it is easy to cast his lot with these people because he shares a sense of purpose with them. The grand, over-arching, and recurrent low motive of self-aggrandizement, rising to the level of obsession for many, is the preparedness to do whatever it takes to get wealth. The newly appointed local government administrator is not exempt from this mania to acquire ill-gotten wealth, no matter what the cost to his community. The attempt by the conspirators to co-opt the inexperienced executive finds him instantly receptive because he has only been waiting to be shown the ropes, having never truly assumed the office to be in earnest in its determination to contribute meaningfully toward the grassroots development of his community. This is the sense in which the image of the local government administrator comes to represent some miniaturized, abridged variation of the character of the hero of Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*,⁶ the self-serving party-political big shot Chief Nanga, who behaves throughout the novel as if political cynicism is in-bred in him. Like the hero of Achebe’s novel, Ajima’s local government administrator too possesses none of the requisite ascetic personal qualities to resist corruptive influences.

But the difference between Nigeria’s founding novelist and Ajima is the difference between the author who does not show his readers the corrupt politician growing into but only acting in that role and the short story author who turned to him for inspiration and does, even within the configuration of the relatively greater space limitation imposed by her chosen form. Achebe shies away from depicting Chief Nanga acting as if he were someone following another individual’s guidebook. Within the intricately woven structure of her story, however, Ajima allows her readers to bear witness to the grooming of the politician into the corrupt character he becomes. The man does not just cynically commit himself to the giving and receiving of bribes on his own, instead of being devoted to transparency and ethics, off-handedly becoming dismissive of lofty political ideals. So, barely eight months into his tenure, the local government administrator throws in everything into his mission, becoming quickly open to being coached in the corrupt methods prevalent in the civil service as he has been waiting for this

chance for a long time. With the notification sent to him of his godfather the state governor's scheduled "familiarization tour of the areas under his purvey" is set into motion the plot which will provide the launching pad of the chain of events that enables the syndicate to drain the government coffers (23).

The force of the local government administrator's attraction to wealth at all costs expresses itself without concealment. It exudes through the endless worries that he is beset with. At the news of the governor's unscheduled visit, for example, a sort of suppressed tension hangs in the air and seizes him completely. His anxieties are so persistent that his own unwelcome thoughts hold him captive. The greatest of all his fears is that when the governor assesses "the achievement" of his administration he "would be held responsible for any shortcomings and that would put an outright end to his career" (23). He becomes so apprehensive about the governor's impending visit that the darkness of despair engulfs him as the thought that he might lose his job prematurely—that he could be fired before he has made good his aim to enrich himself—takes complete possession of him. These phobias take on a frenzy when his secretary comes in with the dreadful announcement of the arrival of an important dignitary from the state headquarters. The local government administrator gets himself in a fret and goes completely berserk. But it's all in his head; the knock on the door which introduced a new note of intensity to the worries he is battling against gives readers a sense of how deep is his belief in the imminence of his window of opportunity for graft being shut.

The way in which this story handles the breakout of the local government administrator's anxieties is flawless; it illuminates how he cannot banish the swelling fears that his dream of fabulous wealth might be aborted while he is opportunistically biding his time to join those defrauding the nation. Hence, he becomes a nervous wreck; a shadow of himself. Functioning very much as an emblem, this story signifies things are so bad in the country that bureaucrats like the local government administrator aren't even pretending like they used to do that they are in office to bring about community uplift; such is the level of moral turpitude that these officials no longer have any reason to disguise their selfish motives. The reader learns that "Though it was the harmattan season and the weather was dry and cold, he felt hot and jumpy" (23). His growing panic is out of control. He is on pins and needles. "The administrator, on hearing this announcement, adjusted himself in the executive seat, straightened the features of his face to look as calm as possible, cleared his throat to shake off all tremor from his voice" (24). He presses the buzzer; the "secretary opened the door wide as the visitor walked in" (24), and many questions begin to swirl in the head of the reader. Will the local government administrator be able to overcome this moment of crisis? Will he arrest his descent into complete nervous breakdown? Will the local government administrator regain his composure, recover his mental state, or get a stroke or a heart attack and slump to the floor? Will the local government office have an emergency on its hands?

It does not at all diminish the effect of the important rising action that the visitor turns out unexpectedly to be anyone but the anticipated guest. In an

effective deployment of the technique of foreshadowing, it happens to be just a lower-level officer from the state headquarters who has arrived on a surprise visit to help with preparations for his boss's impending tour of the area. But, if anything, the surprise element heightens the dramatic impact. An old hand in the business coming over to launch the inexperienced local government administrator into an initiation rite in the menacing game of corruption; readers wondering if the negative impact will have its sway keep their fingers crossed as they witness for themselves an open playout of the game of graft. In this rite of passage, the initiating officer introduces himself and promptly announces his mission. He is there, he says, to follow up on "Circular Number 30," sent earlier from the state headquarters, apparently to prepare the local government administration for the governor's upcoming appraisal visit. The governor's harbinger makes the transition to the business at hand quickly, beginning with an effort to gain the trust of his host as a confidant. So, he attempts to put his host at ease with small talk, mostly taking swipes at their boss, calling the state governor "a clown, you know" (25). He goes on to express his solidarity with the local government administrators generally, suggesting some kind of fraternity, a brotherhood in arms, the idea of the civil service as a place where cooperation is essential among the working-class people. He consequently defends anyone in the family against what he calls the volleys of the governor's unfair attacks "in the presence of everyone ... for non-performance," even though "it is not the administrator's fault, if funds are not forthcoming. Do you embark on projects with your teeth?" he insists (25).

As might be expected, when he hears the governor's envoy grumbling about their boss, the local government administrator's initial reaction, perhaps wisely, is to remain guarded, unsure that it is not all a set-up to get him to say something negative about the governor that could be used against him later. However, the valuable information which he extracts from the governor's emissary during his tutoring in the routine procedure of government business is that there is a strategy for the local government administrator to meet appraisal requirements without having to actually show any substantive on-the-ground accomplishments. The name of that strategy is "Gloss Over":

It's an expression I use to describe a false state of affairs that you are really performing, when in fact, you are not, so that you do not end up in the trash can of history like some foolish ones do ... Remember the case of — Local Government where a borehole was dug halfway and a tanker full of water was brought so that it could be commissioned. Well, everybody clapped for that man as the governor took a tumbler of water from the so-called borehole ... Again, remember the electrification project at —. Because the governor wanted to fulfil his campaign pledge, everything was in place except the connections to the grid. So as to fulfil his pledge, you remember a generator was hooked up and the community had light for that day only in their lives. (25)

Thus, the initial tension is resolved, rather swiftly; and the expanded awareness brought by the governor's messenger gives his fidgety host instant reassurances. He receives encouragement that "things were not too late for him yet," and he "smiled at the visiting officer, his first genuine smile in two weeks," relieved to know that he "was yet in the good books of the Headquarters people" (25). "This was their way of telling him to do something so that he did not earn the ire of the governor," the local government administrator mused to himself, which gives him the opening to ask, "Any idea when the governor will be around this our side?" (25). Seizing the moment then, once again, the governor's subordinate returns the favor, following up graciously with another useful piece of advice. "The officer shook his head slowly and said, 'You know these days people could be very erratic, but if I were you, I would swing into action immediately. The man can drop in any moment'" (26).

In the manner of "scratch my back and I'll scratch your back," when the governor's intermediary "made ready to go, the administrator went to the safe that stood by the corner of the office and brought out a ward of crisp naira notes saying, 'Since you insist on leaving immediately, the local government would have loved to entertain you, but do please use this for refreshment on your way'" (26). "Ah, that's most considerate of you,' the officer said as he quickly received the money and slipped it into the pocket of the suit he was wearing" (26). The sophisticated form of bribery transpiring here, the illegal offer of money and its speedy receipt, might now have been superseded by cruder forms, but it will intrigue those interested in the history of double-dealing in Nigeria to know that, as part of his mission, the state governor's agent pockets wads of the Nigerian currency which the local government could have actually more profitably used to build infrastructure for the people at the grassroots level.

Significantly, also waiting in the wings, ready to press for his own share in this dishonest distribution of the proverbial national cake, is "the correspondent of the state's daily paper sitting at the visitor's room apparently waiting" for the return of the local government administrator who has walked the governor's message carrier "off to the official car that had brought the guest" (26). We are told that if the administrator had run into this journalist around his office "in the last few days, he would have felt like wringing the scrawny neck of the reporter for they both knew what he was here for. But now, he felt in an expansive mood, he had got the answer to his problem—'gloss over'—that expression sounded nice. He ushered the reporter into his office and started regaling him with the achievements of the Local Government during his tenure" (26). This scene becomes a repository of the perfected education of the amateur local government administrator, who has now had the earlier despondency lifted off him and wastes no time in expressly putting into practice the art of falsifications and misrepresentation he has just moments ago been taught:

The reporter was baffled as he scribbled into his notebooks because he wanted to tell the administrator to his face that there was nothing like that on the ground. But he kept his peace; if the man now knew the rules of the

game and was ready to play ball, he was ready to play along with him. After all, were not most development projects executed on paper and on the air but never on the ground? That was as long as all the parties played along beautifully. (26)

Who better to help the local government administrator with the facilitation of fabricated publicity than a reporter seasoned in the art of peddling lies? Hence, “the reporter” also “departed the administrator’s office with another wad of naira notes securely lodged in his pocket,” and the administrator too is satisfied as he “gave a sigh of relief” secure in the knowledge that “the two million naira lodged in a bank account in Lagos” should “keep him buoyant till the day he decided to retire from service” (26–27). Thus emboldened, the administrator proceeds right away to roll out the plot outlined for him, covering his tracks with instructions for the director of civil works to build “ten culverts ... within one week with staff working day and night”; these will be the accomplishments to be touted during the governor’s tour.

Not surprisingly, the very next day the governor arrives and the administrator takes him “round the Local Government introducing him to the traditional rulers” before he “conducted the governor round the projects he had undertaken” (29). Readers learn that “In his welcome speech, he called on the governor to come to their aid in completing the culverts so that the rural people could move their produce to the markets. The governor was so impressed that on his return to the headquarters, he directed that enough funds be made available to the administrator to complete the culvert project he had embarked upon” and “the administrator received the news over the radio” and “chuckled to himself as he saw how ‘gloss over’ had worked so well” (29).

It is insinuated in “Gloss Over” that the rank poverty of the circumstances of the local government administrator should not be discounted as a factor making the prospect “to enrich himself fraudulently without being caught” (28) irresistible, as presumably is the case for others like him. This conclusion makes corruption seem neither ingrained nor innate but rather something which springs out of the survival instinct, and thus intrinsic to socio-economic conditions that are so hospitable to it that there’s a certain inevitability to its happening. The notion of poverty as an underlying factor that makes it impossible to live with one’s integrity intact has serious implications for social policy formulation; for the perception of what it means to develop character, to possess agency; and for the alleviation of graft.

For one, it suggests that the likelihood that the country can turn the page on the cancer of corruption is not even visible on the horizon. Before his appointment, readers are told, the person who would later become the local government administrator had only a “rickety saloon car”; he was “almost reduced to penury”; his salary could barely feed through the month his family of seven children, his wife—unemployed and with a limited (primary school) education, who he could not for shame allow to work in petty trade—and the countless relatives who depended upon him. It is presented as no wonder that

the moment the windfall comes, the local government administrator is immediately in thrall to the exhilaration of full pockets. The sights of bundles of naira come into the local government administrator's senses as he imagines the pleasure and promise of what wealth can do when he comes into full possession of it: "the sum of ₦50,000 touring allowance" brought to him by the accountant"; "the contractors, relations, friends, and faces he had never known," who all "in the secrecy of his official residence ... promised to pay into any bank account of his choice a certain percentage" if he would "sign a piece of paper awarding a grossly inflated contract and paying the contract sum"—not to talk of "the fat security vote" that he could embezzle out of the millions of naira the government gave him to develop his area (28). But the administrator at the same time has to sell his conscience because all of this temptation to yield to avarice comes against the background of "the roads ... crying out for either rehabilitation or construction and hospitals begging to be built" while he makes "going on tours" his "major concern" (28).

A similar case seems to be demonstrated with fine aplomb in the story entitled "Checkpoint," a piece about the actions of police officers who set up checkpoints solely to assist them in wresting bribes from unwary travelers. This story also illustrates to the reader the uses to which not only government bureaucrats but other persons in positions of authority can put their offices for personal material gain. It seems as though all government functionaries take undue advantage of whatever their stations are, and law enforcement is not exempt from this pattern of misconduct. In this story a dystopian view of things is taken; the title itself, "Checkpoint," has archetypal resonances. To any reader familiar with travel on Nigerian roads it invokes the dreaded image of police corruption and brutality, instantly calling to mind the notorious sites not only of extortion and illegality but of random violence and barbarity. While the checkpoint itself can be lawful, what's at issue is police misuse of it: the excuses the police manufacture as a cover for their exercise of power outside the scope permitted by the laws of the land.

As another story in which the survival instinct is offered as a provocation for acts of debauchery, the focus in "Checkpoint" is on infractions committed by law enforcement officers. Sergeant Mathias, the main focus of the story, forces travelers on federal highways to give bribes before they can continue their journeys. The underlying motivation offered for his behavior presented is the pressure of excessive family burdens hence the need to supplement his inadequate official earnings. But Sergeant Mathias acts not just alone but on behalf of his colleagues in the field, as well as his superiors sitting in the comfort of their offices at headquarters. It is this collaboration that complicates the simplistic explanation of the motivations and pressures law enforcement people face—not to mention the fact that he also clearly relishes misdirecting the extraordinary power the state has placed in his trust.

As an illustration of the slippery overlap between his personal background and the official duties and actions of law enforcement, however, the story is intent on stressing that it is not just Sergeant Mathias' meager salary, which

never lasts beyond the payday. Rather, it is the lot of law enforcement personnel in general to micromanage lean resources. By “the time he paid accumulated debts, there was not much left to go [a]round”; and “almost all policemen’s wives had to engage in one form of trading or another in order to supplement their husbands’ earnings” (8–9). No reader seeing Sergeant Mathias’ family’s living circumstances can reasonably view law enforcement officials like him as anything but ordinary workers trying to eke out a living:

His wife traded in raw food items, shuttling round the surrounding villages ... So, with the meager amount that was usually left out of his salary, she was able to buy their food ... Because the money was not much, the food she bought also could not be stretched for longer periods ... The children were always having fever or cough. The police clinic tried for them but most times, they were forced to buy drugs on their own. Sometimes they just allowed a cough to go its course until it expended itself because there was no money to buy the needed drugs ... The government made a great deal of noise from the fact that mosquitoes caused fever. Yet in their one room and parlour quarters, they and mosquitoes were constant companions. The mosquitoes were always swarming around them both day and night. There were water gutters both in front and at the back of their quarters. (9)

Here, the story gives the reader grimly memorable images of the slum neighborhoods to which the law enforcement people are consigned by their poverty. The frustration of those living in these appalling circumstances is palpable, and it is understandable that the victims would want to take out their anger on others. The image of the underfed, malnourished, and sick children of the law enforcement officials reinforces the high level of their personal impoverishment, a long way from the image of money-grubbing scoundrels. The lack of basic amenities like health care and adequate housing, as well as the poor work conditions and incomes that barely meet primary necessities, offer a stunning indictment of the government and are given as explanations for the roots of corruption among officers like Mathias. While this assessment certainly directs appropriate attention to the failure of government leadership, it also masks the roles of greed and of individual character since suffering cannot ever be a justifiable ground for anyone to victimize other innocent people.

Most certainly, as with all other organizations, incomes cannot be uniform in law enforcement. For that reason, the idea that bribes are generally used by all law enforcement officers to supplement meager earnings is indefensible. But the police have found ways to press for bribes on the highways with a device called a “tyre-ripper, a board studded with five-inch nails across the road” which is used “to stop the oncoming vehicle” in order to extract an illegal payment (7). With this new tool, the police are able to “force all

stubborn drivers to a halt" (9) so that they can set in motion the process of bribery. Here's how the operation is described:

'Police trouble', that was a big 'T', Sgt Mathias thought to himself, sardonically as the oncoming vehicle slowed to a halt just in front of the tyre-ripper. It was impossible to get out of police 'T' once you got into it ... Something was bound to come out of this one. As the clean-shaven driver wound down the glass with the press of a button, Sgt Mathias peered into the vehicle. Sitting behind was a stout dark man ... His mind okayed them but he instantly put on a fawning look for the dash. The man seeing the look on his face dipped his hand into the pocket of his coat and threw a crisp five-naira note at Sgt Mathias's face in disgust. Sgt Mathias quickly picked up the five-naira note from the ground and briskly saluted, signaling to his mate to withdraw the nail-studded board from the road to allow the vehicle passage. (7-8)

Reading this story is like making an actual road trip in Nigeria and finding oneself caught up in a web of uncomfortable situations. One provocative aspect of this story is the eye for detail, which at times borders on prying. The nosing, omniscient narrator who observes and reports on the extortion of citizens by the police is attuned to every nuance of misconduct: the sly manner of the asking for, and taking, of the bribe. The story is told from a point of view that appears to be detached; however, on closer observation the selectivity of details is important and reflects and conveys an attitude that, if not downright satirical, is by no means sympathetic toward the reported misconduct. For instance, by not actually making a verbal request for money the narrator implies that the police are playing it out to make it look like the offer of a bribe is voluntary on the part of the giver. Not only does the use of "dash," which in Nigerian English translates as "gift" or "free-will tip," reinforce the pretense by the police that the bribe is optional, but the police are also feigning reluctance to take the money, when in fact the opposite is true. The manipulation used by the police is particularly extreme because the law enforcement officers convey their message primarily by threatening body language. This coded language makes clear that the bribe is obligatory as the traveler's access to the road is dependent on it, while the police officer is eager to receive the bribe and anticipates the money to lubricate the traveler's passage. The fact that the police are indeed disappointed when they cannot safely execute this carefully orchestrated plan of hijacking, for fear of being caught in the act and jeopardizing their authorities, or when the "takings" fall short of expectations at the end of the day, is further proof that the bribe is in fact something that is required of the vehicles held up on the highways.

The image of the dour and sardonic Sergeant Mathias only confirms stereotypes of the police as sadistic and mean-spirited, evidence of built-up resentment over the work conditions for law enforcement officers. The five-naira note thrown in his face reflects the anger of the citizens which has reached boiling point; the people are completely fed up with the police's exercise of arbitrary power, on display even in broad daylight. On closer examination, however, both

the law enforcement personnel and the citizens they target appear as victims of the same forces—powers larger than themselves—even if they don't know it; and those higher authorities are misallocating resources in a country where private sector participation in national policy formulation and execution is almost non-existent. It is in this way that the plights of the two groups give readers what Donatus Nwoga elsewhere calls “a unified insight.”⁷ Professor Nwoga specifically links this effect to a capacity of poetry for “drawing ... two reactions together” to deepen insight on phenomena.⁸ The Ajima of *The Web* is a prose stylist in the minimalist expressive mode, one who conspicuously seeks this magical transformation of the language of prose to aspire to and approximate the accomplishments of poetry through condensation of the foreign lingo.

The same compressed, embedded layers of effect are apparent in the scene detailing the manner in which law enforcement operates behind closed doors. It is demonstrated that law enforcement personnel function as one unit, in a way similar to the pattern of organized crime. Sergeant Mathias explains this network:

Take this five naira that had been thrown at his face; he was not just going to pocket it all alone. All the money they were collecting was being put in a polythene bag. At the end of the shift, they would count this money in the presence of their immediate boss. This boss would give those that were on duty at the checkpoint one third of the takings. The remaining part would go to their boss and others up the line at Headquarters. (8)

The reader is here witness to the fact that the law enforcement is rotten from the top to the bottom; Sergeant Mathias' concession about the crucial complicity of the institution, of the officers, and the rank-and-file law enforcement employees, is not a topical attack but a critique of a perennial problem in the polity: the failure of the Nigerian government's economic, social, and judicial policies which have allowed an arm of government to live as if it were above the law itself. But Sergeant Mathias neither corroborates nor denies the notion that the corruption of law enforcement is solely driven by self-aggrandizement or human greed and rapacity. If social services were adequate, it would clearly reduce the social pressure that all too often forces citizens to succumb to temptation; and, in equal measure, it would limit police misuse of authority if the law did not turn a blind eye to police misconduct. However, the valorization of unethical conduct among the general populace, though it is an essential survival measure for some, has undermined the country to an extent that even its law enforcement can behave as if the law does not apply to it. The search for something to explain the source of corruption in the country is thus left at the level of a morally confounding mystery.

What is not in doubt is that law enforcement has denied itself the moral authority required for effective policing. As a consequence, there is a proliferation of criminal activity in the land. Especially prominent are the hold-ups set up by others who take a leaf from the law enforcement book by mounting their own (in this case illegal) checkpoints on highways and utilizing the same

violent methods law enforcement itself employs to rob the citizens. In these muggings, the hoodlums arm themselves to the teeth like the police and, in the same fashion, with guns drawn these armed citizens stand ready to rob their fellow unarmed and unsuspecting fellow citizens of property that the travelers have toiled to acquire. The pieces “This Kinda of a Luck” and “What Men Can Do” record two different types of such robberies—one random and the second an insider heist carried out after a tip-off using privileged information—both sorts independently or in combination unleashing a general state of widespread insecurity on the country.

As the title clearly indicates, “This Kinda of a Luck” advances an ironic theme. The subject matter is the trauma and heartbreak brought on ordinary people like Bello, the story’s main character, and his traveling companions as they begin to pick up the pieces of their broken lives after being knocked down by social forces; and it is they, who least deserve the misfortune of double victimization, who face robbery at gunpoint. Protagonist Bello is a petty trader. When he runs into an armed bandit while traveling to Lagos to buy second-hand clothing for retail in his village, Bello barely escapes with his life. The story is told through techniques resembling stream of consciousness, unveiling the thoughts and musings of the main character, summary recapitulations or flashbacks, memory, an all-seeing teller, and suspense. The impact of Bello’s story largely rests upon the backdrop of his family background: his life while in primary school; the untold hardship he experiences there because of grinding poverty; his parents’ lives as toil-worn subsistence farmers and their inability to pay for their son’s education; and, ultimately, Bello being forced to drop out of school early. In many ways, the pathos of Bello’s situation is that after many years being jobless—unable to secure a civil service post, sitting idly at home and wallowing in self-pity before sinking into “deep despondency” due largely to seeing his poor parents suffer and not being able to help them in their situation or help himself—an old friend of his named Salifu moots the idea of petty trading and provides Bello the start-up funds in the amount of ₦500. Soon Bello’s trading career has got off the ground so well that he is making plans to marry his fiancée Fatima (16). Then all at once Bello is suddenly in a battle for his life, facing the imminent prospect of losing everything to highway robbers. Out of the blue Bello finds himself in a life-and-death situation; here is how the dramatic banditry is described:

He felt eternally grateful to his friend Salifu for opening his eyes to this business which had sailed him through the most difficult phase of his life. He was pondering on what he could do to show his friend his appreciation when he was suddenly jerked out of his thoughts by the screeching tyres on tar. It was dusk but he could still discern large logs of cut trees placed right in the middle of the road where they should not have been. He could also see about five vehicles in various stages of careless parking. His heart started pounding. Armed robbers! The dread of the Nigerian roads. Every traveler was always travelling with two prayers in his heart—safety from automobile

accidents and safety from armed robbery attacks. Either of these was always calamitous, either resulting in death or being maimed for life. Bello had always felt lucky that throughout his two years of constant travel he had never been confronted with either of these two fates. But here he was, face to face with armed robbers, all his efforts about to be brought to nought. His blood ran cold within him as the station wagon taxi in which they were travelling screeched to a halt. As he heard gun shots Bello sprang like a coiled spring out of the window of the taxi and began running ... (18).

In this emotionally charged scene Bello's instinct takes over and he runs for his life like he has never done before. This story is built upon the opposition between justice and wrongness, what is fair and what is not; and the unexpected escape that Bello makes when his dispossession or even death seems inevitable allows him to observe the tactics employed by the armed robbers, giving real teeth to the implication that their methods are not at all dissimilar to those employed by the law enforcement officers, including their formula for sharing the loot. Through the exercise of uncommon willpower Bello thunders into the dark forest, straining as hard as he can as he plunges through ravines and snakes his way through thick brush, miraculously overcoming the great obstacles in his path until he does indeed make good his escape. When he is at what he believes to be a safe distance from the scene of the robbery, Bello climbs a tree to seek shelter there. He falls asleep, and when he is awakened by a noise this is what he observes:

His body became stiff. He was terrified. Right under the tree on which he took refuge was a group of fifteen men; he was not very sure of the number since they kept going and coming with all manner of goods. Bello noticed that some of the men wore hoods and were just pulling them off. His blood chilled in his veins. Bello concluded that these were the men of the underworld that had just robbed travelers a few hours before ... They seemed to be counting the money they had snatched from victims into a black bag they had placed in their midst ... He became interested in what the robbers were doing ... (19)

The story ends with Bello unintentionally striking a blow against the criminals, which confers on it a form of poetic justice. It begins with his attempt to "adjust his position so that he could watch what the robbers were doing more clearly" (20). This move on Bello's part precipitates an unintended chain of events, with results he could not have anticipated. Quite inexplicably, "his bag which he had clutched to his chest escaped his grasp and went tumbling down the branches making a great noise" (20). The robbers mistake the ensuing pandemonium for signs of "the long arm of the law" stretching out to nab them, and in panic they take "to their heels" leaving behind them, in their hasty retreat, the huge polythene bag into which they were "counting their booty" (20–21). A few minutes later Bello is in firm possession of the stolen money the fleeing robbers

have abandoned in the “amount of ₦46, 000 and 80 kobo,” ending up as the sole beneficiary of the heist which the hoodlums have pulled off (21). But notwithstanding, the near folkloric happy ending for the hero does not strain credulity at all.

The central focus of “What Men Can Do” is the increasingly sophisticated turn the crime of armed robbery is taking, which in turn has necessitated the invention of new ploys by road users, particularly commercial bus drivers, to beat the low-breeds at their own scummy games. This story features the standard material out of which great fiction is made: lifelike characters, an innocent but wily victim and a domineering villain who sets up the plan to destroy them, with something important at stake, in this case a sizable sum of money. To spike up the adrenaline rush, there is a chase by an armed bandit and some very energetic writing. “What Men Can Do” holds a mirror up to society through the end-of-year affairs of a women’s social group known as the Amaankhala social group, and it sees things darkly. Instead of people working to strengthen bonds and improve the lives of others in the community in which they ostensibly have the closest ties, what is fully revealed is the avariciousness that propels people who will stop at nothing to make a quick buck. Such is the desperation to have cash at hand, especially during seasonal festivities like Christmas, that the bad guys now find ways to infiltrate organizations for the purpose of not only gathering information but being able to set them up to be robbed at gunpoint.

The story stresses that the Amaankhala women’s group, which is the target of an insider heist while its representative is on the way to buy the members’ uniforms, is not unlike other women’s social organizations, built around communities formed to cater to their “members’ welfare and social get-togethers” (38). Its distinctive mark is the uniform, which is made from “six-yard wax hollandaise wrappers for each member” and changed each year (38). “The uniform served many purposes. It not only made the group to stand out from among the many other women’s groups in existence” but “it also encouraged men to buy clothes for their wives each year and also made the women able to stand shoulder high with their colleagues” (37). In light of the aesthetic, utilitarian, psychological, and communal values attached to the uniform, its importance to this women’s association is inestimable; and it is the reason that each woman agrees to contribute ₦250 so that Mama Rose, “a trader member of the group who was known for her honesty and enterprise was unanimously mandated to purchase the uniform for the group” at a great discount (38).

It’s no wonder, then, it becomes a particularly puzzling and loathsome idea that any member of the Amaankhala women’s group, let alone its Chairlady, should even remotely entertain the faint thought of sabotaging the group interest for her own selfish gain, as indeed she does in connivance with another member, “the Secretary of the Amaankhala Women’s Social Group” (46). The Chairlady has already acquired notoriety for her “sharp tongue” and for “her comportment” which “commanded respect” (39). This pushy woman with a dominant personality is “Tall and on the heavy side, with fierce-looking eyes” (39). She is rumored to have been in “the world’s oldest profession before

hooking her present husband and that was what accounted for her sharp tongue and rough ways” (39). In the three years since this former prostitute joined, readers learn, the Chairlady “had been able to effectively control the Amaankhala women’s group for the past two years” and many “a chattering woman had felt her heavy slap” leading “all idle side talk” to come “to a halt immediately she gave one of her usual roars which she frequently did” (39).

The insistence of this control freak that she should travel “to make the purchases the very next day” following the collation of all the women’s contributions raises Mama Rose’s suspicions, but “the Chairlady was a woman that must be obeyed” (38–39). Little does Mama Rose know but she has been set up and is walking into the trap; so her husband Papa Rose drops her at the bus terminal and she boards the Onitsha-bound Bus, which heads out in the early morning hours. A short while later “a brightly painted green cab swept at full speed past the luxury bus in which Mama Rose was travelling” and then “ten minutes later, the luxury bus caught up with the taxi and overtook it,” only for the taxi cab to overtake the bus “at full speed,” at which point the driver immediately identifies the pattern and makes the dreaded pronouncement which “sent chills down the passengers’ spines, including Mama Rose’s. The driver announced that the taxi, which was playing a game of overtaking with their vehicle, was that of armed robbers and that he was able to tell this from experience and from the antics of the vehicle” (41).

The luxury bus driver’s precocious observation and the actions that he undertakes save the day for Mama Rose and the other passengers. Amidst the passengers, shocked “into silence with that announcement” because they all know that armed robbers are “devoid of human feeling,” the luxury bus driver breaks into their thoughts with a question, asking to know in pidgin, the commonly recognized language of everyday communication for the denizens of the country, who is carrying “big money for im body?” (41). It is made explicit now that Mama Rose is the target because she has the biggest amount. “Driver, I de carry meeting money go buy uniform for dem O!” she announces, also in plain pidgin, adding: “The money wey I hold reach eighty thousand naira” (42). The angry driver rains insult on Mama Rose for not being forthcoming with this important information sooner, but he does proceed to offer her a great safety plan. He stops the bus quickly, just long enough for Mama Rose to scramble out with instructions to hide in the bushes, and promises to return to rescue her in the daylight after the robbers have completed their operation. “As the bus rounded the next sharp bend, there stood the green cab parked right across the motorway with the occupants nowhere to be seen,” “a ploy” to “make all on-coming vehicles come to a sudden halt to avoid crashing into the immobile vehicle” (42).

The unfolding events show convincingly that the bandits have their sights set clearly on Mama Rose. “Suddenly, from nowhere sprang several menacing figures, their faces hooded up with black cloth” as they “rapped viciously on the door of the bus, forcing it open and five of them stepped in. Two went to one end of the bus while one stood by the driver’s side. The remaining two quickly

strode through the bus scanning the faces of the passengers as if they were looking for a particular passenger" (42–43). Thus, the armed robbers scour the vehicle in vain for Mama Rose as propitiously the dawn's arrival is announced with "the first rays of the morning light ... struggling through the sleepy clouds and trees" (43).

As in "This Kinda of a Luck," "What Men Can Do" also employs an opportune coincidental moment as a portentous technique of conflict resolution. This is the stampede which follows when one of the robbers loses his foothold on the door of the bus and "landed on his face on the gear lever with blood spurting out of his nose" (43). In the mayhem that broke out, the male passengers who had been cowed into inaction suddenly find their mettle and are "galvanized into action" (43). They grab hold of this advantageous situation and mount a triumphant attack, taking out the bad guys with whatever objects they can lay their hands on: "Shoes, bags, iron and wooden chairs ... waist belts" (43).

Inevitably it is Mama Rose who gets the last laugh, just like Bello in "This Kinda of a Luck." The male passengers apprehend the hoodlums, and the reader is told, "On removing the hoods from the robbers' faces," the bus passengers "were aghast. Peering up at them were two female faces. Nobody could utter a word" (43). Traffic begins to build up as "a trickle of cars had started arriving on the scene"; the apprehended robbers are "handed over to the law enforcement agents" at a police station; before the bus driver then secures an escort of five policemen and returns to "the place where Mama Rose had been dropped" (43–44). The story terminates with an emphatic didactic warning in the folktale tradition that crime does not pay as culprits will be brought to book, and a happy ending for Mama Rose, following her successful identification of the two female armed robbers as "the Chairlady and the secretary of the Amaankhala Women's Social Group" (48).

In both "This Kinda of a Luck" and in "What Men Can Do" the scenic presentation is compelling, sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, each detail bringing vividly to life with acute realism the actions of the characters. With both Bello's story and Mama Rose's, Ajima writes vibrantly, alerting readers to the actual dangers lurking on Nigerian roads and expanding on the concept of stealing by force of arms by insinuating that *de facto* and *de jure* robberies are in many ways very much equal. This is an extraordinary revelation, and it means that the Nigerian landscape will never look the same to readers of Ajima's stories.

The underlying dichotomy between the collective and the individual experience, in which what may be considered an upbeat ending for the story's main character does not in any sense alter the state of affairs for the country in general, also presents itself in "Day of Nemesis." In this terrifying story, a faith-filled Christian gallantly faces the possibility of ritual execution and successfully overpowers his attacker. In a tale reflecting the persistence of superstition in contemporary Nigerian life, it is shown that, far from being stifled or wiped out by Christianity, irrational fear and belief in the powers of malevolent and

malignant spirits continue to jostle for pre-eminence in the lives of the people. In their day-to-day existence, even if they are unaware of it, conflicting spiritual forces often conspire with other ideological forms to hold societies hostage.

“Day of Nemesis” reverberates with intertextual energy. Echoes of literary and religious sources spread far and wide, from both within and beyond the shores of Africa. It harks back, for instance, to Wole Soyinka’s play *The Strong Breed*⁹ in its exploration of a culture of terror embedded in a society’s core tradition. This is the belief in human sacrifice, which is carried out during a seasonal ritual of purification meant to secure the well-being of the community. As in Soyinka’s play, in the society of Ajima’s story, the human victim must also be an outsider, a stranger. It is surely no accident that, like Soyinka, who assigns the victim in his play a name, Eman, suggestive of that of the biblical savior Emmanuel—Jesus Christ—Ajima too labels the main character and target of the scapegoating in her story with the name of another man after God’s own heart in the Bible: David, the anointed Jewish shepherd who slew the giant Goliath and became King of Israel.

Ajima’s story, like Soyinka’s play, opens with an ominous warning; on a day “overcast with dark clouds but in which no rain was expected” David, a seasonal migrant laborer who has gone up North “seeking to be hired as a farm hand in these rich agricultural areas” is on an errand (1). This trip happens to take place on the day of the “festival of Igbakoto,” when “only members of the cult could move freely about to perform the rituals” (1). David unknowingly defies this tradition and is out on the road, where “the priest of the Efan oracle” picks him out as if he “perceived the scent of the blood” and ambushes the unsuspecting man (2). The danger that David faces is enormous because the ritual is already well under way and has reached the part where impatience is at fever pitch among the cultists as a result of the delay and difficulty so far in finding a human scapegoat:

The worshippers were getting frightened because they knew that if after five days of the chilling cry they heard from the innermost parts of the shrine no ‘big one’ was sacrificed, they would cast lots and on whomsoever it fell must either give himself or his most loved child. The priest also needed this prey desperately because his rich customers were getting impatient with him. They needed one part or another to be used in spewing money for them. Indeed many of these rich men got their wealth from the charms he made out of human parts. (3)

In Soyinka’s play, the communal cleansing is the main object of the inhumane ritual. But in Ajima’s story, the agenda is to appease a new god; and money is now that new god as man’s inhumanity to man reaches unprecedented heights, running amok and banishing every shred of fellow-feeling. The savagery of this new cult is beyond comprehension as the conception of a human being as merely a money-making machine takes on a new face, a novel form of cannibalism that completely strips away the dignity and integrity of life itself. Here the reader is enlisted to picture human beings walking about carrying other

people's body parts, which are held up for sale. In this aggressively acquisitive society, there are no limits beyond which people will go in their quest to get rich quickly; consequently, the demand for human body parts has reached a morbidly bizarre frenzy.

The monumental danger which confronts David is aggravated by the background of the extreme difficulty that the cultists are faced with in finding a candidate for the ritual sacrifice. "Though ritual sacrifice had been outlawed in the country," the reader is told, "communities still deeply engrossed in pagan practices continued with them" (2). In the past slaves, or people known or suspected to have origins in slavery, could be procured for the ritual. However, with the end of warfare it has become "virtually impossible to get prisoners of war for use" in these rituals, "thus it was that religious cults actively involved in ritual sacrifices were always on the look-out for strangers and visitors in the area to be used instead" (3). This is the context in which the priest of the Efan oracle's stalking of David, as well as the would-be victim's gallant reaction, are to be grasped and appreciated. Another piece of information is also provided to assist the reader's appreciation of David's gallantry; it is that David's opponent is not really an ordinary human being. When ritually possessed, the priest of Efan's "body was no longer his. It belonged to the god of Efan. Pain was sweet" (4). In any event, the priest of Efan says that he loses all normal instincts like fear and assumes powers of metamorphosis to "fly on an orange leaf"; "change to mighty snakes" and "crawl through dark thick forests"; or "become a crocodile" (4).

A reader will be flat-out wrong to envision this story ending with a chase in which the heavily armed priest of Efan sprints out of his ambush and attempts to nab the fleeing David, leading to an epic confrontation, a struggle that in time has one party prevail. That's not how Ajima structures this story at all; instead, ultimate agency is given to wit and the role of spiritual authority, the God of the Christian David defeating the forces of Satan, the devil, as David wins the battle through prayer to his God. Here is the encounter:

Suddenly he felt power surge into his limbs. He shrieked and ran several yards into the footpath by the right. As he floated back on air he sighted the prey and more loudly incanted. He was no longer himself. The dance of ecstasy had begun, every single cell in his body tickled with sweetness. He turned his back toward the oncoming prey, raised his hands to high heavens as he offered the sacrifice to his god.

Meanwhile David had scented trouble as soon as he sighted the juju man from afar but there was no turning back. He knew that it could be more dangerous for him to turn back, because having sighted him, they would pursue him until they got him. He could hear the loud thudding of his heart as he faced certain and gruesome death. (4-5).

David's response is to go on the offensive rather than defensive, which the reader can see as his "anger boiled hot and he could feel the heat and force of it

rising towards his skull" (5). So David "calculated the distance between himself, the skin of the leopard spread out on the ground and the juju man who was still incanting towards the sky" (5). Next, David "made a sign of the cross on his forehead and silently called on God to be by his side" before briskly "he stepped quietly to the leopard skin and picked up the juju man's spear lying at the edge, drew back, and carefully aiming between the shoulders of the juju man, let go the spear" (5). "The spear," the narrator reports, "found its mark and the juju man crumpled unto the ground, his glassy eyes upturned to the skies, his hands raised to his god—Efan" (5). This is how David kills the ritualist stalker, whose body lies lifeless and motionless.

In devising this strategy of confrontation Ajima's story overturns the tragic structure of Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, in which a chase between the village cultists and Eman, their sacrificial lamb, leads to his eventual death. By contrast, in Ajima's story David does escape with his life; however, he gets out of trouble without posing any significant threat to the status quo. The ritual itself survives for another day, to claim other human victims in the future. Readers witness no action in Ajima's story questioning the justness of the practice of human sacrifice per se beyond denying it the representation of sympathetic treatment. Without calling specifically for its abolition, perhaps the very choice of this topic for the story's presentation does, nonetheless, communicate a sense of immediacy and urgency on the subject of the atrocity of human sacrifice. Ajima gives an update with this story on the face that human sacrifice has assumed in contemporary Nigeria and the menace it still represents for the general public.

In these atmospheres of profound moral depravity, the pressures that convert the eponymous character in the story "Mary and the Business" into a drug trafficker represent the climax of societal decline, the point of no return as it were. Mary is a naïve and innocent young woman trapped in her daydreams when her "eyes lighted on the 'joy girl' that stood at the edge of the market" and she begins "seeing herself as that girl of glamour," radiant with "beautiful hair, beautiful skin" attracting "men all around her" (32). There is a strong parallel between Mary and the eponymous character of the Irish writer James Joyce's story "Eveline."¹⁰ Like her Irish counterpart, Mary also finds herself torn between commitment to her family and the prospect of a new life. On the one hand she could stay at home, in her case in her Makurdi hometown, to look after her poor and aging parents while continuing her trade in second-hand clothing in a cheap store in a remote corner of New Layout Market, which her former classmate Sam, now a successful businessman in Lagos, has secured for her through his influence; on the other hand, she could accept his marriage proposal and move with Sam to far-away Lagos. Like Eveline in Joyce's story, who chooses to stay home in Ireland to look after her elderly father rather than marry Frank, her suitor, and leave with him for Buenos Aires, Argentina, Mary chooses to stay near to her parents in Makurdi. "She could not bear to leave her old parents, sister and their only brother Abel ... Her parents ... were always sick. Everybody depended on her for ... survival" (31–32).

Mary is a young woman who seeks solace from the troubling reality around her in her Christian faith. She would “spend hours ... speaking in ‘tongues’” so that “God would hear her better that way” (31). Mary’s prayers are for money to help her poor parents. But some days “all the hopes she usually nurtured sank like lead into the ocean and it was always by crying that she was able to lift herself out of it” (31). One harrowing experience which would leave a permanent devastating impact on Mary is the death of her Uncle Thomas because of a lack of money to get him treatment at the hospital following his illness. “As Mary witnessed Uncle Thomas’ condition, tears rolled down her eyes” (33). Mary does donate “the only ₦200 she had managed to save all her life,” but this money proves insufficient and Mary weeps “not just for Uncle Thomas, but for all of them, for all the poor people in this world who stood helplessly by as their loved ones died because they did not have money to ensure their health” (33–34).

Not long after, Mary is faced with a life-changing decision: to choose between “Faithfulness to God and desire to break out of poverty” (35). In the most chilling and bizarre scene in the story, Mary is unexpectedly made to yield up her body, her most private female organ, in a dream-like state. It is an invasion of her privacy which irreversibly compromises her integrity, to serve as a human medium for the commodity conveyance known as drug trafficking to Europe and the United States of America. In this extraordinarily disturbing scene in “Mary and the Business” the accumulating details don’t shed much light beyond the reality of the procedure because the passage is composed in the magical realist mode. Written in a style which also has echoes of the Czechoslovakian writer Franz Kafka in his story “Metamorphosis,”¹¹ by mixing dream and reality with no clear boundaries this scene presents an order of a procedure as baffling and astonishing as it is enchanting in a narrative using a matter-of-fact idiom. First, the scene begins on an ironic note as Mary decides she has to “get to church and knock on the door once again. Maybe God would open the doors and she will have showers of blessings as the pastor always promised. Hers had not arrived yet, but she kept rekindling hope” (34).

Ajima might have taken the structures of her story from the traditional stock, but she definitely gives them a new slant. So next Mary begins to speak “in tongues” while knocking “on God’s door of prosperity” (34). At the next stage, Mary begins “sweating but she loved it because it showed how hard she was trying to get to God” (34). But, here, things get really ominous; and Mary’s thoughts are recorded in very suggestive terms, taking on sexual connotations with undertones of sexual violence: “Today, that door must be broken down. The bars must be broken. Hallelujah! A warm moist tongue in her ear. Sam. Onions. No, how could she be thinking of that in church: devil, go away!” (34). Readers witness Mary’s suitor step out quite out of the blue to announce his presence, “It’s me, Sam!” (34). Mary confirms his identity when she “opened one eye and saw, yes it was really Sam” and he “held her by the hand and led her out of the church. Mary was still in a dreamy state. She touched her ear: it was moist. It was real” (34). At this time, the reader begins to wonder if Mary has

been drugged. "Oh Sam, how you frightened me, I did not expect you," states Mary, to which Sam replies, "I expected myself" (34).

There is something very unusual going on here, for a church is not customarily a place one expects to see a sexual seduction take place, and it is a suitor, not a pastor that Mary sees when its doors open, one who wastes no time in kissing her "fully on the lips" before making a pronouncement of his plan "to discuss business with you, not to take you away from your people" (35). Factoring into Mary's final choice among the options placed before her, the reader learns, are her "thought of that malnourished child called her brother" and her memory of "Uncle Thomas" as "she shut her mind to God," praying to God to "forgive me Father for this is not a grievous sin like the others," although at the same time she acknowledges that she has not forgotten that her earthly father "had taught her that the sin of prostitution was a sin against one's own body and that was the most grievous sin" (35).

This passage carefully weaves through the confused state of Mary's mind, unveiling her desperation. Mary wants to have her cake and eat it too. The contradictory messages notwithstanding, Mary descends into a stunning state of degradation. As she herself reports, it all "happened so fast ... she remembered the night faintly" (35). Mary not only gives up her virginity, consenting to Sam's request as "it was necessary to deflower her so that the stuff she was to carry would have enough passage" (35). Mary accepts the further indignity of undergoing the procedure of skin discoloration. "They had put her into a kind of bath for one hour and when she came out, her skin had looked almost like an albino. She felt beautiful. Could this be the heaven she had dreamt about?" (35). Then she allows drugs to be loaded into her vagina. "The stuff made her slightly uncomfortable but she had been warned not to show it" (35). She gets on the plane with Sam sitting beside her. "By the time they landed, their host was waiting to receive them. He was a heavy-set *Oyinbo* [white] man whom Sam kept calling 'Mr. Brown'. They were treated like royalty. All she needed to do was to shit it out nicely on to a clean dish given her. After three days they were back in Lagos, and she had half a million naira. To spend as she liked. To spend as Mary liked. This kept ringing in her ears until Sam taught her how to spend it" (35).

The reader learns that the fallen Mary made "seven more trips within two years" (36). It is a reflection of how ubiquitous materialism has become in this society, not even excluding the church, as once Mary has money her "father was made an elder of the church and her mother became matron of the town's women's meeting" (36). Mary goes on to accomplish many of the things that money can bring, such as being able to send "all her sisters and Abel to boarding schools" and helping to place Uncle Thomas' son "in the Rehabilitation Centre" (36).

The story closes with what should customarily be a crowning moment in a woman's life, the wedding of Mary and her partner in crime Sam at the church. However, while "she sat in the front pew," not only were "tears ... flowing freely down her cheeks," but Mary's "face was covered with a veil so nobody could see what was happening" as "Sam, the bridegroom who sat beside her could feel the

tenseness in her body and sense what was happening” (36). This image of the now thoroughly humiliated and shame-faced Mary, returned to her church with all the accouterments and trappings of her ill-gotten wealth failing to make her a happier person, achieves the effect of the ultimate irony, and it contributes to a lasting impression of the absolute vanity of all human ambition. The reader learns that “Mary clenched and unclenched her fist as the pastor rambled on about the godly family life in the midst of society today,” but “she only heard faintly what he was saying” (36). Mary is so guilt-ridden that she becomes stressed to the point of a nervous breakdown because she knows the contents of the pastor’s message to be falsehood, and many words are spoken about her that she believes it was impossible for anyone in the church service not to know were lies. So Mary’s “mind was on God,” which should be a good thing except that she’s not truly repentant (36). Mary refuses to commune with God and come clean, as it were, even with Him.

A careful reader can hardly miss the fact that what Mary intends as a prayer to God for forgiveness is in the end a statement of justification for her misdeeds rather than genuine repentance, since repentance comes only when a sinner remorsefully admits sin and sincerely turns away from it, never to return to it again. Instead, Mary mumbles a bundle of contradictory statements: “Do you forgive me, Father? They say it kills . . . Lord if I have sinned, forgive me. I had to do it. I am sorry. Is my rainbow still there? God, are you listening? Can I speak in tongues once more to you? Lord, do not punish my children for this sin necessary to save a multitude. Forgive me, Father. Are you there?” (36). All this mumbo jumbo shows that Mary has not yet had an encounter with God, which brings all who experience it genuine humility and consciousness of being sinners by nature. Rather, Mary remains someone who wants to continue to play God, to act as savior, which goes to show that the corruption in her society is so deep-seated it doesn’t even allow individual citizens to have sincere relationships with their creator but has kept them locked up in the mindset of justifying their sin. Think about the procession of “I’s” and “Me’s” reflecting the way this society has put “the self” and one’s ego at the center of all considerations, instead of the creator—Almighty God—and a contrite heart and desire to please Him by living within His will, obeying His commandments, statutes, and ordinances. It is evident that the homage that this society pays to wealth, power, and prestige could not repair the lack of inner peace in Mary because her soul has been stripped bare of its vital moral compass and disconnected from the creator.

Overall, if the name that the author has assigned to the main character in “Mary and the Business” is deliberate, and intended to be a signifying appellation—an attempt at adversely linking the identity of this personage to that of the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ—it has to be pointed out that the technique is a huge success. The suggestion that the character of the protagonist of “Mary and the Business” stands for something like a form of reversed mimetic representation of that of her Bible namesake must bear great associative satiric resonances. This is not just the case for Catholics, although people of the Catholic faith are the only group among those that call themselves Christians

who venerate the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, regarding her as a saint, so that they can hardly bear to have her name even remotely linked with a sinful life, something which will represent an apostasy of the highest order for them. Yet, the imagery of the label cannot be missed even by other groups of Christians who make no distinction between the Virgin Mary and other human beings. It's as if Ajima had selected Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary to sit for her portrait of Mary.¹² Other groups of Christians may see the Virgin Mary as just a mere mortal, nothing more than someone favored with a particular grace to be a vehicle for the holy birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the image of another female bearing the same name as the mother of Jesus but who is employing her sex organ as a conveyor of drugs must conjure for these Christians too the abhorrent picture of the unholy birth of the Devil himself, for here we have one Mary giving mankind the ultimate gift of salvation, and the other one destroying those very lives, as even she herself acknowledges.

Ajima's *The Web* illuminates a bewildering era in Nigerian history in an appropriate vehicle, the short story form best suited for capturing crisp vignettes or snapshots in contrast to the blurring images which come with the rolling pictures or movie-like portraits associated with the more extended novel. Fascination with the past is not a feature of this collection for the obvious reason that the burdens of the present seem too pressing to permit the author of these stories who is living through them to be distracted by backward glances. The stories in *The Web* are told objectively without romanticizing or moralizing through dispassionate, deadpan, sometimes bemused detachment and the critical voice of a third-person omniscient narrative method which observes and relates events, reflecting scorn for Nigerian hustle and debased lives but admiration for the simple, relaxed attitude of the people. Throughout this collection, the voice of a concerned storyteller, one who understands life in the fictional world represented and who reports and also judges events according to a strict moral code that has disappeared from the communities, asserts itself powerfully.

The canvas drawn by Ajima in *The Web* is generally bleak, as she turns to the conventional theme of the inevitability of the trials and tribulations of the upright individual within a society that is morally rotten to the core by subversion of the male tradition in African literature. She breaks with both the picture Chinua Achebe paints in his novel *No Longer at Ease*,¹³ with the career of the hypocritical main character Obi Okonkwo, who puts up a brief fight before succumbing to the powerful forces of corruption. When individuals become slaves to the animal impulses to glut insatiable acquisitive instincts, they negate the building of character required for citizenship, Ajima demonstrates. In this regard, she clearly takes the discourse on the precipitous decline of the state of the nation a notch up. The people of integrity appeared to have been an endangered species in the preceding era when Achebe wrote his novel *A Man of the People*, signaled with the conspicuous image of protagonist Odili, who pretends to be a hermit—someone that will have nothing to do with the giving and receiving of bribes—but in truth who turns out to be someone who just talks the

talk but cannot walk the walk. However, by the time Maria Ajima came along to write *The Web* it had fallen to her to hold a magnifying glass for re-examining the subject. Through distinctively original illustrative stories, she enables readers to learn something new and worthwhile. She proclaims astutely that the persons with personality traits to stick to it to the end and to hold on single-handedly to lofty political ideals had become completely extinct in Nigeria, destroying the falsehood of idealism. Throughout *The Web*, Ajima shows that she is chiefly skilled in the art of storytelling. She has a feel for divine intervention (*dues ex machina*) that is deft and comely. She knows very well how to begin and end a tale; how to create suspense and maintain interest; how to avoid superfluous detail and apparent contrivance; and how to invest characters with individuality. Besides, her handling of interiority, otherwise known as psychological realism, is remarkably masterful, and Maria Ajima has the golden aesthetic discipline to write in a style that suggests much but explains little while giving each episode a suitably important and integrative role.

Notes

- 1 Maria Ajima, *The Web* (Makurdi, Nigeria: Fambi Nigeria, Ltd., 1999). All subsequent page references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parenthesis.
- 2 Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor* (The Critical Idiom, London: Methuen, 1972), p. 2.
- 3 Terence Hawkes, pp. 6–14.
- 4 Charles May, “The American Short Story in the Twenty-First Century,” in Viorica Pâtea, ed. *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First Century Perspective* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 299–324 (p.299).
- 5 Charles May, pp. 299–300.
- 6 Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (London: Heinemann, 1966).
- 7 Donatus Nwoga, “Poetry as Revelation: Wole Soyinka,” in James Gibbs, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1980), pp. 173–185 (p. 173).
- 8 Donatus Nwoga, p. 173.
- 9 Wole Soyinka, *The Strong Breed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).
- 10 James Joyce, “Eveline,” in *Dubliners* (London: Grant Richards, 1914).
- 11 Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1946).
- 12 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*. Translated by Alan Russell (New York: Viking Penguin, 1951).
- 13 Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

3 Allegory, Migration, Mock-Epic, and Unspeakable Subjects: The Lure of Glamour, Empire of Material Things (Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*)

This chapter focuses on Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* It examines in particular the dark trade in African objects—notably those that are connected to African sacred practices. This trade replaces the trade in human cargoes, demonstrating circuits of continuities between the past and the present. It also looks into the immigrant life of Ike, the notorious protagonist of the novel, using him to read how immigrants adapt and sometimes go to the point of betraying their societies in order to survive in their host communities. It is argued that the novel's overall engagement of the gross failure of Nigeria as a nation-state (corruption, linguistic absurdity, environmental degradation, Christian fundamentalism, the rise of new mercantilism, widowhood, and the immigrant question), establishes its relationship to Nigeria's third generation fiction.

Stylistically and thematically, in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* we have a redeployment within the fold of third-generation Nigerian literature of the allegorical novel of man's fall, deployed capaciously in the tradition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's trailblazing and dazzling *The Great Gatsby*,¹ with which it shares many affinities. The connections between these two brilliant novels are, among other features, the melodramatic imagination, the gaiety of the main characters and their obsession with glamour as well as a gift for flowing, radiant, tantalizing, elegant prose on the borderline of poetry. In short, Ndibe's novel employs a forceful flamboyant language in a sustained effort to imbed the idiom of its age. It is a story of the unimaginable things people can do to make money, illustrated with the poignant example of the deeds of a Nigerian immigrant in the United States of America, Ikechukwu Uzondu ("Ike for short"), its main character. *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is narrated by an all-knowing, third-person, non-participant, eye-witness narrator who takes the reader behind the scenes of the protagonist's exploits and provides a credible picture of his hidden motives and schemes. This novel strikes a realistic balance between hearing on the one hand and seeing on the other, employing a subtle, ironic tone that corroborates or undercuts what the characters say, do, or fail to say or do, not excluding the protagonist.

Foreign Gods, Inc. adds touches from an amalgam of elements of many different genres, including parable and the mock-epic. This novel is distinctly parabolical in its method in the sense that the protagonist embodies the values of his age, representing forces larger than himself, and stands for the deprived

mind under the spell of the old sin of covetousness, which is conspicuously listed among the evils that God warns man against in the injunctions of the Ten Commandments in the Bible. The manner in which the story is structured resembles the pattern of the mock-epic, which is parodistic of the serious epic. The loftiness of the aspirations of the protagonist are followed by the grand preparation for the journey to attain them, ending with the pathetic disappointment that attends the quest: all elements which the novel shares with the mock-epic. The main departure from the conventional mock-epic is that the subject matter is neither slight nor trivial: the irresistible allure of big money and the consequent moral fall of the protagonist.

In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Ike's pursuit of his dreams revolves around a frustrated double-dealing intentionally signaled in the text's ominous opening scene. The renegade protagonist visits a gallery in New York City named Foreign Gods, Inc., which buys and sells images and statues of deities from around the world. Stunningly, we discover that he is here on a reconnaissance mission to hawk an idea about his home village's Ngene deity, in a jarring rejection of all traditional notions of ethical behavior—moral, spiritual, ethnic, and nationalistic. What but insanity or extreme cupidity could cause a human being to even conceive, let alone entertain, the thought of such a surreal, grotesque act as plundering his community of its god to enrich himself?

At the shop in the Big Apple which cynically exploits the symbols and sources of man's deepest and most sacred uncertainties, Ike successfully explores the prospects for such a deal and becomes stimulated to new heights of interest to travel to his home village of Utonki in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria, to snatch up its deity then in the custody of his paternal uncle so that he can return with it to the United States and sell it there. The apostate departs Foreign Gods, Inc. fully resolved to commit a travesty, his mind made up to do the unthinkable of not only summoning up the sheer audacity to break the chain of ancestral things being passed down from one generation to another in his family. But he is also determined to do what it customarily "takes an insane man" to do, which is "to threaten Ngene with fire," as it were, a deity with "its white paint smudged with sacrificial blood."²

The plot by Ike to steal the god and sell it abroad potentially bodes nothing short of a terminal antagonism to the future of Ngene. It is particularly such an unexpected and sinister turn of events because it comes, ironically, after the god has survived relentless attacks, most notably from the tempestuous colonial-era missionary Reverend Stanton and his post-independence successors, led most recently by Pastor Uka. Ike would like to base his justification for doing this on the claim that Ngene is "now a retired god, a slumberous deity, in limbo" (169). But the deity is anything but moribund; indeed, as he is to find out to his great surprise in one of his visits to the shrine, the opposite is true. "Freshly polished, the shrine's earthen wall glowed" and two cars "parked outside the grounds ... gleamed in their white exterior and ash interior. One was a Mercedes-Benz, and the other a Toyota 4Runner. In the front seats of both cars sat a driver and a police officer, their seats reclined ... There were several men in the shrine—their voices and silences

touched him” (173). On a second visit, Ike discovers to his escalating consternation that the space has become a place of relaxation for the deity’s devotees: “A generator buzzed steadily behind the shrine, powering a standing fan that swept from one side to another, blowing bellows of hot air” (258).

Ike is no less culpable that the current status of Ngene, in the new variety of its contemporary and modernized incarnated forms, was totally unknown to him at the time he conceived the plot to sell it. Any attempt to commercialize a functional deity, especially if not for the profit of its owners but for the personal selfish interest of someone else who can be rightly considered an outsider, cannot be viewed as anything other than a revolting act of poaching. It makes matters even worse that, in the face of mounting evidence pointing to the deity’s acquired new life and revamped and expanded function during his absence in the United States, Ike still persists in committing to a single-minded venture to wipe it out. Appearances can be deceiving, and Ike’s conception of Ngene is filled with naive misapprehension as he erroneously reviews its personality and fixes it in its past, denying time itself and history any sense of motion:

In long-gone days, when lizards were in ones and twos and Utonki was a terror of its neighbors, the deity’s mouth inspired dread. It belched thunder, claimed its worshippers, and flashed lightning. Those who still venerate the deity would boast that those were the days when men were men, and warriors were known for the valor of their arms. Then that world fell on its face, ruined by the rule of white men who made wimps of warriors and haughty warriors of cowards. (260, original emphasis)

Ike clearly is stuck in his traditional old school conception of Ngene, which is confining because it is obscured to the idol’s contemporary relevance. There is no question that Ike is in error when he throws in an outdated reference that clamps down the identity of the deity to the perceptions held of it by the older generation. It is this limited understanding which leads him to opine lamentingly that in recent times “the elders would look at the deity’s mouth and tremble with sorrow ... say the once-thunder-belching mouth has been reduced to a pout” (260). According to his line of thinking, instead of “evoking fierceness, the deity’s expression now suggests archness and despair ... a famished yawn ... a sign of boredom, or a child’s bewildered wail” (260). As clever and dazzling as these compulsive attempts at that sort of contrastive outline might appear in Ike’s own eyes, the discrepancy between Ngene’s presumed glorified past and its seemingly dwarfed present status, which he so magnificently sets out, is so ill-informed as to be an exercise in absurdity. Yet, it is this reductive view of Ngene which it currently fits Ike’s needs to hold on to.

Doctor Okeke, a renowned scholar of Ngene, graciously gives Ike a free copy of his book, *Rev. Dr. Stanton: A Missionary’s Misadventures in Africa*, during his visit to the deity’s shrine. But even he with all his expertise fails to recognize that Ngene’s owners have purposefully turned it into a multi-faced, multi-functional,

and multi-generational deity, well beyond its former unitary character as a single-purpose war god. Ngene is now “the hand of splendor, the hand of riches”; “the breast that suckles the baby”; “Crab’s head that baffles the world”; a deity who would “prefer scrambling to sharing” (178). Ngene is also referenced as “the one who swallowed the thing that swallowed an elephant”; “the one who pried off game from the lion’s jaws”; “the lion that guards the hearth”; “the chief warrior among deities” (178).

Other appellations capture Ngene’s phenomenal, rejuvenated identities: “the ukwa pod full of amazements” that at birth “is as small as a baby’s thumb” but in maturity becomes “heavier than a man’s head” and when falling “from a tree, the pod smashes the tortoise; rolling, it squashes the python” enabling “the old woman” to stoop and “heave it up” (179). Ngene is also now regarded as a god, which, if “provoked,” becomes “a hawk. Pushed to fight, you spare no foe”; “that flood that defies swimming”; “the deluge that razes ramparts”; imbued with a “rage” which “sweeps away the homestead” (179).

Consequently, what the totality of the more recent attributes imputed to Ngene shows is that the deity has metamorphosed into a new avatar. No longer simply a terrifying entity, Ngene is now consulted by all and sundry, from housewives to politicians, seeking their fortune. At stake here, with the threat posed it by Ike’s plot, is thus not just the fortune of Ngene as a deity stuck in a rutted past—which it is not—but what happens to those who depend on it. The welfare of the contemporary society that now reverences the deity is in danger. But Ike’s eyes are solely focused on his own self-interest, his personal ambition to make money with Ngene. That’s why he invests special value in Dr. Okeke’s monograph as the promotional document required to supplement the gaps in his portfolio on the deity, the hitherto missing paper qualification to push for its final sale, imagining the director of the gallery, Mark Gruels, “reveling in it” (261). For that reason, Ike is prepared to do whatever it takes to accomplish his mission, steeling his nerves for the job at hand with constant intoxication, to keep him “from shaking in the presence of his uncle and the deity” (265). He confesses that

Inebriation enabled him to keep his mind limber, free from agitation over the mission that inspired his return. It gave him the advantage of shadowing his uncle’s deity without feeling a tinge of remorse. Topsy, he was able to circle his quarry without betraying signs of undue anxiety. (265)

Ironically, the single individual who now poses the gravest danger to the Ngene deity’s survival and that of the dreams of the entire community of its devotees himself grew up a staunch worshipper of this god. While “a secondary school student” Ike “loved to dawdle at the shrine ... eating peppered goat meat and quaffing milk-colored frothy palm wine to his heart’s content” (95). A “devoted mass server,” in his youth Ike “also felt drawn to the shrine of Ngene, a space dominated by his uncle” (130). So, he “frequented the shrine, keen to observe his uncle at work and to soak up the atmosphere ... the divination rituals, the

easy banter traded by men gifted with words, the aroma of roasted meats, beer, spirits” (130). However, when push comes to shove, Ike renounces all of his loyalty to the spiritual matters embodied in Ngene, purely for cash considerations. If Ike gets his way, on the horizon looms the disquieting prospect that the Ngene tradition will end with his generation because he does not see himself as a link in a chain.

The narcissistic self-indulgence of this former congregant which is the hallmark of his negotiations for the future sale of the Ngene deity, not even yet in his possession, conveys some of the most disturbing statements on the new mercantilism sweeping over the world. In this new trade dispensation, focus has for sure and fortunately shifted from the sale of Africans and the transportation of human cargoes across the Atlantic Ocean. But the transit of objects from Africa to the West, from the South to the North, as it were, under the new trade scheme, sadly remains just as rank in its odiousness. Traditional African deities too find themselves put up for auction under the new trade system, with their fates placed in the hands of heartless market forces, and it is apparent that not even sacred objects are spared the indignity or disrespect of commoditization. Thus artifacts—terracotta statuettes, vestments, sacred and non-sacred objects alike, from the formerly colonized territories of the world such as Africa and Asia now known as “the third world”—come into high demand for lavish home decorations and exotic museum and art gallery displays in the rich and powerful Western nations of “the First World,” where in the heyday of the traffic in human beings the transportation of Africans for sale was the primary attraction for transatlantic commerce. The new trade sparks major debates about authentic primitive and inauthentic objects; about the original and the copy, the real and the fake.³

But, more importantly, this latest commerce exposes the new face of the looting of African gods and art objects. Up to and during colonial rule, carved objects were forcefully taken from Africa through European armed conquest, religious domination achieved mostly by Christian missionary defilement of other peoples’ religions, and the deceit of Western travelers and politicians. Now, the poaching of sculptures and other objects from Africa is, following the end of colonial rule, a voluntary project carried out by heretic local African peoples like Ike and others who eagerly do it for a price named by the Western buyers. The zeal for money in the post-colonial era and beyond has given a fillip to the traffic in African artifacts as every carved object now carries a visible price tag on it from the West. Not surprisingly, within the United States of America alone, we learn in this novel, “Over the last ten years, major galleries had opened in such locations as Seattle, Napa Valley, Palm Beach, and Atlanta to cater to a rising appetite for foreign deities and sacred objects,” though “the oldest shop—and the acknowledged dean of them—was Foreign Gods, Inc.” (69).

Selfish financial gratification underlies the controlling power of money on people, when the attraction of money trumps every aspiration and people get so drunk on pursuit of it that they lose all reason and conduct themselves in ways opposed to their own noble instincts. If ever any behavior meets this criterion, it

is the conduct of those deserters from the so-called “third world” countries so susceptible to the thrall of money they are drawn like a magnet by the power of the dollar into perfidious contemplation of hitherto inconceivable sacrilegious acts like defiling their own gods. Their peculiarity is to do the dirty job of the West so Westerners don’t have to soil their own hands. Thus, the West no longer has to face the necessity of endangering the lives of its people by sending them on perilous trips to distant parts of the world on quests to acquire exotic ornaments. On the contrary, Western societies can now count on there being more than sufficient incentive for local turncoats from places where the loot originates to now carry out those acts of unimagined violations against their own communities on the behalf of people from the West.

Driven by a propensity to make money, erring sons (and perhaps also daughters) of Africa with no principles not only now take it upon themselves to carry out the hatchet job of robbing their own societies of valuable ancestral cultural artifacts. These wayward children of Africa also follow up by bringing the loot over themselves to the doorsteps of the West, and there beg for the plunder to be taken from them. Within this context, Mark Gruels’ psychological advantage during the negotiations with Ike for the purchase of Ngene extends the trope of the rape of Africa’s cultural objects by the West. Gruels wields the power of the American dollar, and clearly occupies the position of dominance, and the subservience of Ike in the transaction is indisputable. It is conspicuously revealed, for example, that Ike does not even try to hide his shame in begging Gruels to take his people’s god in what is without question very lopsided exchange terms. What emerges is a picture of Ike’s pleas standing in marked contrast to the demurral of the dealer in goddesses and gods of foreign places, “a Harvard Business School graduate who took over the running of the gallery after the 1996 death of his father and gallery founder, Stephen Gruels-Soto” (69–70).

The magnitude of Ike’s absorbing fervor to sell Ngene, a highly treasured fetish object of his evil scheming to steal from his Nigerian Utonki village, matches that of the money which it is his desire and passion to gain. It isn’t that he denies Ngene’s sacredness or historical role as his local community’s war god. But Ambition spares no one its deadly venom; and it bites and infects Ike hard, impelling him in his determination to exploit his privileged access to his community’s asset as a golden opportunity to enrich himself, and falling prey to the temptation to sell his birthright. That’s why he takes cover behind Mark Gruels’ spurious argument that “in a postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality; any deity that remained stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund” (62). In the further rationalizations he offers for his actions Ike depicts Ngene as an abandoned god, saying that most of its former devotees “had become Christians” and “had traded their war deity for the one whose love was so overpowering that He assented to being impelled.” Hence the deity had been betrayed by “every living soul in Utonki, man, woman, and child” that once “paid obeisance to Ngene,” justifying his plan to sell it (169). For this reason, Ike visualizes the role he has taken

upon himself to market Ngene as borne out of a sense of the duty he feels called upon to carry out on not only his community's but also the world's behalf. As he puts it, "It had fallen to him to show the world to Ngene, stuck too long in Utonki, and Ngene to the world. He pictured a party that would be thrown on the marvelous lawns of some swanky home to celebrate the acquisition of Ngene. It would be an extraordinary affair, the biggest debut party, graced by all the big collectors. They'd cast killing eyes of envy at the lucky new owner of Ngene, an African god of war" (169).

Such is the depth of Ike's self-absorption that nothing will cause him to swerve from his dedicated purpose, which is to travel to Nigeria and "snatch the war deity his people called Ngene, and sell it to Gruels' gallery" (59). True to the character of the opportunist that he is, he triumphs in touting Ngene's authenticity and primitive origin, marketing it as "a majestic god with a rich legend and history" who is reputed in oral history to have single-handedly doomed the "famed missionary" called "Walter Stanton" (2). Like a mercenary he puts his business proposal before a skeptical Gruels: "I have a god I can bring ... I am travelling to bring it" (7). There's no doubt that the anticipated prize of the money from the sale of Ngene is Ike's main interest, a way in which a local community's monument can see itself laid to waste not from the hands of foreigners but from its own people. At Foreign Gods, Inc., Ike is in the right market, as indeed the director, concedes: "My entire inventory is made up of powerful, ancient deities" (9).

But Gruels bristles with arrogance. His demeanor gives the appearance of a reluctant receiver of what he has been clearly told would be stolen property. For a start, he can see through Ike's desperation, and his ulterior motive is ultimately to get a good bargain. The import of Ike's answers to the litany of questions directed at him by Gruels varies greatly, but together all the disconcerting admissions pried from him lead to the unsettling conclusion that Ike doesn't yet have the deity in hand; the priest of Ngene is not "offering to sell this"; and Ike is not "acting as your uncle's agent"; nor does he "have your uncle's permission to do this deal" (9).

Stealing is something a low life will do, but a person stealing a god of his community surely descends to an even lower classification. It does not therefore require any rocket science for Gruels to understand that he has a thief of the lowest denominator standing in front of him. So, he asserts his right to dictate the terms of the trade, and states boldly that it is not usual for his gallery to name a price for an object it has not even seen. There are certain conditions to be met and foremost is that his company requires an opportunity to authenticate the primitive status of an item before offering a price for it. The thrust of Gruels' claim is based on the very high standard of evaluation which he alleges his gallery maintains, and he declares that this requires documented written evidence. Gruels presses Ike on the point that once he makes determination of a product's status his company's offers are second to none in the industry. In flatly making a definitive statement therefore of what he presents as the rigid

purchasing criteria governing all business transactions of his gallery, Gruels leaves no room for further negotiation:

Don't think I doubt this is a great god. But this gallery is huge on authentication. Remember that. Nothing beats seeing things on paper—photographs, books, documents. If there are mentions in one or two scholarly texts, that's terrific. (11)

This requirement of printed documentation by Gruels as a precondition for the purchase of a god of an unlettered people is unarguably a tall order. But, like the shrewd and grasping businessman that he is, Gruels has here found a weak spot to latch on to, which brings the haggling over the transaction to an end with Ike accepting the uneven trade terms dictated to him. It becomes a measure of just how desperate he is to make money that Ike leaves Gruels' gallery with his spirits buoyed nonetheless. Without any moral scruples, he is infused with not only a renewed surge of energy but a rededication to his travel plans. There is no question that Ike is set on this mission: to go quickly to his Eastern Nigerian village, grab the Ngene deity, and bring it back to deliver to the prospective buyer in the Empire State. "He even imagined the shape of Gruel's handwriting on the check: strong lines, straight and prim like soldiers on parade, smooth unbroken, devoid of squiggles" (41–42).

The disputation between Ike and Gruels over the sale of Ngene, looked at in one way, represents a clash of two cultures—orality and print—with the eventual triumph of the print culture over the oral. Ike has his sights set on persuading Gruels to accept this product on the strength of the truth founded on the word of mouth which he possesses about it. However, Gruels is left unpersuaded by non-written proof which takes a backseat in his reckoning. Instead, he clings to the superiority of the print standard which must be met because in his view it supersedes any quantity of proof passed down by word of mouth. Gruels does not explicitly state so, but his attitude implies that the evidence passed down by word of mouth is subject to instability and fleetingness, and so is unreliable and is therefore deemed inadequate in the context of a stable print culture.

From another perspective, with even more profoundly daunting implications, the transcript of this transaction conveys an appropriate symbolization of the enterprise known as immigration. It is a parallel to the hostile climate, as it were, of the immigrant's self-presentation and selling of his labor, skills, the services he can offer and his selfhood on others' terms in order to obtain limited rights of inhabitation within the host culture. The immigrant's rights are circumscribed, as becomes evident throughout in Ike's situation, in which he does not have the power to name and fix a price for the carved object which he desires to sell. The way in which Ike must depend upon the apparently unwilling buyer's estimation of the product's worth and his price offer is as complete a reversal of how the West markets its own products to the people in the "third world" countries as can be. For example, the automobiles made in Western factories located both in the West and elsewhere around the world, as well as

other forms of Western technology, are always sold to the buyers globally at prices predetermined and fixed by the Western makers of those products. In contrast, however, we have a situation in which the value-making and manufacturing which intersect for the Western countries are divorced for products and labor coming from the “third-world countries.”

The ongoing revelation leads us to one irrefutable, if unpalatable, conclusion: that the people in the “third world” countries make things and have services to offer the rest of the world, but they don’t have price control over their products and labor. As a corollary, developing/underdeveloped countries lack the sources of ability to generate wealth, as they must sell at the mercy of buyers in the countries of the West who naturally want and are determined to pay the lowest prices because they have the power to do so. This regional power imbalance between the industrialized North and what are called the developing (or underdeveloped) nations of the South was the primary problem that several members of the oil producing and exporting nations of the South came together to redress through the creation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). At its introduction OPEC, now comprised of 13 member nations including seven in Africa, was influential for a time in determining the price of petroleum products, until the West, notably the United States, worked with some of its key allies within that third-world organization (notably Saudi Arabia) to undermine the once all-powerful oil conglomerate from within.⁴

Nowhere is the reality made clearer than in Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.* that, outside of OPEC, the West appropriates exclusively to itself the power to determine the worth of the products of peoples of the third-world countries. This absence of control of Africans over the value of their goods is apparent when a rain-drenched, shivering, and nervous Ike, with the Ngene statue clutched to his sodden shirt, arrives back at *Foreign Gods, Inc.* The store owner asks him to name a price for the product he wants to sell: “How much? ... What are you asking? Give me a figure,” only for Ike to turn over the power to name the price of his own product to the person he wants to sell it to, the owner of the shop. Mark Gruels of course wants to get a bargain, saying to the buyer, “It depends on you” (318). Can any of us imagine going to a car dealership to buy a brand-new Mercedes-Benz and expect the seller to tell us that the price depends on the amount we want to pay!

Foreign Gods, Inc. is brooding in its chronicle of the struggles attending immigration, especially for individual African males like Ike who flee suffering economies by traveling to the United States to find opportunities for better lives, centrally demonstrating their agonizing struggles to stand on their own feet. Absent the ability to wheel and deal, these individual immigrants from Africa are placed completely at the mercy of their Western hosts, who are not always hospitable and keep shifting the goalposts for the permanent visitors in their lands. As far as can be deduced, if African male immigrants could have the kinds of institutional bargaining powers that OPEC was able to deploy for some time, they would certainly be better off. There is no hiding from the homeland, either, for the immigrant, because whatever happens there touches his pockets while he is living abroad. That’s why, in large measure, the rogue’s story and his unsurprising bad

end is intertwined with the desecration which the global trade in artifacts of religious origin from Africa constitutes. The African male immigrant in the United States cannot remain uninvolved while simultaneously an alien religion of not altogether unquestionable character finds enshrinement in place of the discredited traditional African religions, starkly exposing the hypocrisy and ruthlessness of the exploitation of African peoples under the guise of Christianity.

Protagonist Ike was placed in line to succeed his paternal uncle Osuakwu as the chief priest of the Ngene deity in his village, as his paternal grandmother Nne had occasion to inform him, long before his mother Nwanyi Eke would confirm the claim. The succession to the priesthood of this deity is so important that, during his Nigerian visit, his mother cannot help but ask him if he's aware of the plan "to make you the next chief priest of Ngene?" (135). His uncle Osuakwu is certainly indignant if more diplomatic about the matter of the succession protocol, suggesting that "Ngene will speak his mind about a new carrier" at the appropriate occasion and if it wants him, Ike "must come home to serve him—or you'll fall into madness" (195–196). But such a scenario is highly improbable; the logistics aren't favorable for the likelihood of Ike packing up in the United States and returning to Nigeria to become a ritual priest. Therefore, it is not unfair to reach the conclusion that, by voluntarily leaving Nigeria for permanent residence in the United States, Ike's emigration has truncated the trajectory of his life, stripping him of his illustrious heirship and turning him into the main instigator of his own cultural disinheritance. But in exchange, what does America, his new settlement, offer Ike?

There is a sense in which the fate of male African immigrants like Ike is not all that dissimilar to the misfortunes of those cultural artifacts ripped from their homes in Africa and transposed to be sold and put into residence in foreign settings. From their collection, by non-devotees who trample upon sacred ground to get to them, to their relocation to alien settings and display in the homes of non-believers and art galleries and museums, trafficked African artifacts all fall victim to abuse through the profane gaze, irreverent touch, and uses of non-believers. Just like the looted artifacts from the continent, in the male African immigrant's new place of residence he too has his future completely wrapped up in the palms of his host's hostile hands.

America places in front of the male African immigrant a shiny object. Meanwhile, the American establishment keeps making the attainment of the gleam elusive to the immigrant. In charting the uncertain terrain of immigrant existence in the United States of America, the challenges which Ike faces on his path to gainful corporate employment are not atypical of those which beset many aspiring African male immigrants.⁵ They come to America to obtain better lives for themselves, to obtain improved professional and vocational success. The immigrants are led to believe that they could have a piece of the American pie simply through a respectable educational attainment. For this very purpose, Ike "pushed himself at Amherst College" and when "he earned a cum laude in economics, he trusted that he'd made himself attractive hire for any Fortune 500 company" (44).

So determined is Ike to land this type of high-status job that he supports himself paying for his college education by combining “his studies with a menial job—cleaning several movie theaters, restaurants, and offices at night” (26). But, unbeknown to him, the immigrant is already foredoomed to bitter disappointment which becomes incalculable when the college education upon which his hopes of gainful corporate job placement and upward social mobility were centered does not secure for him or guarantee him these lofty aspirations. Even after obtaining a degree from Amherst, Ike finds that there is another obstacle to his dream: the employment authorization which he must first secure before he can ostensibly get a corporate job in America. But the circuitous route to the acquisition of the official permission to work through the green card is filled with scam brokers who take advantage of the African male immigrants’ dire predicaments to subject them to brutal exploitation.

The “green card bride” scam run by the Puerto Rican fake agent Ricardo Otis, for instance, spitefully siphons nearly 5,000 dollars from Ike with the false promise to arrange a marriage intended to secure for him the card permitting permanent residence. But his assigned “green card bride,” a young woman named Yesenia Diaz, turns out to be Otis’ own cousin who is in collusion with him to dupe immigrants (26). So, “Ike and Yesenia Diaz were to meet at the office of a justice of the peace to exchange marital vows. They held a rehearsal,” but, inexplicably, “Came the appointed date, and Yesenia was nowhere in sight” (26). As Ricardo and Diaz give Ike the runaround, it is obvious that they are determined to keep him in continuing subjection to extortion, forcing him to look for cover from the exploitative grasp of these scam artists who continue to troll him as he moves from one city to another, from Atlanta to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and then to New York, eking out a living as a taxi driver.

Within the hierarchy of aesthetic formulas which the plot develops, irony is transcendent. Significantly, Ike remains unwavering in his resolve, bringing along with him wherever he goes “that stubborn dream for a green card” (27). The green card, he thinks, will remove all the employment obstacles which he faces, hence regrets assailing him that “his green card” had not already been “long taken care of” (24). But his quest to secure the elusive employment authorization through the “green card” bride leads Ike into another pothole, instead of helping him to dig out of his troubles, his entanglement with the African-American Bernita Gorbea, with whom Ike enters into a hasty marriage of convenience. “Two distinct, different dreams had driven them into marriage. Ike was desperate to obtain a green card. It seemed that Bernita wanted to acquire her own in-house sex service” (24).

The couple’s incompatibility is made manifest early, with the marriage seeming inescapably destined from the start to fail because of Bernita’s “persistent nagging” and demand “for more and more money for her shopping sprees,” which precipitate Ike’s gambling addiction (33). Nevertheless, before she caps every hurt she will cause him with the betrayal of her marital vows, the unkindest of all the cuts that he receives from the marriage is Bernita’s mockery of his accent and constant hurling of ethnic slurs at him with “her lacerating tongue” whenever

they have a disagreement (20). Ike is the first to bemoan the state of financial insolvency which Bernita puts him in, but readers know that he emerges from their relationship just as emotionally and psychologically scarred, and these mental wounds from the marriage are just as traumatic for him.

Besides the fact that the divorce allows Bernita to make away with all his savings and even with the couple's furniture, the financial pressure forces Ike to work longer and longer hours as a cab driver. But the emotional turmoil from the end of the marriage precipitates an even more difficult affliction, not only pushing Ike into binge drinking but actually exacerbating it. Worse of all is that the baleful results of his subjection to Bernita's sexual battery and sensual indulgence, infidelity, and taunts linger on, even casting their sorrowful shadows on Ike's trail as he is thousands of miles away from the United States of America, often inflicted with insomnia and nightmares.

Take, for instance, the haunting image of Bernita in his imagination while Ike is on the plane during his trip to Nigeria. We are told that the "last scene he remembered was the clarity of the dawn sky in Amsterdam, a wide blue dome with no cloud puffs in sight" as "his mind lolled, unable to cleave to anything, ideas, or images" (72). But, then, all of a sudden, buried and repressed memories of Bernita creep up:

As Ike hovered between sleep and wakefulness, a startling idea seized him. He had the sensation that Queen Bee had somehow gotten on the same flight. And that she had sneaked up and sat right behind him, staring at the back of his head. He unglued his eyes and swung back. His severe eyes met the stare of a red-haired white woman. She gave an apologetic grin, then sharply looked away.

Moments later, he was asleep. It was a restless, fitful sleep, troubled by a churn of unwelcome images. First was Queen Bee the day their divorce was finalized, her face exultant and mocking. Then Cadilla floated into the picture, his face signed with a terrible smirk, he and Queen Bee wantonly commingled, heaving on the couch until, exhausted, they lay in a heap, panting. (72)

A similar intrusive shadow of Bernita surfaces at a Lagos nightclub. There "Cigarette smoke and the reek of beer regaled the air" amidst which "women shook their buttocks" and "men rocked their shoulders from side to side in a controlled sway" (80). Mysteriously, Ike picks one of these women for a closer look, only to recoil because she reminds him immediately of "Queen Bee's stature: a flat belly, wavy breasts" and "That instant, his mind exhumed the word 'Zulu,' a rich and respectable noun that his ex-wife had turned into an execrable epithet" (80). The nausea which overtakes Ike is overwhelming, as we are told that "His body shook as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been dumped on him" and "Queen Bee herself had materialized in a juju-playing nightclub in a seedy hotel in Lagos" (80–81).

In these repeated assaults, the survivor of a catastrophic marriage is forced to relive the painful experiences unremittingly. Taken together, these confusing, recurrent images of Bernita repeatedly inflicting mental wounds on Ike both in his dreams and in his waking moments convey not only the provocation of what might be called remnant grief but also the persistence of the sense of a frightening encounter with an ogre from which, for his comfort and safety, the victim has been unable to put himself at a sufficient distance.

It is arguable that some readers may object to the image of Bernita as a gold digger and even a life-draining and diabolic sex maniac. Moreover, such readers would view her image as a perpetuation of a standard stereotype of the African-America woman. In this regard, Ndibe's portrait of Bernita and Ayi Kwei Armah's idealization of Naita in *Why Are We So Blest?* complement each other as variations on the same topic of the African-American woman's image.⁶ In Armah's second-generation African novel, Naita is the only source of nurture for the African immigrant student—the Ghanaian scholar Modin Dofu—in Radcliffe, within the context of race relations during America's turbulent Civil Rights era in the 1960s. In Armah's Naita we have the example of myth-making per excellence in character depiction. Naita stands as the image of mother Africa, and captures the sentiments of a race in very troubling times, offering refreshment to the children of Africa in the New World. The image of Naita derives its vivacity from a process of binary opposition featuring a grotesque racist image, as can be seen in the depiction of the contrastive sexual encounters Modin Dofu has with Naita and also with his white mistress Aime Reitsch in which his love-making with the former is shown to be blissful, warm, and harmonious as opposed to his arid, awkward, cold, and stiff relationship with the latter. It cannot be disputed that Armah's portrait of the black and white women characters in *Why Are We So Blest?* epitomizes the mutually contaminating, dominant crude racial stereotypes which blacks and whites had about each other in the 1960s. Ndibe's modification of the image of the African-American woman in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* contributes a fresh perspective in this regard and lends further significance to the presence of African-Americans in African fiction and the pageant of their character cast arrayed in it.

By all accounts, it is the dashing of all of Ike's hopes with the devastating and humiliating defeat of his professional ambitions, however, which sends him into his darkest clouds of discouragement out of which he never recovers. The hard truth is finally brought home to him when he finds out that the green card is no magic wand because his accent presents a second strike against him that is nearly impossible to overcome. The green card therefore turns out to be one of those over-hyped things that don't quite live up to expectation. Ike is very disappointed that, aside from the many troubles the quest to obtain the green card brings him, even with it in hand, the corporate job continues to remain a mirage. He attends "five interviews at banks and investment firms, but the expected job-offer never came" (32). Then at an interview at Frisch Investments, Inc., shockingly, "After just about five or so minutes, the interviewer swept up a sheaf of papers on the desk that included Ike's transcripts,

letters of recommendation from two of his professors, and application form,” before making the discouraging pronouncement: “Your credentials are excellent, but the accent is crappy” (32).

A victim of employment discrimination in the United States of America, Ike is aghast at his unfair and dehumanizing treatment. As accent becomes a marker of exclusion at the job-interview, he finds out that it has come down to him being sent packing, being told that there is no place for him and he should go back to where he came from. He can clearly see how the daily reality of life in America does not square with the myth. In voicing his unremitting outrage, however, his railings are directed not at any resentful individual person but rightly at the institutional hypocrisy. It begins to acquire density that he casts integration as a cant since all its officially sanctioned actions are the very negation of incorporation. Ike wonders why well-popularized theories of the world as a global village are only selectively actualized in the real world in America:

We’re supposed to be living in this new global setting—a village, many call it. In college, I took classes where the buzzwords were “synergy,” “hybridity,” “affinities,” “multivalency,” “borderlessness,” “transculturality,” what-not. My sister lives in Onitsha, near my village, but she has Internet access. A gallery somewhere in this city buys and sells deities from Africa and other parts of the world. Many American companies are selling stuff to people in my village. They are certainly selling stuff to me, to lots of people who speak the way I do. But I apply for a job and I’m excluded because of “my accent,” quote, unquote. It’s worse than telling me outright I’m a foreigner, I don’t belong. Then academics rush in to theorize me into an exile. That’s why I don’t wear that tag. (55)

Ike here openly denounces the inequity and injustice of living in this segregationist society with double standards shored up by a system which does not accept multiculturalism in all its facets but only allows those aspects that advance its policy priorities. The United States discerns no accents when profiting from the expansion of markets that people provide for its products worldwide. But the institutional racism in the United States hastens to use pronunciation at home as a reason to deny equal opportunities to all the peoples living within its own borders. Ike rightly perceives the narcissistic establishment politics of accent as a negation of assimilation and even accommodation. It is one means by which separatism is maintained in the United States, the reprehensible politics of Otherness. Instead of celebrating elocution as a legitimate and vital expression of the richness of the diversity of ethnic pluralism, this bigoted society employs it to further divisiveness. The politics of fear modulates into the establishment’s acts of economic subversion of minorities. Accent becomes a marker of difference, providing irrational excuses for corporate America to unleash hostile policies propelled by xenophobic fears on its ethnic minorities, mislabeled as foreigners, who are then left out and left behind, making the words written in its constitution that all people are created equal a lie. Ike’s exposure

of the way accent is used to delegitimize the existence of immigrants is an open protest against discrimination based not only on accent but on all other grounds too.

Within the context of a story about the mania of rich and powerful people in the West for decorating their homes with objects from distant places, from the homelands of the so-called peoples with accents, it is a striking paradox that their institutions will not welcome those persons with accents themselves into their wealthy nation. But, on top of other adjustment problems, immigrants have to deal with challenges of displacement and latent alienation; they are thus among the most vulnerable groups in any society. That's why, reciprocally, as Ike's Sierra Leonean friend Usman Wai aptly points out, it cannot be reasonable to expect the victims of this type of injustice not to become embittered. Usman himself does anything except hide the fact that, on hearing of Ike's anger at his job search ordeals, "I would be, too, if employers treated the way I speak as a terrible disease. I'd be hopping mad, as a matter of fact" (55).

One significant and immediate, material consequence of being denied employment opportunities is Ike's becoming too cash-strapped to afford comfortable, let alone luxurious housing. He is forced to live in a ghettoized apartment complex in a crumbling and overcrowded neighborhood, where the denizens find themselves competing for space with commercial enterprises. Ike is in a serious situation, and the abject and sordid state of his living circumstances shows it. His dingy second-floor one-room Brooklyn apartment is so inhospitable it has long been a dream of his that "once he sold Ngene, one of his first priorities is to relocate" (35). Such is the level of discomfort Ike experiences in his apartment that he in fact considers it "better to roam the streets awhile" than to spend any prolonged time there, for "At all hours, the noisy street intruded into the apartment, breached his solitude" (13). The stairway leading to this apartment is "dank, poorly lit ... There was an ever-present frowsty smell. It was a co-mingling of spilled liquor, urine, cigarette smoke, perfumes, and the rich, leafy smell of marijuana ... chewing gum stuck here and there on the stairs" (39).

Inside Ike's apartment itself the "living room sizzled with heat" and flies "buzz about" (39-40). Worst of all, this apartment harbors bitter memories that Ike would rather have obliterated: his time with Bernita and his financial struggle evidenced by a huge pile-up of bills including "late-payment reminders, disconnection warnings, cancellation threats, repossession notices, eviction slips" (39). No wonder Ike finds the atmosphere so exhausting and is reluctant to retire to this apartment, which houses a liquor store directly underneath it, at the end of the day's hard labor of cab driving and enduring constant insults from rude and insolent passengers.

As if Ike's poor living conditions aren't bad enough, his money problems become complicated with a gambling habit which was brought to a crisis by his marital difficulties. He "had been confident of hitting it big quickly," but his "loss had been so brisk and big that, for the first time, he had drawn 2,000 dollars on a credit card to pay some bills and gratify Queen Bee's shopping mania" (126).

He is left, unable to pay his mounting rent debts, facing eviction. On top of taking a personal loan from his friend Usman Wai, Ike has his credit card maxed out at “a usurious interest rate” of nearly 30 percent (64). He is incessantly nagged by guilt for neglecting his widowed and aging mother and his only sister back home in Nigeria, even as they tirelessly badger him with urgent messages to send money to support them. Absent financial support from him in four years, Ike’s mother, in her own words, herself paints a graphic picture of her acute struggles, recalling the memory of “Days and days in which the stomach saw no food; the mouth found no words to tell its woes. Are you telling me of hard times? If I had words, I would tell you stories that would make the wind weep” (129).

It doesn’t make the situation any less dire for Ike that, even in the midst of all the difficulty of his immigrant experience in the United States of America, conditions in Nigeria make packing up and returning permanently to his country of origin an unattractive option. From the state of law enforcement to education, infrastructure, social amenity provisions, and the emergence of religious malpractices featuring pastors, Islamic priests, and native doctors who take money to “say powerful prayers” for the protection of drug traffickers like Emeka Egoigwe, now husband of Ike’s former girlfriend, Regina, things have degenerated from bad to worse in a drifting Nigeria (223). Ike will learn that Nigeria has produced many such drug dealers, who have either “been caught in America and sent to jail” or nabbed in Indonesia “and beheaded. There was ... Khaki No Be Leather. An only son, he was caught in Indonesia and beheaded. His old mother went and hanged herself” (223).

Nigeria emerges as so bedeviled by twisted, marked class contrasts that the door to wealth is firmly shut to the majority population which is forced to live in grinding poverty. Here, a minority group comprised of political and religious fraudsters as well as drug peddlers is living in luxury in a time of great difficulty for the majority population. Life is a bed of roses for Ike’s former classmate, Tony Iba, for example, now known as Chief/Chair/“Tony Curtis” and a big shot in the ruling party, as a result of his oath-breaking in public office. Since his election as “chairman of the Oliego Local Government Council” he has “maintained two palatial homes, one in the city of Enugu, where he spent his weekdays, the other in Utonki, his weekend retreat” (233).

The incorporation of a profile of the formative years of this political tycoon is masterly in establishing the centrality of personality disorders to the making of the corrupt politician. This much can be observed: that Ike remembers Tony Iba from his days as a secondary student who did not make good grades; who despised authority in the classroom, did not take learning seriously, could not absorb materials; in other words, his knowledge did not stick, and he was disdainful of intellectual aptitude and class rules. In encapsulating the inescapable essence of Iba’s personality, which anticipates his current behavior, the novel attests that his horrifying actions are not entirely accidental.

One implication of all this is that Nigeria’s political class is now comprised of not only some of the country’s worst brains but of its ringleaders in lawlessness

and insubordination, egotistic self-indulgence, and selfishness. Ike gets to visit Iba at his gated Utonki mansion, and it becomes quite immediately apparent the property is clearly beyond the means of a salaried worker. There can be no doubt that this castle has been acquired through dishonorable means. It is “a white three-story structure that towered over the trees and seemed to peer, with a sneer, at the rusted zinc and thatch roofs of surrounding buildings” (235). Here’s a view of the mansion:

Iba’s house was set at the right-hand corner of the walled sprawl. To the left was an open six-car garage with a greenish canopy. Three cars were parked in the port, all of them covered with a tarpaulin. A fourth car, a black Mercedes sedan, was just outside the entrance to the house ... On the TV screen was a 1991 NBA championship game between the Chicago Bulls and the Los Angeles Lakers ... Five young boys, two girls, and four adults sat in a semicircle on the carpeted floor, most of them absorbed by the game ... One of the boys wore a T-shirt with TOMMY HILFIGER with the letters FUBU running down the length of its back. One of the girls faced the TV screen but directed her attention to a dust-brown teddy bear splotted with palm oil. The other girl was equally occupied with ministrations to a sheared twiggy Barbie. (236–237)

Yet the reader also learns that Iba’s “big cars are in Enugu” because the “village is dusty” and “Chief can’t leave his expensive cars in the dust” (244). They include a Hummer, Navigator, Bentley, Mercedes, Rolls-Royce ... the list goes on. The symbolization of the fleet of imported luxury cars stockpiled in Iba’s spacious garage requires no extended commentary, for it points up a self-evident truth about an enchanted lifestyle of graft and indulgence that becomes a ritual for the morally bankrupt leadership class. The pattern of conduct of the people who move in the orbit of the party big shots like Iba has a name—the V.I.P. syndrome. Their proneness to the disease of giving prominent figures special treatment is reflected right from the action of the gateman. He promptly ushers Ike into the gate of this stately home upon finding out that he is Iba’s friend visiting from the United States. The NBA television enthusiasts inside the mansion, the underprivileged youngsters who troop to Iba’s house to watch television, in like manner look at Ike undisguisedly with their adoring eyes and profess extravagant admiration for him. The boys who in the fake designer T-shirts and the girl with the teddy bear and Barbie doll are all examples of the hankering to conform to the taste of metropolitan Western nations popularized through cable, films, and television (237–240). They live out an imitation lifestyle, aping perceived notions of Western culture, but their access is limited to the fakes. Yet Tommy Hilfiger and Barbie stand for the ultimate fashion and beauty, respectively, for these boys and the girls; just as Michael Jordan, who “used to be the king” of basketball, and “the new king ... a young man called Kobe Bryant,” epitomize the hallmark of athletic performance for the men, as shown by the effusive remarks in their idolization of what he represents (240).

There is another salient detail in the scene of the television NBA game in “the poor people’s TV room” (248). A strange spectacular fantasy of all, young and old alike, including the poor people who walk in the circle of Nigeria’s wealthy class, is to live in America, where the NBA games are played live. The craving of this group may be indicative of the unrealistic yearning of Nigerians in general. Following the NBA games helps these television basketball fans, momentarily, to actualize that dream vicariously in their imaginations. They are upbeat and full of vigor. The NBA games afford these followers a seemingly endless source of instruction and delight. Their animated reactions to the games—including their analyses, high-tempo commentary, squabbling, and impassioned imitation of plays—all show their idolization of not only the United States basketball stars but the country itself, which they believe is better than their own country, hence the acute desire they evince for emigration to the United States. But the fascination they express with the idea of America is in truth an obsession with the dollar, as swooning over the large amounts made by NBA stars, for example, is a constant display. Ike is not incorrect in his reading of the minds of the youngsters and their American fantasies when he observes that it is not really the craft of the game of basketball per se that these Nigerian television NBA fans are in love with but the financial prospects which it offers.

The love of money is nothing new, but what makes this money fixation peculiar is that it is with a foreign currency around which Nigerian culture is now re-organizing itself. Somehow, it has become very prestigious in Nigeria to have dollars, and it is the wishes of these citizens of the country to have “bags and bags of dollars,” like their adored NBA basketball players, whom they say they aspire to imitate by playing the game if they “ever go to America” (238–239). It is not surprising, in light of their obsession with the monetary aspect of the game, that the youngsters reduce Michael Jordan’s interest in the activity to the same level, misattributing money as the American basketball star’s supposed primary motivation.

The truth, of course, is that, for an athlete like Jordan, who literally lived, slept, and breathed the game, the supposition of the youngsters that he played basketball solely for the money is as silly as the Nigerian television NBA followers’ own unrestrained gluttony, licentious reveling, and sensual thoughts denoted by their incessant expressions of desires for socially forbidden foods like eggs and alcohol. Over and over, they declare, for example, their passions to soak up beer only and never to “drink water anymore,” and they name pizza their “favorite food,” even though they have “never tasted it,” but only seen it on TV; and, as one of them points out on his peers’ behalf, “If I become a big man, that’s what I will eat” (243–245). In their foolhardy presumption to know the reason Michael Jordan played basketball, the youngsters come up with an oversimplified rationale:

it’s always about the money. When Michael Jordan peeled his feet off gravity’s earth and levitated, it was about money. When millions of Jordan’s fans around the world became light with him, lithe and almost free, suspended with him in sheer air ... it was about money. (241, original emphasis)

Difficult as it might be to get Nigerians at home to believe it, if there ever has been anyone who would have played basketball, money or no money, just for the sheer love of it, as one of the sports in which he excelled, it must be Michael Jordan. The evidence was there in plain sight, admittedly, and anyone with unclouded eyes could have seen it just from observing his passion for the game on and off court: the pure thrill the game gave him was immeasurable. But how could Nigerians not see the monetary factor as his main driving force in playing basketball at a very high level, in light of the huge payouts he received, and of Nigerians' own obsession with money, which they regard as everything—the only thing that counts in life? Money certainly helped him, and after an active basketball career it launched him into what have become some very successful business ventures. Nevertheless, to say that money was the sole propeller of Michael Jordan's interest in playing basketball is a gross distortion.

The excessive attachment to money in Nigeria, which makes the people see everything through the lens of capital, is codified in Iba's infatuation with material belongings. Here is how the main reception room in his manor, "the high-ceilinged living room of the main house," is described:

The air was scented, a bit too heavily, with a floral essence. The air conditioner purred, wafting chilled air. An ebony grand piano was set to the right of the room. Two bleach-blue davenports were placed side by side. Black leather sofas and embroidered ottomans were arranged in two sitting areas set off on opposite ends of the oblong room. Three chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The marble floor had a waxy shine. A huge entertainment unit held a flat-screen TV and other gadgets. Figurines cast in plaster dotted the room ... framed paintings signed by four Nigerian artists ... Two of the paintings depicted nude women, one black, the other white, one big-waisted with generous, droopy breasts, the other tall and thin, her slight breasts accentuated by dark, prominent nipples. The other paintings were abstract works dominated by whorl-like patterns or sturdy strokes ... Each painting seemed distinguished by a certain extravagance, an excessive avidity of color, as if commissioned by a man who traded subtlety of touch for a touch of gaudiness ... overwrought paintings ... a giant rosary with fist-sized emerald beads staked with a crucifix. On the floor, next to the beads, was a life-size photograph of Tony Iba in the habit of a knight, complete with plumed visors and a sword at his right shoulder. Heftier than Ike could have imagined him, Iba wore a blue sash across his neck with the words KNIGHT OF SAINT LUMUMBA. Then there was a photograph of Iba's family taken in a studio, his wife to his left, leaning into him, bearing a sad, reluctant smile, their two daughters standing on either side of their parents, their son stooped in the middle ... In the center of the room, recessed into the wall, was a fireplace. (246)

The conflicting messages from the riot of images conveyed by the possessions with which Iba has inundated his huge country house can be seen as the decisive

proof of the blind mania for material belongings of the Nigerian ruling political class. Within the master living room space, his mix of pornographic images sitting side by side with the sign of the crucifix, the purest symbol of Christian piety which the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ embodies—holiness and lewdness, divine temperance and human lust, jostling together—is alarming. It is emblematic of not only the chaos of taste but the stunning, profusely wanton conduct in which this class is entangled. The erratic behavior of this homeowner crystallizes into his self-visualization as a knight; this grandiose image is a troubling reminder of the vast, bloated image of himself set up by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, in the Bible, who issued a decree that at the sound of a bell all nations of the world should bow down and worship him. Both are intended to impress the minds of observers with awe and to make them feel their own comparative insignificance.

But whoever has heard of a knight in a setting like Nigeria, a country with no history of or connection to the tradition of chivalry, courtly love and honorable warfare! In this context, it bears remarking that even the generation of Nigerians compelled to show their loyalty to the Queen's service in the battlefield is remote from this egomaniacal politician. Just as mysterious is the presence of a "fireplace" in Iba's stately home located in the tropics, so far away from anywhere in the world in which winter-cold weather situations are experienced. It is this unimaginative transplantation of a foreign, Western cultural model of affluence which provokes Iba's derisive anger to remark scornfully that "[a] home like Iba's could easily belong in one of the tony quarters of the Bronx or in the more affluent sectors of Worchester County—anywhere, better still, where money counted more than taste" (246). "Ike was astonished by the bathroom's width," we are told, and its "golden flourish. The faucet, magazine rack, towel-holder, bathtub and sauna were all gold-plated" (249). No wonder that it has become the practice in this same place to perform another display of slavish imitation of Western culture: "Twice each day, at 9:00 A.M. and then at 9:00 P.M., Iba's servant rang a bell and then bellowed, 'Tea is served!' Then he appeared, butler-like, in one hand two spotless, pressed cotton napkins, a tray aloft in the other, with crackers, three varieties of cheese, gold-plated teacups and spoons, and two ornate crystal containers, one for milk, the other for ground sugar" (265).

During their complimentary exchange of pleasantries Ike learns from his thrash talking, swashbuckling host that he now lives alone like a bachelor in this huge manor because "My missus and child[sic] say the heat is three much here" and so they have "navigated abroad to London," visiting Nigeria only occasionally (248). The pretentious rich home-owner, Chair/Chief/Tony Curtis/Iba, then walks Ike to the door, and quite unexpectedly, "giving a parting handshake ... slid five hundred-dollar bills in Ike's palm" (250). Ike asks for an explanation of the cash handout. "Iba's face bore a self-satisfied smile. 'Your share,'" he answers. "Dividends of democracy ... Even though, you are located in Yankee-land, still yet you're one of my royal constituencies" (250). The casualness of the deed conveys its routinized nature; with such generous acts, Iba

aims to cement his pretention not only to uncommon affluence but to the status of an unselfish politician because he does not prevent the crumbs from his table from falling to the members of his constituencies. Yet, amid the superficial material splendor is the haunting picture of Iba's discontented wife, unquestionably the crowning testament that happiness does not consist of having possessions. Apart from becoming clutter, what seems to undermine dignity is if those possessions are bought without morals, and this is when their utter pointlessness becomes evident. The more things Iba accumulates, for example, the less satisfied he becomes—hence his insatiable desire to fill up this inner void by acquiring more, including through impersonation as revealed in his misguided, superfluous, and outlandish aspiration to knighthood.

Drug pusher Emeka Egoigwe's professional life and personal conduct also unfold in just this fashion. His notorious ability to make "a lot of money" but also to throw "a lot of it away" is brought into focus (226). "One Christmas," for example, we hear of the lavishness of Egoigwe, who "gave five cars—expensive, brand new cars—as gifts to his hangers-on" (226). He is a married man with ill-gotten wealth, but Egoigwe not only has "lots of girlfriends—here and in other parts of the world," but "paid rent for them" as money "passed through" his "hands and went quickly to other hands" (226).

What the male chauvinists like Egoigwe, Iba, and Pastor Uka, who wield economic muscle and political and religious power in Nigeria, all have in common is a proneness to disrespect weak and defenseless groups such as women. Indeed, the flag-waving men's displays of egocentrism can become so unbounded that they even co-opt the instruments of barbaric customs and corruption in their subjection of the most vulnerable among women: the widows. We see this in the appalling mistreatment of Regina. "When my husband died," she recalls, "even before his corpse was flown home, his brothers came to the house and accused me of being a witch. They said Pastor Uka told them I had used witchcraft to cause the heroin to burst in my husband's belly" (226). The bogus allegations then become the pretext for the disinheritance of Regina of her marital entitlements. All her appeals and protests fall upon deaf ears, and Regina is subjected to not only material exploitation but also physical and mental abuse. "They gave me dirty slaps, worse than any beating I had ever received from my husband" (226). Regina is given her marching orders and commanded to prove her innocence by going to "swear at a deity's shrine in Okija," which is tantamount to a death sentence (226). To do such a bidding would be suicidal because "Somebody who wants to get you just offers a bribe to the priests. The priests then sprinkle a slow-acting poison in your drink. Within seven days, you're dead. That's what my brothers-in-law planned for me" (227).

Regina does not sheepishly bow to her brothers-in-law's wishes for her self-immolation. As a consequence, she receives more "merciless beating. Right in front of my crying children. It was as if they meant to kill me with blows if I wasn't going to drink poison. They left bruises all over my body" (227). The strangeness increases when an ultimatum is served on Regina: she is given "thirty minutes—only minutes—to take the children and run from our home in

Enugu" (227). We can only imagine the viciousness of the command that she is "not permitted to take anything, only the dress on my body. Everything else, they took, including a Toyota Camry my husband had given me three months before his death. My children and I were homeless" (227). With her complete privation in this manner, Regina is turned into "a professional beggar" (227). She links herself to other dispossessed "women like me in the country" (227). Regina is not wrong to make this link; Ike's mother, as will be shown shortly, is also one of these many other afflicted women who have fallen victim to unfairness. Regina explains with resonance the sinister tactic routinely employed in her male-dominated society to disempower women like herself. "Often, when a man dies, his relatives accuse his widow of witchcraft. Then they drive her away and inherit everything the man owned" (227). The expression "everything the man owned" is quite germane in conveying the peculiar notion in societies like this one that place women outside the boundaries of property ownership within a household, all part of the politics of women's domination. Here, instead of a family's assets being thought of as jointly and equally owned by a couple, full ownership is unfairly exclusively deflected to one party: the man.

We will now turn to the more public testimonials of the Nigerian nation. It is sometimes said that an airport is a reliable window through which the pattern of ethical and moral conduct of a country can be gauged by visitors. Nigeria's situation is no exception. There is an escalation of corruption in Nigeria, and it is revealed right from the spectacle of the disorder on Ike's plane on the final leg of his trip from Amsterdam. It is expressed in the unruly behavior of Nigerian passengers stampeding to get off the plane before it touches down. The passengers simply do not show the temperance of waiting patiently to be officially notified to disembark, as they should after the plane completes its landing at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos.

Even more jarring is the conduct of the Nigerian customs officials and the immigration officers at the airport. Not only do they all demand bribes from travelers before clearing their luggage but the crudity of their demands for bribe shows that it has become a normal way of life for them; so much so, participating officers don't even hide it anymore, as they seem even to relish their power to display this unbecoming behavior so openly. Everything that Ike witnesses at the airport becomes a reliable prelude to the seething corruption of Nigerian law enforcement personnel that he will endure during his return journey. Claiming visibility and prominence is an apparently innocent tactic the officials employ. An inexperienced person observing for the first time the ticketer turning Ike over to the customs counter during his return journey would not think much of it or see anything objectionable in the directive. However, that command turns out to be a well-established step in a perverse process of subjecting the passenger to the inevitable rite of passage in the game of greasing palms for an anticipated returned favor.

With the Ngene statue stolen from his uncle Osuakwu securely wrapped up and concealed, Ike believes, under the clothes in his luggage, the airline ticketer at the airport politely, it seems to Ike, hands him over to the customs department.

There, he is told, he must clear his luggage before check-in. But this directive follows only after the persistent cajoling to have the luggage checked in unobtrusively fails. Nevertheless, this action is like sending Ike to a pack of wolves in Nigerian customs and immigration uniforms, who waste no time in pouncing upon him. It is a perfect set-up for the law enforcement officers. Their victim repeats a prolonged plea over “the personal effects” that comprise the contents of his luggage, but it is all in vain. His argument to be granted unobstructed and non-intrusive check-in status is gaining no traction with the truculent and defiant bad customs and immigration officers, who use scare tactics to threaten him with committing a crime serious enough to earn him jail time. The discovery in his luggage of snacks his mother has packaged for him prompts them to ask him, “Who give you license to export food,” and just at this moment up pops a colleague of theirs playing the good cop (285). This more personable officer takes Ike to a side counter and commences negotiations for cash to swap hands, starting with a surprisingly blunt demand: “How much you fit drop?” (289). His language is even quite businesslike as he continues to gently increase the pressure on the passenger with the alleged contraband goods in his luggage to avoid bigger trouble with the threat of being turned back over to the less sympathetic customs and immigration officials; he makes it clear that it has been in his own best interest to escape from the clutches of that group. In the event of the undesirable likelihood of the negotiations failing, he warns, Ike would face a heavier penalty. The once seemingly kind-hearted official, who is now growing increasingly petulant by the minute, next demands “two thousand dollars,” discounting it slightly down a little more later, commanding, “bring one thousand five” (289–290).

Through a delicate balancing maneuver, this customs and immigration officer breaks Ike down. It involves the right combinations of persuasion and threat to mask the helplessness of the disenfranchised victim, while keeping a steady eye on the ultimate prize, which is the bribe to be squeezed out, mixing by turns amicability and belligerency, directness and obliqueness, resoluteness and flexibility, transparency and opaqueness, the carrot and the stick, all at the appropriate intervals. So, Ike “turned aside, pulled his wallet, counted 700 dollars, and then handed the bills to the officer,” who in turn “counted the cash” before asking Ike to add a 100 dollars (291). “Weary of the haggling, Ike complied. A wild, nervous smile lit up the man’s face. ‘Oya, no more problem. Come, you fit take your bags now’” (291). The same flagrant lack of consideration for the interests of other people, the same disrespectful extortionist appetites, the same degrading goals of self-enrichment, the same opportunistic compulsions, the same afflictions of intemperance, the same irrepressible self-indulgent urges, the same web of deception, the same capacity for manipulating people, the same tactics of intimidation, are evident in the actions of Nigerian police officers who feed their impulses to fish around for travelers to extort money from by setting up checkpoints on the roads leading into the hinterland from the airport.

The bridge which links Utonki, Ike’s final destination, to the rest of the world, is itself a brainchild of the corruption in higher quarters. Its story illustrates the scandalous conduct of top government officials like the minister of

works, who uses the powers of his office for personal aggrandizement. This man's motivation for building the Utanki Bridge truly stinks. No one will dispute the fact that in itself a bridge is a useful amenity, something which every community which needs one deserves to have. However, there is no sign of integrity in the minister's use of public funds to build a bridge primarily to bribe "a dazzling belle from Utonki" that he "had an eye for" (86). Nor can there be any defense for this minister's funding of the bridge also to facilitate having "his friends (from home and abroad) descend on Utonki to witness the spectacle of his third traditional wedding," to say nothing of the way in which the "love-struck minister also threw in a new 'ultra-modern' dispensary to replace the dilapidated structure where a traveling nurse used to stop twice a week" (86).

The narrator also assiduously draws attention to the fact that no one in Utonki appears to be unaware of the shady story behind the village's old kindergarten building.

Ike remembered going there as a child. The building had been shut down after the local government awarded an inflated contract to erect another school at a different site. The new school was hardly different from the old one. It was, like the old school, a sloppy, dingy structure of brick and zinc. But since so much money had been squandered on its construction, government officials dubbed it ultramodern. (141–142)

A stupefied Ike finally arrives in Utonki for his visit, after being away in the United States for ten stressful years, and finds a nearly unrecognizable space. His birthplace, the setting where he spent his early childhood, is in ruins, so to speak, the landscape structurally deformed, thanks to a warped notion of so-called development. The structural disfigurement of this countryside is dramatic, and the outrageousness of the new constructions in Utonki makes it impossible for him not to take immediate notice. The blot on the landscape impresses itself on him with all its banality, the false façade of the shoddy development it showcases. Utonki manifests all the trappings of modernity, many of which are not even functional: "Electric poles dotted the landscape"; "New houses had sprung up where he remembered farmlands"; "His mother's residence, a modest bungalow his parents had finished building in 1964, was now hemmed in and dwarfed by three gigantic three-story buildings, two on either side and an even taller one behind"; "Zinc-roofed concrete houses stood where mud houses used to be"; and "Several buildings sported satellite dishes or television antennas" (88).

The architectural transformation of the landscape of Utonki and the technological transformation of media there mirror the chaos in contemporary Nigeria. With the space and grandeur of the village setting now mangled beyond recognition, we can see the genesis of a new ghetto. The replacement of farmlands with the profusion of houses transforms a rural landscape into an urban one without attending the change with the social provisions appropriate for the urban lifestyle. Ike's niece Alice takes him to his bedroom and asks if she should light a lamp because there isn't any electricity as "It has reached more

than one week that NEPA [Nigerian Electric Power Authority] took light." All the neighbors who have light, Ike finds out, are using their own personal generators (92). Equally as bizarre, not only does the transformation of Utonki fail to preserve the beauty and history of the rural landscape, which is a real slap in the face for conservationism, but it introduces needless congestion and the sanitation problems one can reasonably expect to come with overcrowding. Here is a failure to recognize the critical distinction between genuine development that improves the lives of people and superficial modernity. A choked and crowded village alters the way the people experience the world, as is the case where the house behind Ike's mother's bungalow even "seemed to stand on heels and peer into his mother's backyard" (88). It's no wonder that Utonki has begun to look different, and not in a positive way; the invasion of privacy, for instance, condoned by the developers, reveals the decline in the quality of living which poor town planning can cause.

In Ike's niece Alice's garbled English sentences and sub-standard expressions we have in exhibit Nigeria's broken educational system, the skewed state of instruction. Ike says that he's "entertained by her misused tense" (92). Misuse of tense is certainly an error she commits; but the fourth grader's grammatical problems extend well beyond tense and are no laughing matter because a young girl's very educational future is at stake. Alice says that her mother "will come next tomorrow" when she wants to say her mother "will come the day after tomorrow"; "we breaked," instead of "we are on break"; "she go to church," for "she has gone to church" or "she went to church"; "should I went to tell her that you came?" in place of "should I go and tell her that you are here?" or "should I go and let her know you are here?"; "sometimes it's lesser than two hours," for "sometimes it's less than two hours"; "I will on the lamp for you" in place of "I will light up the lamp for you"; and "They use generator to on their own light" for "They have switched on their private generators" (91–92).

However, the evidence of schooling gone awry is not limited to the form of linguistic debasement represented by the expression of the young Alice. It is hard to believe, for example, that the awful spelling blunders of Pastor Godson Uka were considered either by him or by his parishioners to be fit to print. The prevalence of such grammatical inaccuracies is embarrassing, and some editing would have saved his face as well as the image of the members of his church, not excluding the general public. Ike stops "to read words scrawled on a broad wooden board" in front of Pastor Uka's church and this is what he sees: "MAITY DEEDS WORLD INTENATIONAL REDEAMERS CHURCH ... COME TO BE PROSPARED, RELEACED FROM YOKES AND SATANIC ATTACKS, WUMBS OPENED, MIRACLIIOUS DELIVARANCE, DEVINE WONDERS!!! IN JESUS NAME!!!" (142). Ike confesses to having a "bellow of laughter" stirring "inside him," which he "struggled to hold ... but let out a gush of breath," before he quips about the pastor needing "a divine editor" upon confirmation of Uka's authorship of those lines (142). But the caricature of Pastor Uka's spelling bloopers make for a sad commentary on the state of the English language in

general in Nigeria, which reflects the dire outlook of the society with a long-collapsed educational infrastructure in apparent perpetual neglect.

By far the most extensive instance of idiosyncratic linguistic mannerism, however, is represented by the brand of English language associated with the political personage Chair/Chief/Tony Curtis/Iba. The representation of his speech is a fine example of the subtlety and cleverness of Ndibe's narrative technique, especially his ear for conversation, to capture the contours of human personality. Iba's language abounds in bombast, pomposity, and ostentatiousness, and the riot of strange word coinages and collocations from him borders on the nonsensical. Upon Ike's admission that he is captivated by the gallery of paintings in Iba's big house, the home-owner translates this information as meaning, "You've visualized my paintings" (247). He then adds: "Each is cost me a bundle ... they're spectacular [*sic*], indeed ... But I shouldn't be throwing away so much hard-boiled money into such luxuriations" (247). Many of the words he uses are simply made up by him, but some are familiar words strangely and wrongly selected, like "visualized" instead of the more common "seen": "spectacular" is misidentified as "spectaclous"; "hard-earned" as "hard-boiled." There are also misconstructions, such as "each is cost me" for "every one of them has cost me" or "every one of them is quite costly/expensive."

At one point during their conversation, Ike compliments Iba on his big house, prompting a response from the host that is not only formally mangled but riddled with verbiage and grandiloquence:

My brother, let us titrate all the praise to God. He created the bottom and the top—and he architected this humble house ... We conjugate all the glory to God almighty. He tumbles down blessings to my arena. That's why I made it a point of fundamental principle to take care of poor people. This edifice contains a room where poor people watch TV. Even in my absent, the facility is available to them. (247–248)

In his inflated voice Nigerian English assumes an entirely new character through the idiom of the anomalous word choice and word collocations he has personalized and popularized. In place of homely words, Iba opts for obscure and far-fetched vocabulary that he places in a strange order: "titrate," "conjugate," "architected," "tumbles down," and "edifice" befitting his ornate and orotund style. His trademark English language is therefore a long way from any form of standard, received English usage. Yet, his verbose jargon also disturbs any simple notion of the typical ways in which politicians manipulate language to avoid being comprehended so as not to be held accountable through employment of ambiguity.

During their conversation, Iba conveys his sense of the sacrifices that he has made on his family's behalf as well his generosity as host. He says:

She [*i.e.*, his wife] and my child[s] [*sic*] habitate far, far away. In London ... I am quartered here, suffering alone. My missus and child[s] [*sic*] say the heat is three much here. So therefore they navigated abroad to London where God

blows AC inside the air. My own is to sufferate [*sic*] for them to enjoy ... Please, my brother, don't revelation my secret o ... Simeon [his house help] likes missus three much. In fact, four much! He's her real husband; I am only a borrowee [*sic*] of her. Whenever she lands here, she always donates fine, fine designer shirts to Simeon. As for me, nothing! So Simeon can carelessly navigate my secrecies to her earlobes. And she will vex and somersault me inside pepper soup ... All gratifications to the owner of the sky and the earth ... The moment I saw the piano in a *Famous Homes* magazine catalog, I convicted [*sic*] myself to purchase it ... Now, I have to be a fantastic hostage by tabulating a drink in front of you ... Just announce your likes and dislikes to Simeon. For your informations [*sic*], we also have a variation [*sic*] of beers in the refrigerator. (248–249)

To call this sort of expressive idiom an embarrassment is an understatement. In the spectacle of his undignified, deformed utterances, the repertoire of Iba's own peculiar lexicon seems strangely elaborate. His personality shines through his amorous teasing, lack of decorum, and lavish ostentatiousness. One unique quality of the unorthodox words like "childs," "habitate," "sufferate," "borrowee," and "informations," which he manufactures and deploys, however, is that the vocabulary is close enough to the standard equivalents to permit mutual intelligibility with the person he is talking to; as such, the variant forms are employed not so much to bamboozle as to impress the listener with the supposed breadth of the speaker's learning. But this is what makes the linguistic bloopers so stunning. Whether it be non-standard English words, their misplaced collocations, wrong word choice, or disfigurations of standard English words, they collectively reflect poorly on the user's ostensible educational refinement. Ndibe casts this political mogul's grandiloquent speech as so quaint, it is an illustration of not just a bizarre situation of the state of a nation's education in disrepair but a total disregard for societal norms that not surprisingly seeps into language use.

The burdens which the Nigerian state now bears are not in any way lightened by the unprecedented rise in Charismatic Christian fundamentalism. The country is tangled in a bogus Christian religious fervor which is not only tearing families and neighbors apart with its rigidly doctrinaire false teachings but also deploying an erroneous message of prosperity to subject gullible congregations to unconscionable financial exploitation. In all corners of the land, fraudulent Christian Charismatic/Pentecostal teachers like Pastor Uka have mushroomed and are taking advantage of the miserable folk, making the corruption of religion one of the most pernicious of the deadly plagues to fall upon the rebellious nation. Ike says his mother is one of the victims of this religious fever and the fraud perpetrated by this church; her conduct does nothing to disprove his claim. Pastor Uka's misguided Pentecostal teachings and fake prophetic pronouncements are highly troubling. It bothers Ike that his gullible mother has fallen under the spell of such a disreputable doctrine, a watered-down Christianity. Without question, one very consequential detrimental effect of the religious ailment Ike can see is personified in microcosm in the amenability

to indoctrination, which inexplicably has led to his own mother's curious practical estrangement from key family members; with both his uncle Osuakwu and his grandmother Nne she is no longer even on speaking terms.

Obviously, Ike's mother is less skeptical than he is of her counterfeit Christian religion, which has painted his grandmother Nne as a witch and labeled his uncle Osuakwu a "servant of Lucifer ... Satan's biggest agent in these parts" (130). Ike is so stunned he cannot help but ascribe his mother's overzealous faith to the effects of her grief over his father's death, and is inclined to think that the loss of her husband has dealt "such a savage blow to his mother's psyche, making her susceptible to a trickster garbed in the visor of a religious seer" (133). "How had she come to this thing? What desperation had driven her to the bosom of an experience at odds with everything" his mother had "been and done in the past," Ike wonders, "his throat clamped up with bile" (151–152).

As a result of brazenly misleading spiritual influences exerted by Pastor Uka, Ike's mother also has imbibed the ideology that she now "sees with spirit eyes" and understands "occult ways" (132). She tells Ike that Pastor Uka informed her that his father was killed by his grandmother and his uncle, and she believes him because "He's a man of God. When you see him, you'll know, Ike, my son, he's anointed, a real man of God" (134). She counters his diagnostic statement identifying complications from diabetes as the cause of his father's death, restating her conviction that "a disease can be caused by spiritual means" and "evil people can put yokes of sickness on others" (132–133). But her instruction to him to thenceforth follow her lead and cut himself off from both of these close family members, and not make any further contact with either one of them, both stuns Ike and meets with stiff resistance from him. He cannot reconcile his mother's claim that his grandmother and his uncle mean him harm with his personal knowledge of their characters, even as she categorically warns him: "You are not to set foot in her hut. And you're not to see that *one* who sits and drinks all day" (130). "They're of darkness. Light and darkness don't mix," she adamantly declares (131). She relays the fearful news to him of a similar diabolical plot by his grandmother and his uncle to have him eliminated as well.

An incredulous Ike hears that, but for his mother's intercessory prayers against those evil plans by his uncle and his grandmother, he himself would have been dead. She describes the spiritual warfare she has waged on his behalf: "I have prayed and fasted to keep you alive. But for my prayers, where do you think you would be now?" (131). Ike's mother then pleads sanctimoniously with him to stop drinking, witnessing to him in the grand evangelical Christian tradition, plaintively: "Surrender your life to Christ. Submit to the Almighty and be covered by the blood of salvation. Don't let the devil lead you astray" (136).

In truth, however, Pastor Uka is a false prophet with attributes pointing back to his infamous pedigree. The curse of his grandfather, Okaa Dike, a "robber without equal ... a terrible robber," follows him around closely (202–209). The grandson's emergence as his grandfather's double thus broadens the significance of the role of influence in the formulation of patterns of conduct, so that his

dupery becomes an exemplary vindication of the law of teaching and learning. The colonial government made his grandfather “a warrant chief, with power to judge cases among his people” (200–203). He flourished in that role, but it was by perverting judgment: aiding false causes, taking bribes from both plaintiffs and defendants alike, dispossessing them of their wives, lands, and money. As a result, a curse was placed on him and his offspring.

Even before becoming a pastor, his grandson Uka’s struggles with the law had already begun. A significant milestone was Uka’s getting jailed for five years in Lagos, following the discovery that he “sneaked in and stole the money kept for the salary of fellow workers” (204). His own interest in becoming a pastor could not therefore have been service to others in spiritual devotion to God with the ascetic imperative. In fact, oddly, far from exercising self-denial, in his new occupation, Pastor Uka is anything but abstemious. He is still laboring under the curse in his family line, and, following in his grandfather’s footsteps, treading a condemned family path, still beset by inordinate love of money. Uka exhibits no temperance at all. From all indications, he is not able to save himself from his self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing nature; the curse on his family has not been conquered yet. According to his professed Christian faith, however, Jesus is the answer to his problem; but Uka has not turned over his life to the Lord. His is therefore a career move that makes complete mockery of the Christian faith, his criminal career truly proving “anything born of a snake will never fail to resemble a rope” (204).

The sustained exposure of Uka’s fraudulence, because it is obtained through a combination of narrative strategies—oral history, lively parodies of his own behavior, eye-witness accounts and corroborated reports—is successful in fleshing out his warped character comprehensively, giving readers not just bare outlines but nearly all important details, insights, and observations on the background as well as the baleful shaping influence of this curiously morally bankrupt person. The account by Ike’s uncle Osuakwu of the genesis of his mother’s feud with him and his grandmother gives further confirmation of the falseness of who Pastor Uka claims to be. But Ike also gets an opportunity to witness for himself just how dishonest Pastor Uka is. This window of witnessing opens up for Ike during one of the pastor’s meetings.

At the persistent invitation of his mother, Ike accompanies her to a Sunday service. Church is scheduled to start at 9 A.M., and Ike’s mom rushes him to be ready to get there on time. But Pastor Uka, tapping into the psychology of crowd anticipation, keeps the congregation waiting. Finally, he arrives to a packed church, just a few minutes shy of being an hour late. Here is how his theatrics and the sweeping emotive reaction of the congregation which swarms up wildly to receive him are described:

He was never good at aimless waiting. It grated on his nerves. He showed his watch to his mother: 9:46.

“He’ll be here soon,” she said. “Be patient.”

Just then he heard the rev of a car and the sharp cut of the engine. A man clanged the bell. The congregation shook with excitement. They stampeded to meet the pastor at the entrance. “Daddy! Daddy!” they sang, young and old alike. They massed around the man, enveloped him. They bawled, hands upraised, like fans at a soccer game. Some uttered inaudible supplications, speaking with diarrhetic rapidity. Others just droned, emitting sounds that were a cross between a quiet wail and a crazed groan ... For a minute or two, Ike could not see the pastor, nor did the pastor notice him. As the pastor was lost in the crowd, Ike surmised that the man had to be short. His mother was in a state of possessed stupor. Eyes shut, she flailed her arms, stamped her feet, stomped an invisible beast. Her lips trembled all the while, a torrent of undecipherable words tumbling from them. (146)

In a nutshell, in Pastor Uka’s delayed arrival to church and the frenzy of the congregation upon his ultimate coming, we have a theatrical presentation of the importance of the “man of God” in the Christian Charismatic/Pentecostal tradition. The scene captures the defining character of the devotion, even reverence, of his followers. The “man of God” is delayed in coming to church because he supposedly has to be awaiting a divine unction, to hear from God before appearing before his congregation. In turn, the church congregation, in its worship of material blessings, pays misguided homage to the pastor who is the ostensible implement for delivering to it God’s promises.

So too Pastor Uka’s preaching does not veer from a formulaic replication of the rituals, rhetoric, and paraphernalia of the Christian Charismatic/Pentecostal sermon tradition. His false prophesying to his parishioners is the highlight of the event, and achieves the purpose of firing them up with his good news. This heretic does not disappoint his acolytes, as the simpletons leave each service, as reported by Ike, with “expressions of hope etched on their faces,” even if it is “a hope worn thin,” all the same, “by repeated disappointment” (152). Uka claims that he hears directly from God, and his false prophesies are singularly disturbing because he uses these gimmicks both for self-promotion and to manipulate his congregation for personal monetary gain. Through his lies and the erroneous teaching of prosperity-theology he outwits the Christian faithful at his church. It is evident that these folks are bereft of the level of critical amplitude required to be wary of putting total confidence in anyone who has not earned it. Come rain or shine, these villagers flock to his gatherings unsuspectingly to hear him preach falsehoods week in and week out, both on weekdays and on Sundays:

“God told me,” he bellowed, “that he has not forgotten the promise he made to Abraham, to give his descendants great increase and prosperity ... God told me to tell you that, under the new covenant, you’re the descendants of Abraham ... God told me ... God woke me up at five thirty-five A.M. ... He called me Godson, and I answered.” He said, “Go and brush your teeth and take your bath because I have a lot to reveal to you today ... God told me to tell his people that his abundant anointing

will flow for believers. He told me that this is the week of double portions and triple blessings ... God told me to tell you that His people who want children will have them this week ... Ah, He told me to tell you that Satan is a liar ... I said, if you've been praying for children, God has answered your prayer ... God said that any believer who is now pregnant with one baby is going to receive twins. Amen? ... He asked me to tell you those of you looking for a husband that you will receive husbands who count their money in dollars and pound sterling ... God told me to tell you that those looking for a job will find it this week. Those who already have jobs will receive double promotion ... But God said only those who tithe will be blessed ... Have you been praying for prosperity? ... God said you'll be prospered ... Are you trapped by water spirit? God says you'll be set free ... How about those harassed by witchcraft? God said your deliverance is at hand." (149–151)

Throughout his sermons, Pastor Uka employs demonstrably elaborate hand gestures and other forms of body movement. Pastor Uka uses melodramatic tactics, like pausing for "dramatic effect," "Maintaining a dramatic silence," hoisting "himself on his toes," "rhythmically" rising and falling, "swaying from side to side," strutting "about the room," "circling and circling," throwing "punches at the air," removing his jacket and swinging it "several times over his head" then sending it "sailing," taking "a backward step, as if the burden of divine revelation had made him stagger," pulling "a red handkerchief from his pants pocket" to wipe his "sweaty face," pronouncing "I am burning with anointing ... like a man truly on fire," and "blowing breath at a group of worshippers," among others (149–151). All these ploys work in tandem with the litany of repeated generic Charismatic/Pentecostal prophetic declarations mouthed by him to create an electrifying atmosphere approximating that of total theater.

One more point remains to be observed regarding the suspect conduct of his services. From the beginning the expressions of highly charged emotions and the other extravagant displays of the congregation—not excluding the exchanges of playful banter which punctuate, sometimes anticipate, and almost always encourage the utterances and the theatricality from the pastor—should be seen as not tangential but intrinsic parts of its participatory character. They include ululations such as: "Alleluia!," "Praise God!," "Tell us, Pastor!," "We claim it!," "Thank God! Alleluia," and "Amen!" (149–51). Nonetheless, the congregation's willing incitement by no means absolves Pastor Uka of responsibility for knowingly bringing reproach to the gospel by asking widows and other poor people to shell out money they don't have—an egregious sin. No one with any intellectual honesty will gain his wealth, as Pastor Uka does, by preying on paupers.

For Ike, therefore, the personal adversity of being bluntly accused by his own mother of being neglectful of her pales in comparison to the gravity of the disease of faith he sees troubling the nation. There is some evidence that to the more aware and less simple-minded the danger of this religious sickness is to some degree mitigated. Ike objects outright when Pastor Uka commands him to

stop speaking to his aunt, the wife of his father's "only brother," because she is a heathen while at the same time calling on him to "be born again ... spirit-filled, tongue-speaking, hands-laying, devil-binding born again" (157–158).

Ike's visit to Uka's home allows him to see the pastor for what he is: an individual enriched by capital unjustly exacted from the vulnerable poor. When Uka tells him the same lies that he feeds his mother about the supposed ill-will his family is borne by Uncle Osuakwu and grandmother Nne, Ike does not hesitate to say to his face that he is a liar. Nor does Ike hide his disdain when Uka prophesies unto him the same false vision and divination he preaches to his congregation, the deceit of his heart. Pastor Uka's attempt to hoodwink him with false prophesy directly offers him a dollop of the con-man's stock-in-trade:

You see, Satan is so wicked. He used sweet lies to lead you astray. He made you turn away from your mother, turn away from your sister, turn away from God. Satan stopped you from sowing your seeds. That's why your millions did not flow. That's why your harvest has not been as mighty as God intended. But God said I should tell you, Satan is a liar. He asked me to tell you it's time. It's time for fulfillment. It's time for your harvest. It's time for your redemption; time for your breakthroughs. It's time for you to shine ... My friend, God wants to bless you with a mighty harvest. He has commanded that you'll start counting your harvest in millions. And he wants to bless you this year, not next year ... That's right, you've found divine favor. The God who owns all the seas and lands, all the gold and diamonds, wants to prosper you. He wants all your enemies to die of envy and shame. He wants to lift you above them. And God doesn't lie ... Satan wanted you to continue counting in thousands when the divine plan said you should count in millions ... For the longest, God has had your millions in his hand, ready to release it ... All he wanted was for you to sow the seed. Divine law says that we must sow in order to reap. Out of jealousy, Satan blocked your way and blinded you ... God is asking you to sow fifty thousand dollars to build him a church here. (159–160)

One scandalous aspect of this astonishing stream of conventional Charismatic/Pentecostal prophetic declarations issuing from the scam artist is their disproportionate incongruence with Ike's factual experience. His predicted future is so bogus and outlandish, it bears testimony, for example, to how readily the man who pretends to know what God has purposed for others imagines everyone as his dupe. Pastor Uka claims that Ike is currently "counting" his earnings in "thousands," but, in truth, the only money that he is counting in thousands is debt—borrowed money. Nevertheless, presenting an image of himself as someone with foresight beyond human ability, the hustler would have Ike believe that his impending "blessing" from God is in fact conditional, and Ike himself is the "only person standing between you and your divine blessing" (160). With these statements Uka conveys through coded language the unfounded tenet that God's blessings are actually for sale; that the favor God

bestows is for the highest bidder—when of course nothing could be further from the truth. Therefore, it is in vain that Pastor Uka attempts to persuade Ike to take as the evidence of his special anointing the “mighty ways” God uses him “to release thousands from bondage. He has used me to heal hundreds of sick people. When I hold crusades, the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dumb talk. Barren women have children. Cancer disappears. Diabetes is canceled. In his mighty name, I’ve raised people from the dead. And he’s used me to prosper a lot of people” (163).

The moment when Ike finally confronts Pastor Uka is one of the greatest moments of retributive justice in African fiction. Throwing all caution to the wind, Ike gallantly charges the so-called man of God with flagrant exploitation of the poor and defenseless. The people in this society who have suffered the most economic attrition, are least deserving of such victimization, he asserts. It reads like the moment when a long-standing victim of a crime ultimately gets to meet face to face with the offender in court. It’s the day of reckoning, and it is rife with rage, conveying the swirl of anger and utter contempt which the injured party harbors toward the culprit:

There was a dash of mockery in Ike’s tone ... He stood up and straightened his back. He walked over to the pastor.

“You ‘ve been exploiting my mother,” he said, his hand jabbing the air as he spoke. “She gave you her meager feeding money. She bombarded me with letters. *Come home, come home*, she cried. *Come and meet this powerful pastor*. *Come*, she begged, and *be saved from your uncle and grandmother*. My poor mother! You’re not satisfied with stealing her feeding money. You dreamed up a scheme to get your filthy hands in her son’s pocket. You call yourself a man of God, but you’re rotten. Rotten inside and out! You say your God wants me to sow fifty thousand dollars. But fifty thousand, in truth, is the size of your greed ... I went to visit my grandmother last night ... Yes, I was with her for more than two hours. We talked and joked. She didn’t eat me. This is the woman you just warned me not to see—or I’d die. The birds in your dreams, do they tell you such pathetic lies? ... After all the lies you tell, how do you lie down and sleep? I would spit on you—but I don’t want to dirty my spit ... I want you to know I am going to see my uncle. Today, not tomorrow.” (164–165, original emphasis)

It’s as though Ndibe has taken a page out of the playbook of a fiction of liberation by Ngugi wa Thiong’o or Smebene Ousmane.⁷ Here, the composition of a form appropriate to its context is Ndibe’s accomplishment, and it is evident in his portrayal of the image of a spokesperson for victims of betrayal who expresses the courage of an individual not only willing but also able to stand up to the might of those in power, in his case, represented by a so-called man of God.

The blurb on its dust jacket has the eminent Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o quoted as stating that events in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* make a reader “laugh in order not to cry.” Among several others, one of the novel’s most

moving parts that also has the reader constantly cracking up is its naturalistic exposure of the impious subject of Christian religious charlatanism. The novel launches a diatribe against such religious hypocrisy that is both fair and illuminating. The kinds of malpractices represented are those we witness both recurrently—in the activities of mega-churches and popular televangelists—and routinely in purported works of evangelization by micro-churches of the Christian Charismatic/Pentecostal heritage. But *Foreign Gods, Inc.* makes a uniquely important contribution to the novelization of just how extremely susceptible Christianity is to fraud and imposture, and there is no other novel from Africa that even remotely approaches the stature of this work in the field.

In the terms of this novel's representation, then, not only the ethics but also the practices of the Ngene deity present themselves in better light than those of the imported Christian Charismatic/Pentecostal faiths, even if the two religions appear to share some similar prognostic tendencies. With his dispatching of the obstacle presented by Pastor Uka, the main task ahead of Ike pivots into focus, and it is completing his mission to pick up Ngene. That moment of reckoning arrives when the traitor-to-be meets his uncle Osuakwu at the shrine of the deity. Here, Ike clearly has his work cut out for him. At the Ngene shrine, we learn, with Osuakwu, are nine of his clients: "Four of the nine men were about the chief priest's age. The rest were much younger" (175). The returning defector is instantly transfixed to near choking by the ritual conduct:

Osuakwu paused, his face set in the cast of a man in the throes of deep mysteries. His rib cage swelled and contracted from the exertion of an invocation spoken with force and rapidity. The torrent of words had struck Ike with a mixture of awe and an oppressive sense of terror. It was as if Osuakwu had sloughed off a familiar identity to become a different being, human still, but only barely. The transformation was most evident in Osuakwu's eyes.

Ike shook with fear at his uncle's eyes. They'd assumed a vapid, strangely distracted quality. They seemed able to pierce the membrane of secrets concealed in Ike's heart. They could penetrate his remotest thoughts and grasp his invisible schemes. It was as if they discern the invisible hieroglyphics of desire embossed in his soul. They seemed no longer functioning like ordinary eyes. It was as if they no longer focused on things with fixity and solidity. (179)

This is a big moment of reckoning for Ike. To stay or not stay on course to pursue the theft of Ngene is the question, and it is complicated by the nature of the prayer offered by his uncle Osuakwu to attend the breaking of kola nut. The center of Osuakwu's prayer, which employs ingenious proverbial language to make its points with trenchant wit, comprises in the main of petitions for justice and fairness to prevail in the attendees and in their dealings with the world at large. Osuakwu's benevolent prayer is then followed by direct invocations and earnest entreaties for deliverance from all forms of mistreatment. But the chief priest of Ngene still has such a soft spot in his heart for his visiting cousin that

he accommodates him in a personal way in the outpouring of his blessings. It underlines Osuakwu's generosity that he goes out of his way during the ritual process to personalize a part of the program with the expression of a goodwill message for his cousin.

The chief priest of Ngene turns to Ike, like a diviner, and reads the lobes of the kola nut as presaging a special form of good luck for the visitor from the United States. He then foretells his cousin's future by declaring that the lobes present "the sign of prosperity. It means that hunger will never dog you; your journey will always be filled with success" (183). We are told that "Ike's eyes flitted toward the statue, and he quickly withdrew them," smiling "wanly at his uncle, struck by the cold irony in the old man's prophecy" (183). A reasonable question brought up is whether the would-be Ngene statue snatcher will now beat a retreat or if a numbness of conscience will prevail upon him to gather the willpower to forge ahead with his scheme. Will the unmistakable moral gravity of the ritual prayer offered by his uncle make Ike change course? Or, is it the case that the magnitude of the high-minded ritual prayer offered by his uncle will not temper the evil plot Ike is nursing to rob him? Will he waver or will he maintain a firm determination to bring the purpose of his journey to completion as planned? How can Ike possibly want to proceed with a plot that inevitably will hurt an uncle who loves him so much?

This conflicting situation is amplified, especially when, after extending him lavish hospitality in which Ike is entertained liberally with food and drinks, his uncle pops the following query: "Ikechukwu, the journey that brought you home, is it a good one?" (190). Never before has Ike faced the challenge quite like this: to rationally define and defend the purpose of his journey in the starkly narrow ethical terms demanded by his uncle. Having always been preoccupied with the financial considerations that underwrite his expedition, the behavioral dilemma that he faces is evident. The questions about his mission, which is hanging in the balance, take on a special character because it will be a mortal affront not only for Ike to go on to reward his uncle's all-pervading goodwill with an egregious act of unkindness but also to lie to his uncle's face, thereby committing the same offense of falsehood he is accusing Pastor Uka of blatant guilt for.

For the moment, Ike is saved some trouble, but only briefly. He does not have to voice a blatant lie to his uncle's face because the query about the character of his mission to Utonki instantly drives him into a silenced state of paralysis.

A tremor rocked Ike's body. He felt drowsy, like a man shaken awake as he tottered over a gorge. He opened his mouth but remained mute. The words welling up his throat were a lump he could neither swallow nor emit. He nodded. (190)

But the question remains whether Ike can still punch his way to sudden wealth through Ngene.

The stakes are raised even higher for the very life of Ike's pursuit by the conversation he eavesdrops on between his uncle and his friend and fellow

serviceman in Burma, Ogbuefi Okwuego. Their talk centers on their reminiscences about the nature of the call to service on behalf of Ngene and the fundamental character of this deity, leading to lengthy treatises on why and how gods die. They distinguish the status of living and dead deities, to stress the point that Ngene is alive and well. They articulate some of the conditions for the demise of gods to embrace a number of factors. These include when deities “fall asleep, shirking their responsibilities”; when they “swell with pride”; when they are “Filled with bitterness” and “turn against the very one who feeds them. Full of spite, gods can bite both foe and friend alike”; then, “our people . . . kill off a recalcitrant god” (200). A seminal aspect of Ike’s uncle Osuakwu’s contribution to the conversation is his explanation of how the execution of an ineffective or parasitic deity is carried out:

When a deity leaves what it was asked to do and starts doing something else, when it turns on the community it’s supposed to protect, or when it begins to thirst for too much human blood, the people snatch up its body—its wooden body—and set it afire at the boundary of the clan. That’s one way of killing a god . . . there’s a simpler way. A deity is like you and me; it needs to eat and drink to live. That’s why we offer sacrifices to deities. When a deity doesn’t receive the kind of sacrifice it needs, it dies. (200)

Ironically, while Ike’s uncle Osuakwu here indirectly makes the most effective case regarding why the Christian Charismatic/Pentecostal religion should be eliminated in his community, it is his own Ngene deity which doesn’t have any exploitative behavior that his cousin has set his eyes upon to destroy. Ike’s horrific plot to perform the coup de grâce on Ngene runs completely counter to every form of logic, and it must be unambiguously clear to him at this moment. He cannot unlearn what he now knows; none the less, acting like one without conscience, he permits himself to be so contemptuous of his own community’s ethics of sociability as to violate them. It is true that a god can meet its death either through banditry and arson or through sheer neglect. But there are conditions for that to happen, and they are governed by standard laws pertaining to performance. Only a negative exhibition by a god, expressed through patterns of being totally irrelevant or of outrageous acts of omission or commission, like a misdemeanor or a high crime, can justify its destruction. Ngene remains a god with no such allegations pending against it by those who venerate it; it is not currently accused of any crimes, low or exalted. From this community’s standpoint, therefore, it would not only be difficult to fathom on what grounds a misguided plan to illegally relocate this deity could rest, but it would also be the height of betrayal to move it anywhere away from its shrine.

For Ike, however, there is to be no retreat from the mission because the primacy of financial gain, in his scale of values, overrides all other considerations. Accordingly, Ike’s non-negotiable battle is the quest to lay hold of the Ngene statue. This is where providence inserts itself powerfully; and, quire ironically, it takes the form of the unintended actions of a most unlikely individual—none other than Pastor Uka and his publicly documented attacks on Ngene which give Ike a reason to convince himself that he has the sufficient cover to execute his mission to Utonki through what is clearly a mean-spirited strategy of blackmail:

If the statue of Ngene disappeared—when the deity disappeared—Osuakwu would swear that one man, and one man only, was responsible. That man was Pastor Uka, who carried the burden of cause, motivation, and declared intent. Osuakwu knew that Ngene was Uka's Baal. He knew about Uka's boast that Ngene would be destroyed, decimated in a puff of smoke that would come from heaven. It suited Ike's purpose. He could plot and execute his goal in absolute anonymity, beyond the pale of suspicion. (211)

Ike not only overcomes his considerable trepidation, but he hardens himself with whatever is needed, not excluding alcohol, to pull the trigger. After bracing the hazard of going to pluck the statue from its shrine in pitch darkness, he also has the effrontery, the nerve, to return to the site in broad daylight to commiserate with the owner, as his uncle, alerted to the disappearance of Ngene, raises a village-wide alarm over the unspeakable event. He then hurriedly bolts out of town. Getting out of the country with his stolen trophy presents its own challenges, but he meets them squarely. His return to his foul-smelling New York apartment, which is in darkness because in his absence it had its power turned off for non-payment of his bills, smacks of some sort of poetic justice. But in the pecking order of his intractable difficulties, his incessant financial jinx assumes paramouncy.

In his haunted New York apartment, panic attacks assail Ike amid the rancid odor from the statue which in no time has taken over the building, driving the newly returned traveler into a near-psychotic, deranged, and disturbed state of mind. In an overdetermined manner, his conscience is wrecked by images of his mother as well as of his uncle Osuakwu mourning the colossal loss of Ngene in nightmares which place him in the colonial missionary Rev. Stanton's shoes, drowning in a flooded river. Then, suddenly, his spirits become revived in a breakout of the joy of being back in the city and he shakes off the anxiety. Overwhelming feelings of rejuvenation and rising hopes and optimism about the future sweep over him. But it is precisely at this time that, like an albatross around his neck, his financial woes resurface to completely get the better of him:

The trouble with focusing on practical problems was that he had little money. He didn't have a dime left of the five hundred dollars Tony Iba had given him. All of it—and more—had gone to the customs officers in Lagos. Then he had spent forty dollars on transportation back to his apartment. There was nothing in his checking account. And he had used up his credit card limit buying the ticket ... He tore open three letters from the rental office. The word URGENT was printed in red ink at the top of the page. The letter reminded him of the delinquency of his rent of March and April. It instructed him to immediately pay the sum of \$3,000 plus \$300 in late fees. Another letter from the power company threatened disruption of his service if he didn't pay a balance of \$277.59 within five days of the notice. Next, he slit open an envelope from Visa. His credit card had a debit balance of \$2,682. He gazed at it, brow knitted in a frown ... There was

Usman Wai, his old friend who'd made him a loan of more than \$1,250. He'd finally returned Wai's calls that had taken on the quality of a harangue. "It's about the money I loaned you," Usman had said after a few polite questions about his trip. "I have an emergency—and I need it immediately. In fact, like yesterday." (302–308)

Against the backdrop of the tremendous faith that Ike has invested in Ngene to make a fortune, the cold reception of the statue by Mark Gruels at his store is most shocking and comes as a major upheaval, verging on the traumatic. Adding to his pain is the enormous trouble Ike has undertaken to bring about the statue's seizure, its clearance at the airport in Nigeria, and its subsequent shipment to the United States, all at exorbitant financial cost to him. The ordeal of enduring the terrible stench oozing from the statue in his apartment is terminated when Ike gets the terrifying news of his mother's hospitalization. A band of idol worshippers has attacked Pastor Uka's church while the congregation met to celebrate Ngene's disappearance from its shrine—an event termed by the pastor a victory of his god over a false god, his sister tells him—and money is needed for his mother's treatment for the broken leg which she has suffered.

From a perspective sympathetic to his uncle Osuakwu, owner of the Ngene deity, Ike's disappointment is a paradigm of the misery that one can expect when honesty is set aside. The family emergency in Nigeria incentivizes Ike to go earlier than planned to sell Ngene. But the intended buyer

Gruels scratched the side of his face with an expression of agitated lack of interest. For a moment he sized Ike up ... A war deity ... Gruels echoed dubiously ... From where? ... Otoonki ... he sneered ... deliberately massacring the pronunciation ... Where's that? (315)

Mark Gruels reinforces the mockery and sarcasm with which he greets the statue by rejecting the two documentation sources on it that Ike possesses as insufficient, short of the three required. Besides, he spurns Ngene by saying that he has an overstock of statues of African origin, pointing out the bad timing because African deities are not moving in the market; sales are hopelessly down; supply exceeds demand; and there is a huge stockpile because customers have no interest in such things:

"You are looking at my inventory of African gods," Gruels said at length, spreading his arm. You can see there's hardly any room on the shelves ... African gods are no longer in vogue, that's why. Three, four years ago, they were all the rage. Even two years ago, they were still doing decent business. Every serious collector had to have three, four, five African gods. They flew off the shelf. Then things—tastes—changed ... It just happens that African gods don't excite collectors as they once did ... See? My entire African inventory's been on sale going on three years, yet it remains slow moving ...

He pointed to an oblong statue That's a Wolof god of fertility. It's been marked down by eighty percent—and it's still here. This one, a Bambara water goddess . . . This, a Fanti god . . . A Tiv god. Five, six years ago, collectors would have paid a handsome sum for it. Today, there are no takers, even though it's going for five thousand . . ." He led Ike to a showcase at the end of the wall that held a rectangular object, a cornucopia of animal skeletons, bird beaks, straw ropes, chiseled bark, twigs, and raffia . . . He thrust a finger at a case . . . "That's a Ligbi god of revelers . . . That one . . . it's an Akan warrior god . . . Here . . . is a Luba patron god . . . There's a Malinke earth goddess, there's a Baoule god of fire, and there's a Shona mermaid . . . This is from Togo—an Ewe guardian magic . . . This is a Senufo funeral mask . . . This is a Chi Wara deity of farming. I once asked a hundred and eighty grand for one . . . Look at this one, an Efik rain god; this, an Urhobo canoe to heaven; this, Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder; this, a Fon earth goddess . . . Look, I've got inventory from all over Africa—the Kongo, Bamana, Bembe, Baga, Xhosa, Yaka, Dogon—you name it. I wished they did as they used to. I've offered huge discounts, but collectors simply aren't interested. African deities are no longer in vogue." (320–321)

The bottom line is that Gruels asserts that his shop is already inundated with African products which no one appears to want, and the best offer he can make Ike is "A thousand bucks," before he raises the offer slightly, with finality, "I give you fifteen hundred," upon hearing Ike protest that his

flight ticket cost fifteen hundred dollars . . . I then had to travel to my hometown. I spent more than a week there. Each day cost me a lot of money. On my way back, I was stopped by customs at the airport in Lagos. They nearly seized the god. I gave them eight hundred dollars to let me go. (323)

Mark Gruels says his price offers are governed by the interplay of market forces and "the odds" are not in Ngene's "favor . . . Go to Asia and get me a god—any god—and I'll make you a great offer for it. Or to Latin America. That's what collectors are looking for. This isn't it" (312).

In translating this, let us say that a major shift in interest has occurred, from the product Ike possesses to products from two other territories inaccessible to him, as Gruels claims, identifying Asia and Latin America as the new fulcrum. But it is all baloney; everything Gruels says is a lie, as Ike is to discover too late. For example, his devaluation of Ngene was intentional, the intent being to swindle the seller and maximize the buyer's own profits. Nothing could be more ridiculous than Gruels' allegation that interest in African gods has fallen to unprecedented depths. We see this when a remorseful Ike calls to let Gruels know that he has changed his mind about his sale of Ngene. Ike demands to have his product returned to him: "I haven't cashed your check. I need my deity back . . . I want it back . . . I'll bring back the check" (328–329). However, in response, Gruels snaps back: "It's gone . . . Gone two days after I bought it.

A Japanese guy snatched it up” (329). As recompense for Ike’s woes, the best Gruels can do, he says, condescendingly, is give him a bonus.

Listen ... I’m going to make you a deal because the deity you sold me happened to be a class act—as far as my African inventory goes ... So, here’s the deal. I paid you what, fifteen hundred dollars, right ... I’ve never done this, but you brought me a great god—and I like your accent and all. So let’s say I throw in another thousand bucks. (330)

Mark Gruels’ pitch-perfect masterminding of the transaction is the most savage rebuke of his motives. While knowing the truth all along, he persists in declaring the opposite. But he downplays the value of African statues for a purpose. His goal, to reiterate, is to decrease the seller’s gain and increase his own as the buyer, taking advantage of the seller’s accent. The contradictions between Gruels’ eviscerating comments prior to the sale, stoking anxieties against African gods, and his admissions after it about their real worth are telling. The accent of the seller, it has turned out, has been a key factor in the devaluation of the product which he put up for sale: the reason the value of Ngene came down when Gruels assessed it. Accordingly, with a single stroke of his pen violating basic ethical behavior, the robber is himself robbed and Gruels punctures Ike’s dream bubble big time, precipitating the immigrant’s massive post-sale depression. Ike finds himself scrambling after having been taken advantage of by a swindler masquerading as a businessman, defrauded by a smooth-talking and dishonest entrepreneur who employs barely disguised dirty business tricks—deception, innuendo, fabrications, crass manipulation of facts, and unfair devaluation of products based on the ethnicity of the owner—as bargaining tools. So, the novel ends by tying in the central dilemma of assimilation for African male immigrants, the mistreatment haunting them and translating into their economic disempowerment, of which Ike’s predicament is a stark specimen.

The huge blow that Ike’s goals have suffered, the unexpected shut off of the life-giving oxygen of his dream, recalls the depressing deflation of Willy Loman’s ambitions in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.⁸ Loman, unlike Ike, at the end of the road for his aspiration to make a success of a career as a retailer, takes his own life. He is so exhausted, he can no longer keep a false pretense of dignity and professional success, and he seeks escape from a dreary existence through death when his hopes come to nothing. Ike is too cowardly to take the path of suicide; and, so, when his dream dies, it leaves him in a mess: not just under a mountain of debt, but buried in remorse and disappointment:

Today, whatever the day was, he knew there were more maggots than ever, more flies flying their egg-laying sorties, a stronger stench infusing the air in the room. He knew that tomorrow, whenever it arrived, there would be even more maggots, a greater clatter of flies, a deeper reach of the smell ... There was the business of feeding the maggots, hosting the flies, inhaling what the air gave. (328)

The horrifying “stench, fierce as a wounded beast on its second—more ferocious—wind” and his conviction that it “would take a powerful disinfectant to dislodge this foe, to shoo off the feculence” out of his apartment concatenate the sordid events which have left such a bad aftertaste (325). “In a snap, he recalled the sum of all he’d suffered. The heartbreak he’d inflicted. Osuakwu stirring the morning with his wails. His mother mauled, lying in hospital unattended, perhaps even breathing her last that very moment” (326). Ike leaned hard on Ngene but it disappointed him. In this discouraging hour in his life, he realizes that Ngene is not going to pick up the tab, save him from his money troubles and help him pay up his credit card debts and other accounts; nor will it aid him in fulfilling his family financial obligations back home in Nigeria.

This is the sense in which Ike’s story is locked into the socio-political structures of his home country, as an illuminating object lesson on the awful conditions that foment expatriation as well as the vicissitudes of the male immigrant experience in the United States of America. The country has sunk to such depths of degradation it leaves ambitious citizens like Ike no option but to yield to the lure of a better life in Europe and the United States; but sadly, wherever they go, they find their dreams evaporate quickly into thin air. Ndibe’s exploration of this crisis, of the scope and sweep of the despondency attendant upon the disappointments faced by some Nigerian male immigrants abroad, is comprehensive and vividly documented. *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is remarkable both for its fine-tuned sense of a historical period of breakdown in ethics and for the narrative prescience it evinces in its dramatization of the contours of human conduct as well as its symptomatic use of language to encode character. It is page for page a strikingly scintillating and engrossing read exposing the nuances and intricacies of the predicaments of the immigrant experience packaged with keen candor.

Notes

- 1 Scott F. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York: Charles Scribner, 1923.
- 2 Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, New York: Soho Press, 2014, pp. 205–207. All subsequent page references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parenthesis.
- 3 On the prevalence of forgeries in ethnological object collections from the Pacific islands, for example, in a chapter titled “The European Appropriation of Indigenous Things,” Nicholas Thomas quotes J. Edge Partington “writing of the late 1880s,” about having “warned that ‘special care’ needed to be exercised in buying forks ‘as when I was in Fuji they were being made by white men for sale to travellers’” (*Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 167).
- 4 For details on the operations, functions, and politics of OPEC, see, notably, Fadhil J. Chalabi, *Oil Policies, Oil Myths: Observations of an OPEC Insider*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2010.
- 5 The case of Ike’s employment discrimination is very similar to those reported by Dennis Cordell for many Nigerians in his essay “Paradoxes of Immigrant

Incorporation: High Achievement and Perceptions of Discrimination by Nigerians in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas (USA),” in Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi, ed. *Trans-Atlantic Migration: The Paradoxes of Exile*, New York: Routledge, 2008. 13–28.

6 See further Ode Ogede, *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. 80–85.

7 See Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1978) and Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

8 See Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking Press, 1949).

4 Allegory, Elegy, Prose, the Labyrinths of Disquietude: Art and the Wellsprings of Discontent (Teju Cole's *Open City*)

This chapter looks at Teju Cole's *Open City*, reading it as an allegorical lens into what Omi and Winant call "racial formation."¹ Using this novel, author Cole historicizes race, racism, forced labor, and the precarious conditions of African migrants in the Western world, connecting them to structures of subjection developed during slavery. Cole's *Open City* is an example of how African authors today engage with history in order to demonstrate how the past continues to live in the present. It is that rare bird in the blue African sky, so to speak, a novel of ideas of truly striking aesthetic significance, too; flawless, for example, in its utilization of a key tool for the exchange of important information: dialogue, a reliable window into people's thoughts. The conversations between the novel's traveling protagonist, Julius, and his acquaintances and friends Professor Saito, Annette Maillotte, Farouq, and Khalil, are all in varying degrees remarkable for their spontaneity, not excluding even the brief talk with Terry (the postal attendant who helps him mail a letter to Farouq in Belgium upon his return to the United States from his overseas vacation). It will be argued that Cole's *Open City* provides an important and signal contribution to the strand of the Nigerian male immigrant narrative, which will be greatly appreciated by the readers for both its topicality and its glamorous expressive skill. It is a captivating, complex, deeply reflective, profoundly lyrical, and movingly polished and informed work, written in a language infused with luster, privileging inward meditation and drama. It also enthusiastically offers surprising illumination of the aesthetics of high culture.

The very taxing ruminative storytelling platform that *Open City* reconceptualizes thus shifts the terms of the Nigerian immigration narrative hitherto dominated by the emphasis on exteriority.² It is an exquisitely crafted novel using events which appear lifelike enough effectively to re-examine the subject of the perilous place of Africans in the world. It also deals with the question of the complex identity of the African that is becoming increasingly protean and difficult to configure in the era of hybridization. Many Africans leave their homes to live elsewhere, either within their continent itself or outside Africa entirely, and they co-mingle with people of other nationalities, ethnicities, or "races"; this leads in some cases to the production of a cross-breed generation of human beings "neither black nor white yet both"—to invoke the

seemingly oxymoronic terminology of Werner Sollors' fascinating study.³ This novel is a first-person narrative account of happenings in the life of one these personages. It first plunges the reader into the turbulent period in his life as a young adult living alone in America following his immigration and his travels in Europe. Then, it takes a backward glance at his coming-of-age, his childhood background in Nigeria; a place where sodas, like Sprite, Fanta, and Coca-Cola, are not just regular beverages but treasured delicacies for festivals or special events, rationed even in the homes of the relatively affluent. Along the way, the narrative covers his growing rebellion, his increasing sexual consciousness, risky childhood pranks, and some pivotal episodes from his secondary school education in Nigeria that will have life-long impacts on him. Here, we see a child going through all the restlessness that in his words "young people everywhere" undergo as a rite of passage, what he himself aptly describes as "over-heated desire," and we watch him as he encounters and responds to his own unique trauma of family loss and growing up in a dysfunctional family (136–139).

A prototypical work, *Open City* is distinctively and genuinely fresh. The novel breaks new ground, nuanced in its treatment of the topos of the outcast caste, documenting the tortured lives of victims like the protagonist, Julius, chafing under the bigotry and humiliation visited on those visibly neither black nor white yet both. It is keen in its exploration of the predicament of exclusion. The novel provides lifelike accounts of events in public places revealing the dynamics of the heartache that comes with being unable ever to feel comfortable in either shade of color. The story shows attentiveness and sensitivity in laying bare the innermost recesses of the life of its protagonist to document the lot of many people. This work separates itself in its authentic stress in dramatizing the mental toll of the horror of isolation endured by people like its disconsolate protagonist.

Julius' thoughts mainly center around the anguish of his soul. He is greeted with anything but respect everywhere he goes—within Africa, in Europe, in the United States—and he is eager to share his hurt. To be not a part of one's community must be hard on anyone (212). But while many people will understand that to be left out is a bitter pill to swallow, the talent to capture it so vividly through the power of cold print is rare; herein lies the greatness of this poignant novel. *Open City* presents accounts of Julius' observations of events and reflections on his feelings that are more striking than his material state; it additionally elaborates his ideas and sentiments in an unconventional manner. Throughout the novel Julius is associated with a language that in places rolls within the infrastructure of elegy, a meditative mode with a mourning strain. Whether dealing with loss or death, love, sight-seeing, his own emotions, observations of people's behavior, his language carries a measure of the type of composition to which we commonly attach the name of poetry.⁴

A unique novel of ideas, skillfully employing a mixed form—elegy with prose written in a lyrical structural line—*Open City* is profoundly poetic in expression. The straining for the effect of the rhythm of poetry does not come without a heavy price, of course. Several decades ago, Edwin Newman gave a grim warning

about the sorry state of English language use in the United States. He warned that the American version of the English language was rapidly and progressively degenerating into incoherence. He asked, in an insightful study, *Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English?*⁵ The answer to Newman's question must now be a categorical affirmative: the numbing unoriginal language usage—cliche, stereotypes, dead jargon—of the American public, from those in the communications media to politicians, corporate executives, social scientists, and others that Newman decried has now been superseded, multiplied, and compounded by other features of imprecise language usage that threaten effective communication in incalculable ways. We now face the predominance of inconsistent subject number reference, the use of the second-person pronoun “you” to mean “a person/individual” or “people” in general, total disregard for accurate pronoun reference, fused sentences, sentence fragments, comma splices, misplaced modifiers, and tense shifts. Into this potent brew of blunders making the current English usage in the United States sound like slapstick comedy should be added the typical subject-verb agreement errors one comes across all too often. These involve constructions in which singular subjects are inappropriately mismatched with plural verbs and plural subjects are cruelly collocated with singular verbs, as in “If there is American Citizens left,” for “If there are American citizens left”; “we was working” for “we were working”; “the people is here” and “there is many people here” for “the people are here” and “there are many people here”; “there’s pros and cons” for “there are pros and cons.” It is clear that we have a perfect storm in the relentless attack being mounted against benchmark English usage in this comedy of errors.

Nowadays, even American college students habitually resist grammatical correction; when told that singular indefinite nouns must be matched with singular pronouns and plural nouns with plural pronouns students argue, in their own defense, that everyone cannot be wrong except their English instructor. Students hear everyone in the wider society use the wrong pronoun references all their lives. From the kindergarten and elementary school through middle school and high school, even up to college, Americans take their lessons in grammar from the media and popular culture, and these groups have not only undermined the teaching of College English Grammar completely but effectively destroyed intelligent communication using the English language in America.

Today, in an era when a master of incoherence, an individual incapable of the expression of a single complete sentence, actually made his way to the highest office in the land and popularized the sentence fragment as an instrument of presidential communication through Twitter, we are witnessing the nightmare of total linguistic decay foretold by Edwin Newman unfold before our own very eyes. Too frequently, for example, in *Open City*, overruling standard linguistic convention to communicate in everyday American usage results in the predominance of grammatical errors. One common mistake concerns the comma splice, whereby two or more independent clauses are punctuated wrongly and joined with commas instead of being combined more appropriately with either a semicolon or a coordinating conjunction like “but,” as in “Those scenes are very

moving, they are without dialogue or plot, but they are effective” (200). Another grammatical slip involves pronoun reference bloopers such as “so I say let everyone sort themselves out,” defiantly matching a singular indefinite noun (“everyone”) with a plural pronoun (“themselves”) and “No one lined up in front of a federal building early on a weekday morning unless they had to,” here erroneously employing the plural pronoun “they” instead of the singular pronoun “he/she” to qualify the singular noun “no one” (202–218). We encounter profanity-laden language found commonly in uneducated Black English, “He come up, word? said one. He come up yo, said the other, I thought you knew that nigga. Shit, said the first, I don’t know that motherfucker” (211). Nor is there absence of the notorious interpolated use of double negatives typical of uneducated Black English or Ebonics:

and Mr. F. said, with emotion in his voice, Doctor, I just want to tell you how proud I am to come here and see a young black man like yourself in that white coat, because things haven’t never been easy for us, and no one has ever given us nothing without a struggle. (210)

Grammatical errors though such constructions unquestionably are, they do accurately mimic speech or oral delivery; and they do not impede the primary mission of the text overall. In Hayden White’s cogent words in another context, that objective would seem to be, as far as a reader of *Open City* can tell, to provide “the image of reality which the novelist constructs” which is “meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less ‘real’ than that referred to by the historian.”⁶ A fact-based fiction, a piece of creative writing having its fingers firmly on the pulse of its characters responding to real-life happenings, Cole’s *Open City* affiliates itself prominently with art in which there is no dissonance between its plot and the social world, the historical moments it seeks to capture and reflect.

Open City forces into clear and unmistakable view the discomfiting destinies that hit African migrants in the United States and Europe by presenting the scene at Trinity Church as a terrifying reminder of the crushing oppressiveness of inequity. Of all places the site of Christian worship should be the least expected to be somewhere everyone is not given equal treatment, in total disregard of Bible injunction. Such an observation casts even greater doubt on the whole question of the meaning and practice of liberty and equality for which the United States of America says that it stands. This episode is a miniature representation of the concerns and style of *Open City*.

Here, finally, the narrator-protagonist, Julius, thinks, in chancing upon the sacred site of the church in his hour of need, that his dream has come true, or so it would appear to him at first. This momentarily rouses his enthusiasm and hope. Ironically, however, the episode will set him up, unbeknown to him at the time, for a colossal disappointment to follow, providing the ground for his lament about his unfair treatment. As he works through his grief, which is explored with the instrument of poetic expression, he goes through three different

stages. The first stage is one of bafflement, firmly focalized on his being shut out of the historic place of prayer, which soon takes on a wider significance. The cruel act of his denial is supremely local, set as it is against the backdrop of a genealogy of the setting as an arena for the momentous spiritual service it provides, but the core source of his anguish pans out as a global problem of discrimination of which the occurrence at the Trinity Church is merely proof.

During the second stage of the grief, confusion is mingled with acute distress. On the local level, what makes the barefaced act of discrimination committed against Julius, a mixed-race black man or African, so markedly flagrant is his disconcerting recognition that the ritual of offering spiritual fortification to an elaborate list of respectable attendees at the church dates back to the founding of the United States. The significance of this tradition, he notes, is that countless pilgrims, seafarers, whalers, and soldiers have drawn succor here before setting out for their various voyages. This monumental site has made room even for lower animals, serving also as a space for exhibition of whales and other sea monsters washed ashore, yet its door is closed to a bi-racial person with no explanation given. We learn that even

About two hundred years later, when a young man from the Fort Orange area came down the Hudson and settled in Manhattan, he decided he would write his magnum opus on an albino Leviathan. The author, a sometime parishioner of Trinity Church, called his book *The Whale*; the sub-title, *Moby Dick*, was added only after the first publication. The same Trinity Church had now left me out in the brisk marine air and given me no place in which to pray. There were chains on all the gates, and I could find neither a way into the building nor anyone to help me. So, lulled by sea air, I decided to find my way to the edge of the island from there. It would be good, I thought, to stand for a while on the waterline. (51)

In this typical paragraph of Cole's writing in *Open City*, in the big ideas pushed forward, their progressive development, and the pulsating flow of their linguistic construction, the key issue on the table is the perception of injury brought about by injustice. The narrator-protagonist believes he is unaccountably denied access to a site which, for generations, has historically been open to all who (until his arrival) have desired to get in to receive a blessing. Why does the site that granted artistic inspiration to a person who would become the author of one of the greatest American novels of all time, Herman Melville, not extend the same privileges to Julius? Is it based on his ethnicity? It is so implied; and, within the orbit of the totality of his experience, it is hard not to reasonably reach such a conclusion. The use of a combination of various dominant English metrical patterns in conveying the grievance lends a rhythmic quality to the delivery that adds an intensity which is very emotional, persuasively underlying the absolute helplessness of Julius that is revealed by his traumatized voice. This is where we have the swelling anger of the victim of unfairness take over. In units combining iambic pentameter (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one

in five feet) and anapestic hexameter (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one in six feet), he becomes spontaneously tearful. The sound of anguish and distress crowds out every other sound; his weeping over being refused admission into the company of select people who have prayed at Trinity Church incrementally becomes so persistent an outcry against institutional racism.

A victim of unequal treatment, Julius feels high and dry, without any assistance while he literally stands at the gates of this celebrated place. He is spurned, as he believes, just at the summit of his hope of attaining the pinnacle of his aspiration to join an exclusive club. When he needs the water and reaches for it the well runs dry; and his raised expectations are deflated. For him, this is a day of high emotion; he thus grieves, being unadmitted into the great lineage of hall-of-famers who have attended services at this historic church; a huge disadvantage he has suffered due to institutionally sanctioned racism as he attempts, as if using the force of emotion, to bend the will of the invisible gatekeepers of the church.

Everything considered, the hurt bewailed by the narrator-protagonist of *Open City* is not all that dissimilar to the sense of woundedness which drives the revenge odyssey of the famous novel quoted by him. The belief of Captain Ahab, in Melville's *Moby Dick*, that the white whale of the novel's title is the monster responsible for the loss of his leg, is what demands his impassioned and recklessly violent mission for retributive justice.⁷ One may call the forces that orchestrate the fortune of the narrator-protagonist of *Open City* bad luck or dark providence but the outcome for him is injury, like Captain Ahab's, nonetheless. As a consequence, since the state of injury is never a good place to be, we have the pervasiveness of the grievances that both characters nurse and vehemently express.

In *Open City*, the underlying sources implicated in the misfortune of Julius are traced, from the conditions that uproot him from his Nigerian homeland to the myth of white supremacy in his adopted country. His frustrations are real, and he vents them. In the Trinity Church episode, what it would take to restore justice to him would be to grant him admission. His search for personal spiritual fulfillment should not be unjustifiably thwarted by the unseen authorities. The discriminatory practices deplored by Julius are brought into view not in isolation but within the wider context of the Black American experience. They are embodiments of the intransigent ill-treatment of peoples of African descent in the United States. Bi-racial Julius is considered black in the United States by the one-drop rule (one drop of black blood), like Joe Christmas famously before him in William Faulkner's *Light in August*, a novel of the realities in the South at the first turn of the twentieth century.⁸

Like Faulkner's novel of race relations, Cole's *Open City*, too, draws from modernist writing styles infused with oral storytelling techniques. Faulkner situates his story within the gothic frame with its power to recreate mystery and horror, drawing his audiences into awareness of moments highlighting the plague of being in the shoes of those we now call bi-racial people in the American South up to the early twentieth century, a fact they would otherwise

overlook. Cole employs the apparatus of realism to detail the everyday mistreatment of the same group in the North and beyond as late as the twenty-first century. But the more things appear to change, it seems, the more they remain the same. *Open City's* narrator-protagonist references the nature of the continuing racial oppression of one group, decrying why the idyllic "Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees," but a privilege from which black people are excluded, for example, because "Blacks, 'we blacks,' had known rougher ports of entry" (55).

Writing with the implicit background knowledge of the United States' long history of atrocities against its minority groups gives heft to Cole's storytelling. The narrator-protagonist does not just view his own circumstances through isolated lenses but rightly places his cogitations on man's inhumanity to man as something which runs through the veins of the United States. His claim that "blacks ... had known rougher ports of entry" is an oblique reference to the dehumanization of slavery, the excruciating experience of Africans abducted and forcefully taken away from their homelands and their sordid ordeals through the Middle Passage. But his statement also contains an allusion to events even further back in American history, to immediately stress that the foundation of the nation itself was built upon the genocide committed against the indigenous Indian populations by the European settlers. The tree of white liberty was watered by the blood of the Native Americans.

Here, the storyteller initiates a conversation the nation must have about its violent foundation and the persistence of that violence over time. The provisional account of the nation's history offered by the storyteller leads up to and even beyond the modern-day mother of all cruelties witnessed on American shores, the grizzly leveling down of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, in New York City. That incident killed more than three thousand citizens of the world. Acknowledgment is correctly made that "atrocities are nothing new, not to humans, not to animals" (58).

Accordingly, in recalling a brief history of other erasures preceding the destruction of the Twin Towers, we are informed:

Before the towers had gone up, there had been a bustling network of little streets traversing this part of town. Robinson Street, Laurens Street, College Place: all of them had been obliterated in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center buildings, and all were forgotten now. Gone, too, was the old Washington Market, the active piers, the fishwives, the Christian Syrian enclave that was established here in the late 1800s. The Syrians, the Lebanese, and other people from the Levant had been pushed across the river to Brooklyn, where they'd set down roots on the Atlantic Avenue and in Brooklyn Heights. And, before that? What Lenape paths lay buried beneath the rubble? The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten. There had been communities here before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gomez sailed up

the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarreled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and timber of the island and its calm bay. Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories. (58–59)

Indeed, as it turned out, in the case of the enslaved Africans, the violence committed against them was converted into cash for the offender. Narratives of American history often assume too sharp a break with the era of slavery, if they do not erase slavery entirely. But *Open City* says “not so fast,” tickling the memory of the nation with events in its history showing the ways in which violent treatment of Africans translated directly into the money that built America’s foundational wealth. Slavery provided the heartbeat of the capitalist economy. Few people seeing “the glimmering green figurine of the Statue of Liberty” today would connect it to its ugly past, to “a busy mercantile part of the city in the middle of the nineteenth century” that thrived upon the slave trading business (162–163). Long after the enterprise of the slave trade

had become a capital offense in the United States in 1820 ... New York remained the most important port for the building, out-fitting, insuring, and launching of slavers’ ships. Much of the human cargo of those vessels was going to Cuba. Africans did the work on the sugar plantations there. (163)

To facilitate plantation, farm, and even domestic work, each of which relied on slave labor, the special brand of slavery in force in the United States and in the Caribbean invented a purportedly benign practice which we now know as the “paternalistic” system. Joseph F. Healey explains the method of this system’s operation nicely, rightly noting the persistence of strains of ideologies of the practice in America today:

In colonial America, slavery became synonymous with race. Race, slavery, inferiority, and powerlessness became intertwined in ways that, according to many analysts, still affect the ways black and white Americans think about one another ... Slavery was a *caste system*, or closed stratification system. In a caste system, there is no mobility between social positions, and the social class [an individual is] born into (... ascribed status) is permanent. Slave status was for life and was passed on to any children a slave might have. Whites, no matter what they did, could not become slaves.

Interaction between members of the dominant and minority groups in a paternalistic system is governed by a rigid, strictly enforced code of etiquette. Slaves were expected to show deference and humility and visibly display their lower status when interacting with whites. These behavioral codes made it possible for blacks and whites to work together, sometimes

intimately, sometimes for their entire lives, without threatening the power and status differentials inherent in the system. Plantation and farm work required close and frequent contact between blacks and whites, and status differentials were maintained socially rather than physically ... The system defined slaves as pieces of property owned by their masters—yet they were undeniably human beings. Thus slavery was based on a contradiction.⁹

Slave owners' priorities were to maximize highest efficiency in utilization of slave labor, multiply slave labor through rape of female slaves and remove even the slightest questions about the superiority of the race of the slave owners. That's why they put in place coercive measures of rigorous discipline to work hand in hand with paternalism. Among these measures were vicious torture, atrocious beatings, fire-brandings, and even lynching delivered on slaves who showed any sign of resistance to the requirements of their servility. From this work readers catch a clearer view of the conspicuous darker side that the barbaric American brand of slavery had to it. Cole comes far nearer than any other African writer in depicting the savage acts carried out in episodes succinctly captured in Saidiya V. Hartman's apt terminology as "Scenes of Subjection" that encapsulate the malignity of the hatred slave owners had against slaves.¹⁰ The inhuman acts were on occasion used spitefully to punish or quell any acts the slave owner defined as stubbornness or rebellion; they were thus all too often invoked capriciously by sadistic authoritarian slave owners, as demonstrated in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*.¹¹

In its take on the troubling topic of slavery and its continuing legacies in the contemporary United States, one achievement of *Open City* is to dive into the nation's early history to expose how whites capitalized on the brutal mistreatment of Africans. Julius provides the following captivating supporting details exposing an evil practice that simultaneously enabled the United States to build the freedom and equality of some of its groups upon the bondage and inequality of another group:

In profiting from slavery, the City Bank of New York was not unlike the other companies founded by merchants and bankers in the same period—the companies that later became AT & T and Con Edison emerged from the same milieu. Moses Taylor, one of the wealthiest men, had joined the board of the City Bank in 1837 after a long and successful career as a sugar merchant. He became the president of the bank in 1855, and served in that capacity until his death in 1882. Taylor had helped fund the war effort on the Union side; but he had also made massive profits from brokering the sale of Cuban sugar in the port of New York, investing the profits of the sugar planters, facilitating the processing of the cargo at the New York Customs House, and helping finance the acquisition of a "labor force." He had made it possible, in other words, for plantation owners to pay for the purchase of slaves; this he did in part by operating his own ships. He had six of them sailing the high seas. Taylor and other bankers like him knew

exactly what they were doing, and their optimism paid off. The profit margins were irresistible: a fully outfitted slaving ship costing around \$13,000 could be expected to deliver a human cargo worth more than \$200,000. *The New York Times* noted in 1852, as the City Bank brought in its greatest profits, that if the authorities pleaded that they could not stop this profiteering, they were simply confessing their own imbecility, and that, if it was a matter of will, the moral guilt they were incurring was equivalent to that of slave traders themselves. (163)

Here, the storyteller revisits the past, citing historical examples linking present realities to it in a chain of events that has remained unbroken. In this history of unremitting oppression of a minority group upon which the dominant group has based its comforts, its luxuries, and its freedoms, that group has been terrorized, beaten, made to feel insignificant and lesser than others, and some have even been killed to shore up the superiority of others. He literally explodes the myth that this majority population has built its wealth without any contribution from its minority populations.

That America remains segregated to its bone even in death is a fact acknowledged in *Open City*. Not even in death are the bodies of blacks permitted to rest in peace: one of the most horrifying discoveries about the disdainful mistreatment of a minority group documented in *Open City*. In a portrayal of the morbid and disgusting desecration that is perhaps a little too graphic for the squeamish, we learn about “the site of an African burial ground ... now under office buildings, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government” (220). Yet, “Into this earth had been interred the bodies of some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves, but then the land had been built over and the people of the city had forgotten that it was a burial ground” (220).

From “the 1690s and 1795,” this site was the only place, we are told, “on the outskirts of the city at the time, north of Wall Street and so outside civilization as it was then defined, that blacks were allowed to bury their dead” (220). Then, we learn, “the dead returned when, in 1991, construction of a building on Broadway and Duane brought human remains to the surface” and in the

coffins that were discovered, some four hundred of them ... excavated bodies bore traces of suffering: blunt trauma, grievous bodily harm. Many skeletons had broken bones, evidence of the suffering they’d endured in life. Disease was common, too: syphilis, rickets, arthritis. In some of the palls were found shells, beads, and polished stones ... seen hints of African religions, rites perhaps retained from the Congo, or from along the West coast, from people who had been captured and sold into slavery. One body had been buried in a British marine officer’s uniform. (220–221)

The narrative proceeds from here to address the history of struggles of black people in the United States from as far back as the 1780s to protect even their

dead from the abuse they suffered while living, because “Black corpses were frequently singled out by cadaver thieves, who passed them on to surgeons and anatomists” (221). The report has it that the

petition, in palpably pained language, laments those who under cover of night “dig up the bodies of the deceased, friends and relatives of the petitioners, carry them away without respect to age or sex, mangle their flesh out of wanton curiosity and then expose it to beasts and birds.” (221)

But the campaign against the poaching, vandalization, and theft of dead black bodies made no headway. This struggle suffered its greatest setback when the “civil powers recognized the justness of the cause and, in 1789, the New York Anatomy Act was passed,” so that “as was done in Europe, the needs of surgical anatomy were to be met by the cadavers of executed murderers, arsonists, and burglars” (221). Blacks, as was manifestly believed by the mainstream society, being ranked lower in the social order than all the criminal groups in the world, thus were singled out as a bracket whose dead remained fair game in scientific anatomical inquiry. In this way, the collaboration of science and racism maintained the status of black bodies as a group upon which contempt can be justifiably cast.

Julius gets a firm handle on American politics and history, allowing him to uncover skeletons in the closet. He shows how, as the marriage of pseudo-scientific ideas and racist opinions have gained strength, the rapaciousness of racial stereotyping still alarmingly rears its ugly head. He establishes the interconnected roles of personal ambition, scientific development, individual prejudices, institutional and corporate greed and racism that actually continue to promote a ruthless and systemic exploitation of Africans. He is wise, knowledgeable, down-to-earth in his expression, and direct in conveying his understanding of American history and politics.

It is most fitting that the narrator-protagonist does not view his personal crisis and that of his compeers as disconnected from the wider calamities which other minorities have suffered in the nation’s history. The capacity for empathy that Julius evinces is in harmony with documented facts about his character as a kind, compassionate, and unpretentious person who lives for others. He is generous with almsgiving, for instance, donating all his three-dollar change that he obtains at the post office to a homeless man camping there. One might argue that his altruistic commitment to self-extension in sacrificial service on behalf of others does not reach its height until he goes on vacation to Belgium, when he is moved by his tender heart to offer his own body in shielding a young mother and her child from unfavorable elements. But it is the same instinct we see leading him as a young hero swimmer to save another “mixed race” individual, a “half-Indian boy,” from drowning in “a large swimming pool on the campus of the University of Lagos” in the absence of lifeguards (195–196).

Significantly, the event of Julius’ sacrificial giving of his own body in protection of others involves his defiance of inclement weather and a large body of water, both of which can be unpredictable and hazardous. Julius’ ever-ready state

of alertness and his involuntary response, which the menacing threat from the stormy conditions elicit from him, are remarkable. On one of these occasions, he finds himself beside a young woman “walking in single file between ... buildings and some temporary barriers, flat panels of sturdy plastic anchored in concrete that had been set up for a construction project” (145). Then, a “sudden gust of wind lifted the panels, which were all tied to each other, and tipped them over, toward us” (145). Julius prevents the young woman and her child from getting in harm’s way just in the nick of time, just as in the swimming episode, where, but for his effort, “it might easily have been a tragic afternoon” because “What was hauled the short distance to the diving platform might have been a small, lifeless body” (196).

Julius is not only not caught unawares and unprepared to deal appropriately with bad weather and the uncertainty of drowning. He also has the charitable disposition to resist the natural compulsive inclination to put one’s own welfare ahead of the well-being of others more fragile than oneself.

Immediately I sprang forward and broke their fall with my hands and my body. I staggered, but did not lose my balance. The woman, who was young and Mediterranean-looking, in too-tight jeans, was able to swerve her pram out of harm’s way ... The young mother thanked me, again and again, gasping. She seemed stunned at how quickly it all happened. I waved it off, proud. (145)

Yet Julius is unsentimental; he has no self-glorification or showiness. In the swimming pool incident, for example, he says that

all that day’s detail was soon lost to me, and what remained most strongly was the sensation of being all alone in the water, that feeling of genuine isolation, as though I had been cast into some immense, and not unpleasant, blue chamber, far from humanity. (196)

Julius’ act is in the mold of heroic display, always a lonely venture, enabling him to touch so many people. This is the type of person we have come to know the storyteller to be: always kind-hearted, protective of others, but not seeking undue attention or adulation, and always putting himself last.

It doesn’t ever quite rise to the same degree of heroic display as the swimming pool incident or the rainy, windy day episode in Brussels. But it is nonetheless no less significant that evidence abounds aplenty, even back to his early childhood, of Julius’ fondness for identifying with the suffering of others and rising up in defense of the weak from the strong. For example, he would not remain nonchalant but instead becomes protective of a girl deformed by polio “which had withered her left foot into a twisted stump she dragged behind her when she walked,” afraid that his other primary school classmates, especially “the boys would mock her” (60). He is racked by debilitating fears of the disabled girl being taunted, and anxious to put out the fires. The narrator-

protagonist, seeing only the beauty in the object of his affections, “her ability to be comfortable with herself,” begins to “imagine a future life” with her, both of them only “eight or nine years old” (61). In the end, his plans do not pan out as hoped, though, because “her parents withdrew her, and she went to another school. I never saw her again after those first two weeks” (61). Nor should we forget the source of his initial attraction to his now estranged girlfriend Nadege, who walks with a limp because of a deformity and moves “her body in compensation for a malformation” (63).

One of Julius’ nameless friends from his “little group at the park” sees the challenge for each individual as being to rise to some form of heroism; “whether it is a parachute, or a dive from a cliff, or sitting perfectly still for an hour” (194–197). But none of these trivial adventures, satisfying as it might be to the adventurer, can quite equate in significance with the brave acts of saving the lives of other human beings. That’s why Julius’ description of himself as “so essentially indecisive” is off target; it contradicts his actual behavior. Julius might have filtered the incorrect perception of himself from the prism of inadequate self-understanding or just plain modesty, which is equally as unreliable. In this regard, his regular visits to undocumented immigration detention facilities as an adult in New York City, to commiserate with the inmates, come readily to mind as more telling in rounding out what the novel presents to the reader about who he is.

Indeed, one can legitimately say that Julius’ detention camp visits truly do complete a profile that can be made of a personality full of outflowing of mercy, sympathy, and compassion for lowly victims of tyranny, reflecting the heart of a champion for the underdog. It is particularly noteworthy that the migrant detainees that Julius goes to encourage and lend a listening ear to, the “Africans, Latinos, Eastern Europeans, Asians,” bear no kinship to him (63). One of them, Saidu, is fleeing war-torn Liberia; his terrible suffering is not atypical of the others’ as he has had to endure the unimaginable.

Saidu has dealt with the loss of close relatives. He knows the devastations of bereavement. He has seen friends maimed. He has himself labored on a rubber plantation; and he has to walk for days on a long and hazardous trip without food to get away. His resumé boasts of journeying through thick brushes and perilous terrain without roads across “the outskirts of Monrovia ... on foot to Guinea ... Bamako ... eating scraps at the marketplace, sleeping under the market tables at night” and making the tedious trek across Mauritania and Senegal, before securing his berth to Europe through tempestuous bodies of water by ferry (67–68). But what does Europe offer him in return? We learn that

Saidu entered Spain proper after three weeks, through Algeciras, on a ferry, and no papers were required. He found his way across the southern part of the country, begging in town squares, lining up at soup kitchens. Twice he picked pockets in crowded corners, throwing out the ID cards and credit cards, keeping the cash; this, he said, was the only crime he ever committed. He went all the way across southern Spain until he

crossed the Portuguese border, and he kept going until he got to Lisbon, which was sad and cold, but also impressive. And it was only after he arrived in Lisbon that the bad dreams stopped. He fell in with Africans there, working first as a butcher's assistant, and then as a barber.

Those were the longest two years of his life. He slept in a crowded living room with ten other Africans. Three of them were girls, and the men took turns with them and paid them, but he didn't touch them, because he had saved almost enough for the passport and his ticket. If he waited another month, it would be one hundred euros cheaper, but he couldn't wait; he had the option of saving money by flying to La Guardia, and he'd asked the ticketing agent if she was sure La Guardia was also in America. She had stared at him, and he shook his head, and bought the J.F.K ticket anyway, just to be sure. (68–69)

Saidu undertakes all these struggles, compelled to steal and obtain fake passports, enduring great deprivations, and facing personal hazards and difficulties to get to America, only to end up at the immigration detention camp, locked up in a cell there, without any family members nearby to support him, for “more than two years.” He makes “an appeal, but it was rejected” (64). This is the background to Saidu's disappointment which is so huge that he has become completely dejected, “tired of hoping” (64).

The struggles of Saidu closely correspond to the precarious circumstances known by many other immigrants from Africa and their search for better lives abroad that often only leads them into quagmires. His experience calls attention to a pattern of predicaments that other people running away from bad situations at home are all too familiar with. When the narrator-protagonist visits him, Saidu draws encouragement from his comforting presence and expresses his gratitude. The storyteller's concerns for his personal welfare are balanced by those he has for others; he takes the fight for social justice for all personally, for he takes the suffering of others personally as well.

It seems that the same can be said of Julius' handling of the accusation of sexual assault leveled at him by Moji, his childhood friend “Dayo Kasali's sister” (197). The reader watches with profound anxiety her furious confrontation of him after the party at the luxurious New York City apartment of her boyfriend John. There Moji stakes the claim that Julius “had forced” himself “on her” and “in the weeks that followed, in the months and years that followed, I had acted like I knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when we met again, and had never tried to acknowledge what I had done” (244). She appears to speak for other victims of sexual assault, unburdening herself of the pain she has borne over the years, “the bitterness ... eating away at me all this time, because this was so long ago” (244). She says she is cast down by the fear of what the public perception might be of “just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed” as “it's my word against yours, and you'll say it was consensual” (255).

This is a serious charge, and if true, it should be the filthiest stain on Julius' character. It would mean that Julius had taken lightly a crime as serious as rape. But perhaps his election to not argue when confronted with the charge is indicative that the older Julius has grown to be more respectful of the feelings of aggrieved victims, and his absolute silence may be both an admission of guilt and some form of penance. One would hope Julius' character has undergone genuine transformation, and never again would he even remotely contemplate such a misdeed.

Remarkably, *Open City* inverts the formula of writing in the institution of the Nigerian migration novel, which devotes most attention to the physical and material impacts of the trauma of displacement. But it does not entirely overlook those issues. *Open City's* decentering of the thematic emphasis of its forebears, however, is pivotal to its purpose. It is what permits the text, for example, to take readers a good distance in the pursuit of understanding a significant aspect of the phenomenon that Nigerian novelist, Chris Abani, himself now exiled in the United States, cogently terms the exile's "melancholy tension ... the wound the true self carries."¹²

In *Open City*, a major component of that "wound" is comprised of the thick pall of discouragement arising from the refusal of white people in the non-inclusive American hegemonic order to treat the story's debonair narrator-protagonist, Julius, and his fellow African immigrants, as their social equals. Julius is a young bi-racial Nigerian medical doctor resident in New York City. If any individual in all of Nigerian immigrant fiction is a fit for the role of scapegoat, bringing to life the struggles of a cross-section of professionals in the community that is his charge, it is certainly Julius by virtue of his liminal status as a male African alien with a bi-racial identity that complicates his misery.

Throughout this novel Julius is racked by racial anxiety. He carries with him too much of the unvoiced burden of isolation of being an only child, and he is volubly bothered by separation from his troubled native land. There is no doubt that it is a country he has in truth only a love-hate relationship with. As for his dysfunctional family, it is a unit he has but a marginal social connection to. Nevertheless, all things considered, perhaps the most consequential of Julius' problems is the identity crisis which hangs heavily on him as his most crippling limitation. Julius himself admits, with his characteristic candor, that he is scarred for life by confusion about who he is:

The name Julius linked me with another place and was, with my passport and my skin color, one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different, of being set apart, in Nigeria. I had a Yoruba middle name, Olatubosun, which I never used. That name surprised me a little each time I saw it on my passport or birth certificate, like something that belonged to someone else but had been long held in my keeping. Being Julius in everyday life thus confirmed me in my not being fully Nigerian. I don't know what my father had hoped for in naming his son after his wife; she must have disliked the idea, as she disliked anything that came from sentimentality. Her own name

must have been taken from somewhere in her family line, too, a grandmother, perhaps, or some distant aunt, a forgotten Julianna, an unknown Julia or Julietta. She had in her early twenties extricated herself from Germany and run off to the United States. Julianna Muller had become Julianne Miller. (78)

In secondary school, Julius' identity is mistaken, too. He is wrongly identified by Musibau, his music instructor at the Nigerian Military School, in Zaria, for example, as a "half-Nigerian, a foreigner" (83). Musibau associates Julius with the power of the privileged class, "swimming lessons, summer trips to London, domestic staff, and thus his anger" (83). That's why Musibau is not content with privately chiding his student over mishandling a newspaper reserved for faculty. Instead, he calls Julius up to stand in front of his class for public shaming. He then rains down savage insults on Julius, before appropriating to himself the right to serve a severe form of what should be corporal punishment. "This boy is a thief," Musibau announces in justifying his caning, labeling Julius "a disgrace to the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and to the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and to the Nigerian Military School" (84).

Then Julius emigrates to the United States and finds he has no full sense of belonging there either. He writes of the weight of discomfort which his presence in the acutely segregated spaces of America gives rise to as follows:

Most of the people around me yesterday were middle-aged or old. I am used to it, but it never ceases to surprise me how easily it is to leave the hybridity of the city, and enter into all-white spaces, the homogeneity of which, as far as I can tell, causes no discomfort to the whites in them. The only thing odd, to some of them, is seeing me, young and black, in my seat or at the occasion stand. At times, standing in line for the bathroom during intermission, I get looks that make me feel like Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was put on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. I weary of such thoughts, but I am habituated to them. (252–253)

Here, Julius is talking about the social anxiety of his attendance at a classical music concert in which his presence becomes a source of spectacle. It is similar to events from close to a 100 years earlier, shortly after Europeans and Americans first came into contact with non-Western and distant places, when Africans were brought home and put on display as objects of exhibition for commercial and educational purposes and the entertainment of Western audiences. One would have hoped that long contact might have completely dispelled the Western theories of race that questioned the humanity of Africans, but, sadly enough, the debate still remains alive and well among whites in America.

Yet, Julius' story is not just a tragic mulatto narrative, and he certainly expresses no self-pity though by no means does he attain the stature of a saint either. Rather, his tale of lament is invariably a lament for his nation, particularly for the circumstances that foment the mass expatriation of its citizens

and the uncomfortable situations they contend with abroad. True, there seems to be a conspiracy among the forces Julius has to struggle to overcome both at home in Nigeria and abroad. In the constraining power imbalances embedded in the social fabric of his adopted new home, the agonies of exile spare no émigré of his background. Exile is not for the faint-hearted. The trials that immigrants like Julius are stricken by are irrational. Bigotry, domination of the weak by the strong, and manifestations of unequal treatment: none of these is experienced only by those who were forced out of their native countries by intolerable conditions, and who also lack great educational attainments, high professional reputations, or economic muscle.

Otherwise, disrespect should be the last thing Julius ought ever to have expected to be within earshot. Regardless of what would normally be an esteemed occupational footing and a quite exalted economic standing in his transplanted setting, however, respect isn't exactly among the treatments he is accorded by the public. Americans may know the truth, but they largely suppress or deny a public recognition of the high professional performances of immigrants like Julius. A retired Belgian surgeon resident in the United States, Dr. Annette Maillotte, who has performed "gastrointestinal surgery in Philadelphia for the last forty years," and is honest, fair, and kind enough privately to attest that "Nigerian residents are excellent," concedes a truth that should be publicly acknowledged, namely that, in her words, "foreign graduates are a lot better trained than people who went through the American system; for one thing, they tend to have outstanding diagnostic skills" (88–89).

Regardless of this intellectual superiority of many immigrant groups, Julius feels no love in his newly adopted country. Of course, no one leaving the native land for residence in another country can reasonably expect the transition to be seamless. Julius certainly does not give the impression that he thinks the adjustment will be painless. But the novel is emphatic about the manner in which Julius is tested and worn down, in ways that he could not have anticipated, by other social matters besides those to do with the routine mental slog and daily grind of life in the United States.

In-depth exploration of the inner life of a protagonist as the focal point of a novel is of course not new in Nigerian literature. The standard was first set in the country with the publication of Wole Soyinka's widely celebrated and disconcerting prison memoir, *The Man Died*, a formative text in the tradition of singing a dirge for a nation in disintegration while paying tribute to the indomitable human spirit and the elemental longing for freedom, in throbbing, elevated prose approximating the language of poetry.¹³ However, not since Soyinka's prison account has any fictional text in the rich Nigerian literary history hung its hat on the inmost mournful thoughts of its mentally tortured main character quite in the manner witnessed in Teju Cole's *Open City*. But making his task even more formidable is that Cole is not the first Nigerian author to model his novel on Soyinka's prison narrative, an observation that in itself demands, in a sense, that he has to separate himself from the pack. That's why the detachment that he maintains in *Open City* is notably different from

Isidore Okpewho's fine rendition in *Tide* of Soyinka's introspective technique, for example, employed with variation in tandem with a telling use of the diary format as a mode of fictional construction.¹⁴

Rather than establishing a tendency toward the tradition of its progenitors, as exclusively a documentary narrative teeming with a focus on the exterior life, *Open City* secures a fresh start for the Nigerian immigration novel. The locus for Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, to return to a familiar text, for example, is explicitly on material privations and their calamitous assaults on the migrant worker, which are without doubt no less harrowing to undergo, as seen in the previous chapter. *Open City*, by contrast, fashions a radical self-distancing from that convention, and in it author Cole, it is clear, has naturally and significantly found himself drawn to the contemplative form with the elegiac texture. *Open City*'s appropriation of the properties of the brooding narrative, its main departure from its predecessors in the tradition of Nigerian immigrant literature, seems so natural to it that it is out-and-out about the emotional disequilibrium stemming from expatriation.

In stressing new elements of interest, *Open City* focalizes with intensity an elaboration of the pervading aura of the uprooted main character Julius' sense of out-of-placeness. This inner turmoil is expressed in the form of something approximating the pattern of an extended monologue. The use of the vehicles of rhythmic cadences for this exploration, while it is not novel in Nigerian fiction per se, represents a new contribution to the tradition of the country's immigrant fiction. It is a strategy most suitable for capturing the uninhibited flow of the protagonist's inner experiences, as already demonstrated by Soyinka's *The Man Died*, and it comes across in *Open City* as a form resembling the stream-of-consciousness technique, in this instance deployed as if keeping time to the measure of a beat in the head of the narrator. The newness of this style in Cole's hands lies in the manner in which the prose language approximates the calculated patterns of non-free verse poetry, commensurate with the measure of protagonist Julius' elevated thoughts.

Julius is emotionally drained, haunted by the specter of deadly isolation. The severance that plunges him into despair is not unrelated to the separation from his loved ones (being cut off from his own disaffected mother) and surviving alone in America, in a new territory. Not belonging anywhere and in every sense is what becomes progressively more unsettling for him. He is cut off physically and emotionally from what would normally be regarded as his fatherland, and left with only a dubious identification with it. Julius is in truth hanging over the precipice of mental breakdown. Not only has he no firm ties to Nigeria, the place he ought to claim as his fatherland, and the language spoken there is foreign to him, but he is unfamiliar with the culture he is cut off from. Equally challenging for him, more recently he has split up with his girlfriend Nadege, who has relocated from New York City to San Francisco, with his plans of maintaining a long-distance relationship by phone with her facing a test of their own, culminating in a final break-up. The news of her eventual marriage to another man, a Haitian-American, could not possibly come at a worse time, just when he is mourning the

death of his old teacher and friend Professor Saito and needs her shoulder to lean on. Julius is thus desperately searching for a personal human contact in a disconnected world, a world which seems to have rejected him. Though surrounded by thousands of strangers in a place as jammed as New York City, there is no bond of understanding between Julius and those around him. This social isolation heightens his unutterably unbearable condition as an exile cast into a jungle where the strong prey on the weak and survival is for the fittest.

In *Open City*, the consequences of the negative drive of paramount individualism and self-reliance are grim and inescapable for urban dwellers. Too many of them seem compelled to live with the divisions self-sufficiency promotes. The absence of shared joy or grief leaves the people living without natural affection, their souls deadened to the needs of others. There is no mistaking, as an illustration of the grotesqueness of obsessive individualism, the misfortune that befalls Julius' next-door, seventh-floor apartment neighbor Seth, whom he sees "only about once a month, just outside the building or near the mail box" and his wife Carla, whom Julius "met only twice after they moved in" (20). One day Julius and Seth cross paths while returning from their separate grocery shopping trips. At their apartment elevator door Julius is informed by his neighbor that he is now living alone because "Carla died in June ... She had a heart attack" (20). Julius is instantly overtaken by perplexity, and his reflections on the sad news provide a mirror to the depths of the soul of isolated urban existence.

Julius' thoughts center principally on the absurdity of the individualistic lifestyle. One of his exasperations is that his neighbor's wife Carla "had died in the room next to mine ... she had died on the other side of the wall I was leaning against, and I had known nothing of it" (21). But Julius is additionally stunned that he "had known nothing in the weeks when her husband mourned, nothing when I had nodded to him in greeting with headphones in my ears, or when I had folded clothes in the laundry room while he used the washer" (21). Of course, it would be inconceivable for such a thing to happen in a society that valorizes human togetherness and deep human bonds, where the walls of privacy are not kept sky-high. The heavy emotional burden individuals bear alone as a result of disconnectedness of people is conveyed in the touching scene of Julius' condolence message. He feels he must communicate his sympathies with affection but without sounding overfamiliar. A sense of the inadequacy of the healing touch of words in such a context overwhelms Julius. The insufficiency of the belated consolation gesture which he directs at the widower overburdens him.

These social pressures are chiefly remarkable for their unsparing onslaught on Julius. The mental and psychological anguish of alienation is made more real and heightened for him. Thoughts about his adopted new country call up only what Julius calls his own "unacknowledged traumas" (7). The cumulative impact of isolation on the Nigerian exile is effectively to force him to internalize such intense consciousness of his own sense of non-belonging everywhere, be it to a nation, race, ethnicity, family, or social group that is so paralyzing as to render him disconsolate.

The only community fostered by urban living that Julius knows in America is a superficial one incensed by the herd instinct. This body is when people are brought together for a common political cause. A preeminent example is the crowd of women at a protest rally that he watches from his open apartment window marching toward Amsterdam Avenue chanting “*women’s bodies, women’s lives, we will not be terrorized*” (21). Within the context of obsessive individualism promoted by the urban setting, a political group action such as this one seen on the streets is perceived to be a non-threatening activity. It cannot breach the comfortable privacy lines drawn and held so dear by individual participants. Group political activity therefore poses not even a shred of potential danger to the walls of individual self-enclosure. On the other side of the equation is conduct permitted by invasive personal friendships both in and outside of the immediate family which can spiral out of control to stir envy, jealousy, malice, rivalry, wounded pride, resentment, personal ambition, and other negative passions that can eventually lead to deadly results like robbery, blackmail, plunder, and even murder or homicide.

Under the code of hyper-individualism, group political action can be safely pursued even by strangers, who cordially come together in public spaces for common goals or to advance their own selfish ambitions and purposes under a common umbrella. Such an exercise allows distancing from the potentially compromising involvement of any personal intimacy. But the individualistic lifestyle pursued with persistent fear of the value of personal human relationships carries a heavy price tag. The cost of having self-interest and self-preservation as vital principles, the individual accountable only to him/herself, is not only keeping alive divisions, stereotypes, and prejudice. The individual additionally becomes cut off from the support system a community could provide, leading to the loss of the fierce personal loyalty people with interwoven private lives normally show to each other in good and bad times alike.

Open City’s candid exploration of the tribulations of a corrosive culture of individualism makes it partly a novel of growing indignation at the lack of meaningful human contact accentuated by the throes of immigration, and partly a novel about the damaging effects of the racial politics of identity. The American culture deserves to be recognized and celebrated for being a capacious monster that can accommodate both pockets of the nurturing communal spirit, like those found among the Jewish communities and the Amish people (not themselves a subject of this novel), and the ethos of the dominant insular individualistic temper (the focus of the novel). But readers cannot dismiss out of hand the role of the overwhelming isolation that the unsympathetic, rigid, and cynical libertarian culture buries its minority refugees in either.

True, the ennui, despair, and apprehensiveness that assail Julius reflect, to some extent, the generational impact of the disturbing circumstances of his mother’s background in World War II Germany and its sorrowful shadow on her sporadic, despondent, and temperamental parenting style. The root of her bitterness and disenchantment is her unplanned birth. She is the product of sexual violence committed against her mother, Julius’ grandmother, “oma, heavily

pregnant ... likely ... one of the countless women raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could not have escaped it" (80). This baleful beginning is the origin of the gloom and doom that hangs over Julius' mother. Her melancholia is accentuated by the barriers of extreme destitution in which she grows up. Readers learn that the "poverty of life in Magdeburg" was "intensified by the horrors each relative, neighbor, and friend had endured during the war" (80). It is easy to understand why, "born into an unspeakably bitter world, a world without sanctity ... decades later, losing her husband," she would "displace the grief of widowhood onto that primal grief, and make of the two pains a continuity" (80).

Julius does not neglect to acknowledge his growing up a disaffected individual with little meaningful communication or relationship with his own mother because of her fatalistic attitude. Her start in life does not have a good foundation and she becomes not only unable to overcome it or contain the hurt in her fractured relationship with her own mother, Julius' grandmother. The last straw is that she cannot avoid extending her dysfunctional family culture to the household of her own son's childhood, making the void, the chasm that codifies her life, the lack of joy, the absence of the wellsprings of the brightest hopes, become his inheritance as well. She thus passes on to the next generation the structure of feeling which dominates her life: a ruling passion composed of anger and resentment. This continuity in family culture from mother to son is so bad that when Julius plans for his future, he hides his plans from his own mother. "My mother knew I was taking SAT, but she didn't know about my applications to colleges in America; my purchase of a post office box helped perfect the concealment," he reveals (84-85). He secures the college admission on a "full scholarship" and yet he still keeps his mother out of the loop (85). Julius shuts his own mother out of his life. "With borrowed money from my uncles," he tells us, "I bought a ticket to New York to begin life in the new country, fully on my own terms" (85). Julius is determined to test the water on his own terms. But without the shoulders of his only surviving parent to lean on, this independent journey on which he is embarking leaves the young man highly vulnerable.

Julius' mother's behavior, which justifies his cancelling her out of his life, could be seen to conform with a syndrome described by Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart as "the disruptive impact of traumatic experiences."¹⁵ The ailment identified by Kolk and Hart refers of course to the overwhelming burden of the past, whereby unhealed injuries have uncanny powers to govern the actions people take after the event. In their study of patients conditioned by awful experiences they cannot escape or control, the authors cite "how certain memories became obstacles that kept people from going on with their lives" (158). The pitiful way Julius' mother goes about her parenting business clearly fits this pattern with its circle of self-perpetuating bitterness. She is simultaneously a victim and a perpetrator of domestic instability. The catastrophic events in her life simply refuse to go away and the generational consequences are therefore seismic. Her memory relentlessly holds on to her past as a continuing presence in her life, impelling her to be aloof,

withdrawn, given to mood swings, tantrums, furious madness, and post-traumatic depression—behaviors no responsible parent should exhibit, and that cannot be displayed in front of impressionable children without serious repercussions. Children going through the formative stages of social identity require the adults around them to provide nurture, stability, and environments that are safe and secure in order to grow into stable, confident, and rounded personalities.

A critical consequence of growing up under such uncongenial family circumstances is Julius' estrangement from his mother, as the profound social isolation created by her mis-parenting methods precipitates his monstrous alienation. But, while his subsequent feeling of statelessness and non-belonging generally confers on him a sense of being a citizen of the world without borders, it also renders him intensely anchorless. This bleak and dismal condition sets up a volatile future; it is like a keg of gunpowder waiting to be lit up at any moment. And ignite it does, after Julius leaves his Nigerian home for the United States. In exile the melancholic young man's alienation, amplified by his deepening sense of uprootedness, explodes. Julius finds himself among a sea of other human beings in an overcrowded city but feels no personal connection with anyone, heightening the mental and emotional challenges of his exile.

One of the notable feats of *Open City* as a novel is its starkly brutal realism, its sense of verisimilitude. Instead of offering readers a deodorized version, for example, Julius' portrait does not smooth out the rough edges of his personality. It hides nothing of the feeling of deep malaise that sweeps over his soul, exacerbated by his dislocation. Other than his night-time interludes of relief, *Open City's* doleful protagonist knows no peace. No sooner does he catch a nap, however, than he is startled with the onset of daylight by his phone's alarm bell, and then the nagging consciousness of his waking terrors returns to stare him in the face like an enduring nightmare. The deepening sense of emptiness not only elevates his alienation from society to another level but it also evokes a disposition of deep gloom as Julius searches everywhere to find a blueprint for joy and gladness.

The unrelenting effort he makes to find peace in the pages of a book, for example, is highlighted to underline not just the many strategies that Julius futilely turns to but also his high level of desperation. In the end, he does not find calmness of mind where he thinks he will find it, reading a book. Not even moving from silent reading to reading books aloud makes any difference, because neither method is able to drown his misery. So Julius' woeful hopes that the reading process can lead to his spiritual renewal compel him next to turn fruitlessly to another hobby, "watching bird migrations" from his apartment window (3). He next tries listening to exotic music on the radio, pieces from Europe in Dutch, German, and French—melody conveyed in languages he can barely comprehend—becoming more or less his habitual favorite radio tunes. The search for these alien jingles, beamed from stations in far-away lands, may express Julius' aspirations to cosmopolitan sensibilities as well as his faith in the edifying capacity of unfamiliar sounds. But it is a questing endeavor which also proves ineffectual in the long run, although the silver lining, music's potential healing power, does not go unacknowledged by him.

Indeed, *Open City* aggressively touts the affective theory of music as good for the soul, telling a spellbinding tale of the capability of tunes not only to trigger fond memories but to engender a sense of utopia, transporting the listener from somberness into a state of revelry. This embodied and immanent power of music to change moods reveals itself during one of Julius' jogs. He finds himself drifting into a familiar spot, "the big Tower Records store on the corner of Sixty-sixth Street." Alerted by the shop's liquidation notices, Julius stops because he "had been in the store many times before" and "had probably spent hundreds of dollars on music there, and it seemed right, if only for old times' sake, to revisit it before the doors closed for good" (16).

In one of the most sublime and energetic scenes of meditation in the novel, the grace and acuity of Julius' perception are made manifest in his defense of the formidable link between emotion and music. He does not "particularly feel like buying anything," but he takes the escalator anyhow to "the second floor, where the classical section, busier than usual, seemed to have been commandeered by old and middle-aged men in drab coats" (16). Julius notices all these shoppers "going through the CD bins with something of the patience of grazing animals, and some of them had red shopping baskets into which they dropped their selections, while others clutched the shiny plastic packages to their chests" (16). The store's stereo is "playing Purcell, a rousing anthem ... one of the birthday odes for Queen Mary." We are told that Julius "usually disliked whatever was being played on a music store's speakers," considering it a distraction because it "spoiled the pleasure of thinking about other music"; record shops, he feels, "should be silent spaces; there more than anywhere else, the mind needed to be clear" (16). On this occasion, however, he approves of what he hears. Next comes "the opening movement of Mahler's late symphony *Das Lied von der Erde*," as Julius continues his "browsing, moving from bin to bin, from reissues of Shostakovich symphonies played by long-forgotten Soviet regional orchestras to Chopin recitals by fresh-faced Van Cliburn Competition runners-up." But, considering the discounts not attractive enough, he loses "any real interest in shopping" and he slowly and "finally" begins to "acclimatize to the music playing overhead and to enter the strange hues of the world" (16).

Julius extols what he perceives as music's capacity to exercise a commanding and shaping influence while deploring the expressive limitations imposed by the absence of privacy within the public sphere in particular. For him, the lift a tune gives the listener is the measure of its quality, as the listener gives him/herself up to its control, allowing it to take possession of his/her impulses. But in his view, personal privacy is a requisite condition for music's full impact to take effect because the genre does not permit the public expression of private sentiment. Here is his description of the palpable force and dizzying effect of music when experienced on a grand scale:

It happened subliminally, but before long, I was rapt and might have, for all the world, been swaddled in a private darkness. In this trance, I continued to move from one row of compact discs to another, thumping through

plastic cases, magazines, and printed scores, and listening as one movement of the Viennese chinoiserie succeeded another. On hearing Christa Ludwig's voice, in the second movement, a song about the loneliness of autumn, I recognized the recording as the famous one conducted by Otto Klemperer in 1964. With that awareness came another: that all I had to do was bide my time, and wait for the emotional core of the work, which Mahler had put in the final movement of the symphony. I sat on one of the hard benches near the listening stations, and sank into reverie, and followed Mahler through drunkenness, longing, bombast, youth (with its fading), and beauty (with its fading). Then came the final movement ... the Farewell, and Mahler ... had marked it schwer, difficult. (17)

Julius is very demonstrative about the cumulative impact of the tune, which he experiences as something like being hit by a thunderbolt. He stresses how the "birdsong and beauty, the complaints and high-jinks of the preceding movement" get "supplanted by a different mood, a stronger, surer mood," causing some kind of "lights ... without warning" to "come blazing into my eyes" (17). Although he tries to blunt the visceral impact, conscious that it "simply wasn't possible to enter the music fully ... in that public place," it is clear that Julius is unsuccessful in his effort to hold it back (17). One song's resounding clarity takes possessive hold of him, sending echoes that reverberate through his head as he makes his way into "the uptown train just as the doors were closing" (17). It is the "five-note figure from 'Der Abschied'" and it

continued on from where I escaped, playing through with such presence that it was though I were in the store listening to it ... the clarinet, the resin of the violins and violas, the vibrations of the timpani, and the intelligence that held them all together and drew them endlessly along the musical line. My memory was overwhelmed. The song followed me home. (17)

The dark side of music can have a reputation for stirring up the worst passions in people's hearts. But Julius emphasizes the joyous intensity of music that casts its radiance upon his countenance. It momentarily brightens up his mood, in terms of both the nature of objects around him and his relationship to them, so that he can see only bright spots everywhere. Julius' statement that "Mahler's music fell over" his "activities for the entirety of the following day" is a witness testimony not only about the revival, renewal, and motivation it brings him but about how it changes everything in his surroundings. In this manner, Julius is enabled to perceive "some new intensity in even the most ordinary things around the hospital" (17-18). His outlook is so brightened that it is reflected in how he reads objects around him,

the gleam on the glass doors at the entrance of the Milstein Building, the examination tables and gurneys down on the ground floor, the stacks of patients' files in the psychiatry department, the light from the windows in the cafeteria, the sunken heads of uptown buildings from the height, as if

the precision of the orchestral texture had been transferred to the world of visible things, and every detail had somehow become significant. (18)

But Julius does not realize until too late that his next move, the resort to “aimless wandering” on the bursting streets of New York City that affords him so much pleasure of ardent contemplation, will not be unattended by discomfort or even danger. These leisure-walks offer a space to breathe and Julius enjoys them for the most part, acknowledging that they bring him some relief from “the tightly regulated mental environment of work,” the “regimen of perfection and competence” that “neither allowed improvisation nor tolerated mistakes” (7). In a parallel of the journey that is migration, Julius sallies out onto the streets, where his soul has room to roam about freely. “Every decision—where to turn left, how long to remain lost in thought in front of an abandoned building, whether to watch the sun set over New Jersey, or to lope in the shadows on the East Side looking across to Queens—was inconsequential”; it “was for that reason a reminder of freedom” (7). Strolling the streets also allows him to sneak away for an important meeting with an old friend, the lead-up to his visit to a music shop, followed by a train station, and finally a museum gallery. All the venues become sites of his profound reflections on subjects as mystifying as excursions into the past and the overcompensating gifts that seem to attach themselves to disabilities like blindness, deafness, and dumbness.

However, danger always lurks around the corner as his strolls unexpectedly take on an ambivalent character that switches in an instant from being uplifting to downright discomfiting. Ironically, it is at a time when Julius’ sorrows seem to be falling away, even if momentarily, that his leisure-walks on the hazardous streets of New York City will bring him into confrontation with the deadly phenomenon of street violence and the indifference to life it signifies. Julius’ gut-wrenching encounter with purposeless violence is part of the unpleasant turn of events that sooner rather than later will escalate his level of unrest, the very opposite of the object of his search. Here is a part of his description of the sudden shattering of a moment of relative tranquility which troubles him greatly:

At first, I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness, a shock after the day’s focus and relative tranquility, as though someone had shattered the calm of a silent private chapel with the blare of a TV set. I wove my way through crowds of shoppers and workers, through road constructions and the horns of taxicabs. Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day, but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them. I became more tired, too, after the walks began, an exhaustion unlike any I had known since the first months of internship, three years earlier. (6)

The memory that this report unearths comes across, even for the innocent reader, as too close for comfort. The climate of fear compounds the existing

dreadful situation for immigrants like Julius who have already suffered untold hardships. The indignities of abandoning their fatherlands, their families and friends are aggravated by being tormented by memories of vacated places and besieged by feeling like outcasts in the foreign lands into which they have relocated. Migrants like him already deal with the sinister struggles uniquely reserved for people reduced to second-class citizenship. Having to now take on an additional layer of stress, in also not being exempt from the trials experienced by all urban dwellers, adds more salt. Julius represents one such trying circumstance, not untypical of the urban experience, in the arresting episode that he likens to a moment in which “someone had shattered the calm of a silent private chapel with the blare of a TV set.”

The intrusive image is freighted with suggestions of fear sparked by the random violence to be seen on the streets of urban America. Julius cannot help being overtaken by the darkening mood. As a newcomer, walking the packed streets of New York City in broad daylight only to be suddenly confronted with such a rude awakening, he is clearly petrified to witness for the first time the state of insecurity that residents of the city endure on a daily basis. The image contains hints of how inhabitants of urban areas in the United States are subjected to the culture of casual violence and terror. The implication of the indirect reference to random armed violence in urban America is that its perpetual reoccurrence naturally numbs city residents. They become so accustomed to the barbarity that they by and by accommodate or learn to live with it as a routine aspect of their lives.

Inasmuch as the writing is on the wall all around him, even Julius comes belatedly to the smothering realization that “violence for sport was no strange thing in the city” (216). He hears stories of colleagues who report being mugged and robbed, like the person “on the service” who “had her purse snatched” (216). One nurse, too, “a burly, soft-spoken Portuguese-American,” tells of having “his jaw broken by a gang, and they had left his wallet, his watch, his gold chain, and taken only his iPod. He’d needed seventeen stitches across his face” (216). All of these are black-on-black crimes; still, Julius does not really think any of this will happen to him until it actually does; and even then, the way his mugging begins leaves him initially completely unsuspecting until it is already unstopably advanced.

The three-man gang assault on Julius begins almost beguilingly. He first meets up with two of the gang members, and they feign a friendship with him, a sort of fraternity of fellow sufferers based on “our being young, black male” (212). Julius takes assurance from the fact that black males do habitually exchange sympathetic glances on the streets of New York City “every minute of the day, a quick solidarity worked into the weave of each other’s mundane pursuits, a nod or smile or quick greeting” behind which is “a little way of saying, I know something of what life is like for you out there” (212). But what is unknown to Julius is that the third member of the gang is walking behind them. It is this member of the gang who pounces on him when the moment is ripe, and before Julius knows it, in a dark alley he feels “the first blow, on my shoulder. A second,

heavier, landed on the small of my back, and my legs gave way like sticks. I fell to the ground” (212). He adds the following detail:

They began to kick me all over—shins, back, arms—a quick, preplanned choreography. I shouted, begging them to stop, conscious of a man on the ground being beaten. Then I lost the will to speak, and took the blows in silence. The initial awareness of pain was gone, but now came anticipation of how much it would hurt later, how bad tomorrow would be, for both my body and my mind. My mind had gone blank except for this lone thought, a thought that made my eyes sting, a prospect more painful, it seemed, than the blows. (212)

When it’s all over, the mugging has left Julius severely bruised, and it “was clear that they [the gang members] did not intend to kill me ... no gun had been brandished and no explanations given” (212). But the gang has also made away with “my wallet and my phone,” says Julius (213). The source of Julius’ greatest astonishment is that no one has been willing to respond to his calls for help as “I sat on the road in silence, bewildered, thinking it could have been worse, thinking, too, that it had been inevitable” (213). People just mind their own businesses; not even the lone individual who appears to be a sole witness of the mugging and robbery committed against Julius, “an elderly man in overalls,” heeds his call for help (214).

Picking myself up, brushing my clothes clean, I began to walk, limping a little, gritting my teeth, feeling the ugliness spread across my face. But this person bought my disguise ... He walked past, and did not notice, or did not care to notice, that I had just been beaten. (214)

It makes sense, then, that the prevalence of wanton violence in the inner cities of America tops the list of events that shock African immigrants and sends the greatest tremors into their hearts upon their arrival in the country. Watching or even just hearing stories of innocent people walking down the streets of American cities either being mugged and robbed, or being confronted by sudden and rapid blasts of gunfire naturally chills new immigrants to their bones. Each day, many hundreds of innocent people are caught in the crossfire of gang warfare or mowed down by stray bullets in such a manner. African immigrants fleeing admittedly horrendous economic and political conditions in their home countries cannot bear the sights of such dastardly and cold-blooded murders. Here Julius effectively captures the unease of what must be unquestionably a massively disconcerting, intrusive experience.

On top of all that, Julius talks about the curious experience of African immigrants inexplicably finding themselves victims of the inability of Americans to think for themselves. He takes the pulse of the nation and identifies one fatal habit: “a mood in the society” impelling “people toward snap judgments and unexamined opinions, an antiscientific mood ... the old problem of innumeracy

... was being added to a general inability to assess evidence" (28). It renders the mass of the people prone to supreme gullibility to the "cause" of "partisanship" (28). As a consequence, America hardens itself into divisions along racial, ethnic, religious, and age lines. Meanwhile the gross misunderstanding of Africa is gargantuan, as it is easier for Americans to lump all the countries and peoples of that continent together and more comfortable for white people to see black people through the lens of white stereotypes of blacks.

Julius attends a cinema in New York City, for instance, which opens with a film about Kenya, an East African country. However, the "jaunty credit sequence featured music" from Mali, a West African country, instead of "from the right part of Africa," leading Julius to ask himself "what Mali had to do with Kenya" (29). Often, any one African from a particular country is taken as representative of the continent as a whole. There is a meeting "one evening, in an opulent house in a suburb of Madison" while Julius is in medical school. The host, Dr. Gupta, once expelled from Uganda in East Africa by the dictatorship of Idi Amin, minces no words in directing the venom of his hate and anger at him, a Nigerian and the only African among the guests.

Even young white children are not immune from the disease of racial stereotyping afflicting their parents. There is another unforgettable moment when Julius is addressed by a smothering ethnic epithet. He is sitting at an "an almost empty subway station" and "a family of out-of-towners waiting for a train" stops by (31). One of the children, a white girl of 13, sits next to Julius on a bench, and her ten-year-old brother joins her there. Several important points emerge from the unsavory behavior of the children during the interaction that takes place. The children are out of the parents' earshot, and the girl accosts Julius: "Hey mister, she said, turning to me, wassup? She made signs with her fingers and, with her brother, started laughing" (31). Immediately, the siblings jointly address Julius with a harsh and inflammatory racial slur: "Are you a gangster, mister? Are you a gangster? They both flashed gang signs, or their idea of gang signs" (31–32). Even the girl's attempt at self-correction falls within the fold of standard white stereotypes: "He's black, said the girl, but he's not dressed like a gangster. I bet he's a gangster, her brother said, I bet he is" (32). So all the children see is the color of Julius' skin—his difference from the norm in their majority-white society. The two white children do not see Julius as just another human being who happens to be sitting near them. That's why they are immediately judgmental of him. Looking at Julius, these children see a puzzle. In their evaluation of what they take to be his menacing appearance (as the representative of a minority) these children also see a yawning deficit. This shortfall is the failure of the black subject to fit into his stereotypical ethnic image, which stacks the odds even more heavily against him as a black male in America. His observers do not quite know what to do with him because they cannot predict what he will do. A gangster robs or burgles; but what about his look-alike? What is he up to? These children cannot figure out the odd black man sitting next to them on the bench; so they put him in a capsule and open up a debate about his true identity.

To be the object of the sneer of one's peers is bad enough. But nothing can be more debilitating than to be despised by total strangers. What is even worse is for an adult like Julius to watch little children in their presumed innocence so innocuously betray the prejudice of their parents. So discomfited does he become by the two white children showing such blatant racism, he simply walks away from the scene of his verbal assault. Julius becomes too dumbfounded and embarrassed to respond to the insults being hurled at him as his thoughts instead are momentarily thrown into a confusing swirl. Julius is overcome by homesickness, and his mind is cast adrift between Nigeria and Europe. He begins to pine desperately for reunion with his maternal grandmother whom he suspects to have relocated from Germany to Belgium following the death of his grandfather.

The incendiary name, apparently innocently expressed but racially charged, that the two white children give to a total stranger based on his skin color lays bare the troubling legacy of persecution of black peoples in US race relations, alongside what later became known as the white rage that fuels it. When the white children see Julius, all they have been conditioned by their culture is to see a black man as a source of spectacle and an object of their derisive laughter. Their casual encounter with this Nigerian immigrant exposes the pervasive social anxiety sparked by the black presence and how whites see and treat blacks derogatorily in America. The episode places on record the persistence of seeing through the lens of skin color, which continues to permit the lumping of all black peoples into one single negative category. These two white children, acting as transmitters of prejudices passed on to them by the adults around them, refract the black image in the white person's mind. Their behavior conveys the certain longevity of racial misunderstandings, since today's children are more likely than not, when they themselves become adults, to teach their own children the same ideas. These white children in turn then continue to construct their own sense of superiority upon the presumed inferior identity of blacks. In this way the circle is maintained: the circulation of racial prejudice goes on uninterrupted from one generation to another, extending the power of myth in its contest with truth in perpetuity.

Keeping the black and white peoples separated propels the suspicions they have about each other. This in turn sustains the existing power imbalances that the prejudices undergird. With the streets dark with terror even in broad daylight, it may be legitimate for children to be on their guard before total strangers. But separation of the races has certainly kept the hope of ever dispelling these biases in recession, making the dream of containing racial misunderstandings remain a mirage. No victories over these superstitions come within reach.

Notwithstanding his efforts to beat all the odds, every route Julius takes seems destined to crush any hope he has of securing peace. He sinks into great depths of despondency. Not even the occasional breaks provided by his street work-outs can offer him relief from his trials. Here is how Julius himself describes the impactful nature of the walking exercises, the little remedial dent they make on his apparently irremediable pain:

I covered the city blocks as though measuring them with my stride, and the subway stations served as recurring motives in my aimless progress. The sight of large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers was perpetually strange to me, and I felt that all of the human race were rushing, pushed by a counter-instinctive death drive, into movable catacombs. Above-ground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified. (7)

To some degree, the image of Julius drifting through the streets of New York City very much resembles that of the famed Leopold Bloom, the Jewish Irishman and cuckolded protagonist of *Ulysses*, perhaps the century's most innovative novel, by the Irish writer James Joyce, on the notorious streets of Dublin.¹⁶ Leopold Bloom is so down and out that he searches in vain for something as innocuous as refreshing air to breathe freely. But he hits the wall of frustration in his quest for revitalization. Bloom is assailed by a choking silence that is deafening as he coasts his way through the deserted streets of the Irish capital during the early hours of the day. Nothing can combat his ordeal. Bloom is engulfed by a crunch of isolation which is stifling in the extreme because the root causes are bifurcated, cultural as well as existential, leading to a degree of alienation that appears total and perennial.

The circumstances of a black African male on the streets of American cities are not unlike those of the protagonist of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Like the restless Bloom, miserably in hot pursuit of inner peace on the streets of Dublin which he surveys and maps with cold eyes, Julius, too, desperately hopes that his wanderings on the streets of New York City will provide an implement to knock off the pall of sadness over him. But he experiences the same anticlimactic result, predisposed largely by his socio-cultural estrangement. Julius, cumbered with a ponderous burden of worry, ambles his way amidst the hustle and bustle of the streets of New York City, weaving among "crowds of shoppers and workers," and reaching out to get some relief—something to help him to forget, in his case, not merely the brutal reality of separation from his Nigerian homeland but his total alienation, the totality of his identity crises. As in Joyce's novel, the reader is supplied in *Open City*, in great detail, with images of the things that the tormented protagonist sees and hears on the overcrowded streets that bring with them the wildest fear, confusion, and consternation, although Cole's text is free of the welter of stylistic improvisations that threaten to suffocate the contents of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

His vacation in Brussels, Belgium, gives Julius the standing to observe, map, delineate, and designate the nature of the African immigrant experience in Europe, which has its own unique character. Maillotte categorically sates that Brussels is "color-blind in a way the U.S. is not ... not this terrible, hypocritical country, this sanctimonious country" (89–92). Brussels is certainly a haven for a swelling immigrant population from several troubled spots. But the town's attraction is perhaps not because of the open city policies Maillotte proclaims:

old women with dotted black patterns around their eyes, their heads swaddled in black cloth, and young women, too, likewise veiled. Islam, in its conservative form, was in constant view ... this was the European reality now, in which borders were flexible. There was a palpable pressure in the city ... Even in the city center, or especially there, large numbers of people seemed to be from some part of Africa, either from the Congo or from the Maghreb. On some trams, as I was to quickly discover, whites were a tiny minority. (98)

The choice of Brussels as the envied destination for immigrants from Eastern Europe and Africa is not fortuitous. For one, this city is “so conveniently set at the intersection of Holland, Germany, England, and France” (97). Brussels’ location at the center of Europe is a factor facilitating the mobility of populations aggregating there. But there are more compelling factors. For immigrants, all paths lead here for the same attractions that draw in large contingents of Chinese tourists. What is distinctive and the special source of the appeal of Brussels is the fanciful splendor of its imposing architecture. Julius describes the Belgian capital city as “a city of monuments, and greatness was set in stone and metal all over Brussels, obdurate replies to uncomfortable questions” (145).

Particularly eye-catching in Brussels are its monuments like

the Parc du Cingquantenaire ... gigantic arcades ... the Merode metro station ... the Musees Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire ... better known as Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts ... bronze plaque ... portraits of the first five Belgian kings ... Leopold I, Leopold II, Albert I, Leopold III, and Baudouin. (100)

These are accoutrements of conspicuous consumption, the excesses of luxury and wealth, and “the black Mercedes-Benzes ... used as taxicabs at the airport,” contribute to the irresistible image of the place’s “impressive sophistication and wealth, that first experience of Europe” (96–97).

This bustling of the city with refugees exacts a price. The plague the city has brought upon itself will tax it to its limits. The tension that builds up very quickly in this volatile setting is a kind of clash of civilizations, East and West. A religious fervor adds another dimension to the already explosive traditional racial divisions. Africans are caught in the crossfire. As a spike in violent crimes ensues, African immigrants are wrongly blamed for the escalation of criminality in the region. When a 17-year-old Flemish boy is killed for “refusing to give up his mp3 player ... the murderers, the reports said, were Arab” (98).

Instantly the matter arouses swift and widespread indignation and partisan fervor, exploited by politicians from all sides of the spectrum for their own selfish interests. “Vlaams Belang (the Flemish right-wing party) and its sympathizers” are so outraged that one journalist writes “on his blog that Belgian society was fed up with ‘murdering, thieving, raping Vikings from North Africa,’” a sentiment “quoted approvingly in certain mainstream sources” (99). Charitable efforts by

the Muslim community in Brussels to heal the wound, such as their distribution of home-baked bread at the public memorial service for the murdered boy ... drew a furious response from right-wingers. Later, during the elections, the politicians of the Vlaams Belang recorded gains once again, consolidating their position as possibly the biggest party in the country. (99)

In the conflagration that follows, “several hate crimes” are ratcheted up against

non-whites living in the country. In Bruges, five skinheads put a black Frenchman into a coma. In Antwerp, in May, an eighteen-year-old shaved his head and, after fulminating about Makakken, headed for the city center with a Winchester rifle, and started shooting. He seriously wounded a Turkish girl and killed a nanny from Mali ... In Brussels, a black man was left paralyzed and blinded after an attack at a petrol station ... even politically centrist parties like the Christian Democrats began to lean rightward, adopting the language of the Vlaam Belang in order to cater to voter discontent about immigration. (99–100)

Yet we learn that

the murderers in the Gare Centrale case, it turned out, weren't Arab or African at all: they were Polish citizens ... One of them, a sixteen-year-old, was arrested in Poland; his seventeen-year-old partner was arrested in Belgium and extradited to Poland. (99)

However, as Farouq's case illustrates, African immigrants do not come to Europe for sight-seeing. They come to look for work to improve their lives. They are not like the Chinese tourists, for instance, visiting Brussels. Farouq is the attendant at the Internet and Phone Shop in the neighborhood where the bi-racial Nigerian's rented house is located in Brussels during his vacation. Julius, frequenting this shop to use the Internet and to make calls to the United States and Nigeria, has many conversations with Farouq. Farouq informs him that he is a citizen of Morocco, an Arab and a Muslim, and he is fluent in English and French as well. He is highly educated and well-read in philosophy and literature. Farouq is polite, kind, very refined in manners, and well informed about politics generally, not excluding the politics of race bearing on honor and recognition. Farouq is an apostle of peace, cooperation, harmony, and tolerance in a multicultural community. He says he enjoys his workplace because it presents “a test case' of what I believe: people can live together but still keep their own values intact” (112).

Farouq is uninhibited in expressing his opposition to Western domination, and he makes quite a few unflattering remarks about the bigotry and demonization of black people entrenched in the United States. He does not cower away from drawing attention to the extent of American arrogance and hypocrisy

which revealed themselves to him when he was a janitor at “an American school in Brussels” (112). He says he knew the expectations of him were to stay at his station, and he was “nice, quiet, like a janitor should be; I pretended not to have any ideas of my own” (112). However,

one day I was cleaning one of the offices, and the principal of the school, the head of academics, came around, and somehow we got talking, and I just had this idea to really speak as myself, not as a janitor, but as someone with ideas. So I started talking, and I used a bit of my jargon. I was talking about Giles Deleuze and, of course, he was surprised. (112)

The principal gives his interlocutor the impression of being so he impressed with him he extends the invitation to “Come to my office sometime and we’ll talk” (112). However, discloses Farouq,

when I saw him next, he not only refused to speak to me but actually pretended he had never seen me before. I was just a janitor, mopping the floor, nothing more than a part of the furniture. I greeted him, tried for a moment to remind him of our Deleuze conversation but he said nothing. There was a line, and I was wasting my time in the attempt to cross it. (112–113)

Here, Farouq unmasks the hypocritical American school principal caught in the current of contradictions. He attempts to project a positive public relations posture by giving an appearance of openness to engage in a dialogue of equals. But he stands exposed as a bigot exhibiting his sense of superiority. In the intolerant principal’s eyes, one of Farouq’s crimes is presumption, to believe he is capable of thinking; that he has ideas, which goes against the expectation of a janitor to be simply a mule, not a thinker. How cheeky for an Arab to think he can be an intellectual; an Arab should not expect adeptness in abstract thinking to be within his reach. Even more seriously, this janitor is guilty of not knowing his place, having the effrontery to stand before his superior, the racist who harbors the bigotry of lower expectations, look him in the eyes, and argue high theory with him. Debate is the prerogative of white America and is conducted only among acknowledged peers and equals.

Farouq is not slow to perceive the link between his snub by the fascist American school principal and the negative portrayal of black people in the mainstream American media which is intended ultimately to downgrade black cultural institutions as a whole. “Let me ask you something,” he inquires of Julius. “The American blacks ... are they really as they are shown on MTV: the rapping, the hip-hop dance, the women? Because that’s all we see. Is it like this?” (119). Farouq is referring to the deformed language associated with African Americans, the unruly behavior, the all-play-and-no-work culture, and the half-nude and hyper-sensual images of black women, which are all manufactured to contradict the real lives of ordinary black people in America. The truth, of

course, as Julius emphasizes, is that the poor media image of black Americans is manufactured. In reality,

American blacks are like any other Americans; they are like any other people. They hold the same kinds of jobs; they live in normal houses; they send their children to school. Many of them are poor; that is true, for reasons of history, and many of them do like hip-hop and devote their lives to it, but it's also true that some of them are engineers, university professors, lawyers, and generals. Even the last two secretaries of state have been black. (119)

Farouq has no difficulty in seeing the damaging depiction of blacks in American media, like the stereotypical image of the religion of Islam, as an exercise in smoke and mirrors. "Many Americans assume that European Muslims are covered from head to toe if they are women, or that they wear a full beard if they are men, and that they are only interested in protesting perceived insults to Islam," he asserts (119). These negative depictions are at the service of the United States imperialist ventures worldwide, to effect American dominance. Tactics of American imperialist power-grab politics incorporate the use of slogans about fighting to free the world from tyranny, deployed to suppress the cause of Palestinians in support of Zionist Israel, in the elimination of rulers like Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya considered to be dictators because of their defiance of US imperialist stances.

Farouq would not remain ignorant either of the fact that the intertwining of racial and religious misconceptions by white American institutions is intentional, as part of well-designed and carefully orchestrated attempts to put their minority groups down. He understands image manipulation to be what it is: a power-ploy by America not only to keep its minority groups down so it can maintain its stranglehold on economic, political, and cultural authority to the detriment of those with profiles it considers as outsiders at home but also to maintain its global dominance. He is blunt in acknowledging that the effort to damage black culture could in effect be a double-edged sword which could draw a backlash against the perpetrators.

Farouq will not put up with all the nonsense of the white nationalist invocations of race hierarchy and their attitudes of making others small in order to puff up themselves. However he is clear in his convictions and expresses them honestly. In balancing confrontation against reconciliation as two options toward resolving tension, he says he is all for the mutual co-existence which his work champions. In his words, "I am a pacifist. I don't believe in violent compulsion. You know, even if someone is right here, with a gun pointed at my family, I cannot kill this person" (115).

From their acquaintance and his observations of Farouq serving his countless customers and assisting them in "making New Year greetings but also for a lot of people calling home for the Eid" to countries as diverse as "Colombia, Egypt, Senegal, Brazil, France, Germany," Julius ascertains that Farouq is not a danger to

anyone (112). Yet Julius notes that even with all of Farouq's personal qualities and professional accomplishments they do not give him validation. Farouq's credentials, as it were, fail to guarantee him a welcome in Brussels. He is "to countless ... in this city" not only "another Arab, subject to quick suspicious glance on the tram" (106). But his presence would spark "a simmering, barely contained fear," as the "classic anti-immigrant view, which saw them as enemies competing for scarce resources, was converging with a renewed fear of Islam" and "the stranger had remained strange, and had become a foil for new discontents" (106).

Julius inevitably makes a ready identification with Farouq's position as a fellow African immigrant in Western society. "It occurred to me," he acknowledges,

that I was in a situation not radically different from Farouq's. My presentation—the dark, unsmiling, solitary stranger—made me a target for the inchoate rage of the defenders of Vlaanderen. I could, in the wrong place, be taken for a rapist or Viking. (106)

Julius' concerns about his safety inform his decision to adjust his movements to mitigate his personal risks. Julius says he knows that "the bearers of the rage" against immigrants "were insensitive to how common, and how futile, was their violence in the name of a monolithic identity ... a trait angry young men, as well as their old, politically powerful rhetorical champions, shared the world over" (106). Correspondingly, he takes the step, "as a precaution," to "cut down on the length of my late-night walks in Etterbeek ... resolved, also, to no longer visit all-white bars or family restaurants in the quieter neighborhoods" (106). This action to hibernate, of course, does not come without consequences: "the days went by slowly, and my sense of being entirely alone in the city intensified. Most days I stayed indoors reading, but I read without pleasure" (108).

It is unfortunate that immigrants are made to live in fear. Too many of them have already known a great deal of horror. The flight from home is primarily "an act of forgetting ... a means of escape: a refuge from the demands of family life and a hiding place" from what the refugees "might have seen in the Cameroons or in the Congo, or maybe even in Rwanda" (140). Whenever Julius meets "young men from Serbia or Croatia, from Sierra Leone or Liberia," he is haunted by the thought that "these, too, could have killed and killed and only later learned how to look innocent" (140). The consciousness of the history of trauma many refugees have known is what impels Julius to wonder "What losses ... lay behind their laughter and flirting" as many of "those there would have been teenagers during the genocide ... The quiet faces surely masked some pain" (139).

The strong waves of refugees from Eastern Europe and Africa in the midst of large influxes of tourists, jamming the streets of Europe with people from other countries, surely add to a conflagration of attitudes toward foreigners there. The mix-up of identities provides ammunition for people stoking fears about

immigration and spreading the false narrative that if they see one group of “foreigners” in their midst they have seen all the others. But putting all those who are new to a country in the same category does no small injustice to many of them who have not gone to their adopted new lands to seek charity or leisure. It is true that all who leave their countries are fleeing one type of inhospitable situation or another at home. However, while the sojourns of many, like Khalil, have led them to Brussels, this Moroccan is no freeloader. Khalil is not here looking for handouts; rather, he brings with him entrepreneurship and a life pattern of benevolence. Khalil, an inventor, is the proprietor of the Internet and Phone Shop where Farouq works, described by his compatriot as “a good guy, you know. I can really say he is my best friend” (123). Khalil has many Internet and phone shops spread across several neighborhoods of Brussels, supporting small business growth and offering employment to many. Khalil and Farouq both emigrated from “the same town, Tetouan” in Morocco (123). Khalil’s generosity is on display when he pays “for everything, our drinks, your food,” without fanfare or showiness, before slipping out of the shop unnoticed. “He’s like that, he gives and doesn’t think twice about it” (123).

Julius places Farouq in a similar mold, though people who don’t know him may misunderstand and mistake the Moor for a terrorist. Julius sees something essential about the nature of Farouq’s constitution that is in conformity to the psychology of success. He takes an inventory of Farouq’s rise from his lowly family background as one among three children of low-rank military personnel; his independent thinking reflected in his suspicion of organized religion; his intelligence, well-balanced sympathy toward the causes of both Palestinians and Israelis; his hard work, good looks, and charming personality. All of these sterling qualities of Farouq lead Julius in arriving at the conclusion that the Moor has all that it takes to thrive in America. “I think you and America are ready for each other,” Julius declares.

Farouq’s delicate negotiation of the subject of extremism is brilliant, a telling illustration of the thoughtfulness and wisdom that he brings to the table in discussions of the volatile issues currently on the world stage. He says he can pass judgment neither on Al-Qaeda nor on Hezbollah, citing as an overriding determinant of his reasoning

a story from our tradition, a story about King Solomon. King Solomon gave a teaching once about the snake and the bee. The snake, King Solomon said, defends itself by killing. But the bee defends itself by dying. You know how a bee dies after a sting? Like that. It dies to defend. So, each creature has a method that is suitable to its strength. I don’t agree with what Al-Qaeda did, they use a method I would not use, so I cannot say the word support. But I don’t cast judgment on them. (121)

Through this carefully calibrated stance, Farouq cleverly avoids anti-Semitic charges without betraying any shred of opposition to the Palestinian cause, an intractable issue that he himself calls “the central question of our time” (121).

From his angle, Julius says that Farouq reminds him of other trail-blazers:

the age of pamphlets, solidarity, travel by steamship, world congresses, and young men attending to the words of radicals. I thought of, decades later, Fela Kuti in Los Angeles, the individuals who had been formed and sharpened by their encounters with American freedom and American injustice who, seeing the worst that America could do to its marginalized peoples, had something in them that awakened them. Even at this belated date, in the antiterror regime, Farouq could still benefit from entering that inferno. (126)

Besides Nigerian revolutionary musician and thinker Fela Kuti, Farouq also calls to his mind

a startling resemblance: he was the very image of Robert De Niro, specifically in his role as the young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather II*. The straight, thin, black eyebrows, the rubbery expression, the smile that seemed a mask for skepticism or shyness, and the lean handsomeness, too. A famous Italian-American actor thirty years ago and an unknown Moroccan political philosopher in the present, but it was the same face. What a marvel that life repeated itself in these trivial ways. (121)

Of course, Farouq is not an actor. His demeanor is the genuine article. More relevantly, Farouq doesn't like the idea of living in America. He does not feel that he has the path-finding spirit, either, and he says he is sorely appalled by what he believes America stands for. There is no chance that Farouq will follow the counsel of Julius and go to America. "I don't like the place," he says in refusing the invitation. "I have no desire to visit America, and certainly not as an Arab, not now, not with all I would have to endure there" (126). But it's not just his rejection of America, but the passion behind it that is important because it gives an accurate barometer of the level of his antipathy toward the place; as we are told, "He had a look of distaste as he said it" (126). Farouq is in Belgium, in Europe, where his heart has always been from his childhood, the apex of his aspiration.

When we were young, he said, or I should say, when I was young, Europe was a dream. Not just a dream, it was the dream: it represented the freedom of thought. We wanted to come here, and exercise our minds in this free space. When I was doing my undergraduate degree in Rabat, I dreamed of Europe; we all did, my friends and I. Not America, about which we already had bad feelings, but Europe. But I have been disappointed. Europe only looks free. The dream was an apparition. (122)

The apparition of the European dream and the consequent disappointment of those who sought it is the crux of the matter, and we hear about it from the

travelers' own perspectives and voices. The words of the unhappy characters expressed in these exchanges reiterate the prominence given to dialogue in *Open City*, sustaining the impression of respondents conveying their unmediated thoughts as openly and honestly as in real-life situations. The displeasure with the gloomy outcome of the dream of Europe also equates by implication to the general frustration of immigration to the Western world as a whole. The fact that this letdown feels proportionate to the resumé, pedigree, creativity, skill sets, original aspirations, visions, talents, and preparations—the zeal and the devotion to these—that the immigrants bring with them is *Open City's* main preoccupation.

It is ironic that Dr. Maillotte, herself a Belgian immigrant in the United States, should become a recycler of a standard anti-immigration rhetoric. Many staunch opponents of immigration in the United States, who are either descendants of immigrants or immigrants from Europe or South America themselves, seem determined to kick away the ladder they used to get into the country. She is rancidly bigoted in her insensitive response to the revelation by Julius of how Farouq conveyed his displeasure with his mistreatment. Farouq, she is told, has described

Belgium as a difficult place for an Arab to be. My friend's trouble is about being here and maintaining his uniqueness, his difference ... but on the plane you described Belgium as color-blind ... that doesn't seem to have been the experience of Farouq—that's my friend's name—in the seven years that he has been here. I think he even had his thesis rejected at the university, presumably because he wrote on a subject that the committee was uncomfortable with, states Julius. (142–143)

In response, Dr. Maillotte erupts with an unsympathetic assessment laden with innuendo and forcefully scornful of the fundamental principles of pluralism. She dismisses Farouq's claims as baloney, attaching to him the negative label of ingrate:

Look, I know this type, she said, these young men who go around as if the world is an offense to them. It is dangerous. For people to think that they alone have suffered, it is very dangerous. Having such a degree of resentment is a recipe for trouble. Our society has made itself open for such people, but when they come in, all you hear is complaints. Why would you want to move somewhere only to prove how different you are? And why would a society like that want to welcome you? (143)

Maillotte's suppressed intolerance here rises to the surface. Farouq should have been grateful for being an undeserving beneficiary of charity, of being in the country to begin with, she states. Maillotte accuses Farouq of perennial discontent, of having a spirit of agitation, and being guilty of hyper-self-consciousness, self-obsessiveness, not submitting to the process of negotiation

and accommodation required of foreigners when they seek to make their new homes in new environments. She calls Farouq over-sensitive and inflexible, holds it against him that he has not grown a thick skin, and touts lack of assimilation as his problem. She is not just talking about adaptation, the adjustment that newcomers to any place need to make to be able to live there productively. She blames Farouq for the inability to acquire a superimposed new identity, scathing in her attack of his not merging seamlessly with his hosts and hostesses, which she sees as a clear liability. Maillotte's snide remark that "there is an endless variety of difficulties in the world. It's difficult for everybody" is evasive, adding "if you're too loyal to your own suffering, you forget that others suffer, too" (143). Maillotte also renders herself vulnerable to the same charge of hypocrisy that she has leveled against the United States. She claims, for example, that she "had to leave Belgium and try to make my life in another country" for "a reason" but "I don't complain and, to be honest, I really have little patience for people who do" (143). However, this statement is at odds with her earlier disclosure that she now spends most of her time in Brussels, implying that she cannot stand America because Brussels is "color-blind in a way the U.S. is not ... not this terrible, hypocritical country, this sanctimonious country" (89).

The title of Cole's novel is of course itself ironic. Literally, the terminology has a connotative meaning that associates the scenes of the events, America's largest metropolitan and most populous city, and Brussels, Belgium, located at the center of Europe, with the notion of places with generous commitments to diversity, inclusion, and belonging. The tying of New York City and Brussels with open-door (including immigration law enforcement) policies appeals to a familiar distinction between these two cities on the one hand and other territories with presumed conservative outlooks (not excluding closed-door policies toward immigrants) on the other. This disparity, which is summed up by the respective terms sanctuary and enclosed or walled cities, within the context of the novel's title then alludes to the myth of two environments that are strategically, supposedly, open and welcoming. But it cannot be by accident that two of the world's most cosmopolitan centers and home to population agglomerations with perhaps the largest multicultural roots in the world should be so wittily conceived as being so accommodating to all. For one of them, at least, even its nickname, Big Apple, says it all, bestowing the locale with the image of a space sure to guarantee dreams, setting its milieu apart from the hardline spaces that are far less open to diversity, inclusion, and belonging. This novel's functionally appropriate title thus implicitly intuits readers to imagine the fate that would befall immigrants in those other places which are far from welcoming to minority groups.

For African immigrants like Julius and Farouq, New York City and Brussels, respectively, fail, of course, to measure up to their mythology as melting-pots of cultures. The emptiness of existence that Julius experiences even when surrounded by people from different countries in the spot where the United States is said to meet the rest of the world undercuts New York City's paradise lore in

the same way that the alienating racial profiling that Farouq faces, generating hostile stares and reflecting the problematic nature of living in Brussels. This ironic comparative background information has attached to it a functional significance. It signally contrasts the presumed congenial settings supplied by this novel's title, giving readers a hint of the sheer magnitude of the precarious conditions under which many African immigrants generally live in the United States and Europe. As regards the combined nature of the experiences of Julius and Farouq, many others like them share a similar predicament.

Against this backdrop of the distinctive forms of alienation ranged against the African immigrant abroad, the scene of Julius' empowered figure following his rejuvenating conversation with his now retired and bed-ridden former teacher Professor Saito is striking. This episode reaffirms the primacy of a decent and reliable network of support, especially for the mental health of fugitives. This aspect of Cole's narrative has an obvious parallel with the experience of the protagonist of Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.¹⁷

There are some marked differences between the Armah and the Cole scenes, though, despite many similarities. In Armah's novel, his hero, the man, ironically gathers inspiration from his disillusioned former instructor in his quest to contain the overwhelming corruptive pressures threatening his sanity. On its part, there is no elusive quality to the instruction that Julius receives from Professor Saito in Cole's novel during his similar visit, which he too pays in desperate times to his own reclusive erstwhile instructor. Indeed, when the melancholic Julius in *Open City* runs in to see his former teacher, he meets up with an intellectually animated and high-spirited personality instead of a sanguine personality like Armah's Teacher.

The witty instructors in both Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Cole's *Open City* nevertheless do such good jobs of cheering up their despondent guests that their roles brilliantly revive a curious idea: the powers of the memory bank as the repository of spiritual and emotional energy. His own pessimistic outlook does not, surprisingly, deter Teacher in Armah's novel from regaling his caller with tales. These mainly involve reminiscing about the promise of independence during the years of anticolonial struggle in post-World War II Ghana and its souring soon after the formal end of colonial rule. But the pilgrim is enlivened by recollected events shared from the now isolated, immobile and disillusioned host's participation in those freedom movements. Strikingly, Teacher resuscitates the traveler's sagging spirits by not only providing him sympathetic camaraderie but also offering him guidance for resolving his moral dilemma. Teacher helps bring the man clarity about the competing interests of his family members. They expect him, Teacher explains in stark terms to the man, to serve as a conduit for siphoning resources from the coffers of the general public to meet their own private materialistic aspirations, which conflicts with the rebel's own commitment to honor his ruling passion to live above board; and he prods his visitor to take one of the divergent routes out of his dilemma that are open to him, stressing to him the unavailability of the option to pursue both incompatible paths at the same time.

Open City's rendition of the image of a former teacher who doubles as a friend to his erstwhile student is creative. Saito is spot on. He shows himself to be not only compassionate but convivial, generous, and sagacious in his treatment of Julius. The occasion of the food with which he welcomes his company gives rise to a special moment, with enjoyable entertainment enhancing the motivation he offers his visitor in their conversation as the host expounds in his own affable manner on the exquisite discovery he made in his youth. Saito casts a long look back and retails his first-hand experience of the empowering ingredient in the literary classics which comes from expanding mastery over words, ideas, and knowledge. He ruefully recalls his own past intellectual adventures with what he calls the currently forgotten methods of learning through the mechanism of omnivorous reading, internalization, cramming, and rote memorization of classical model texts. "I don't suppose anyone memorizes anything anymore. It was part of our discipline, just as a good violinist has to have his Bach partitas or Beethoven by heart," he points out (14).

The common attribute binding Teacher and Saito is their affectionate demeanor as hosts to their respective visitors, the man and Julius, who are both starving for support. The anecdote recounted by Professor Saito, for instance, resonates with Julius resoundingly. There is a positive trust factor. Saito captivates his visitor's mind with stories about the tried and tested tools in negotiating critical literacies that no longer prevail. The devouring of print material has now become so discredited as to be considered outdated, he says, unlike in the past when it was valorized. But imbibing knowledge literally made Saito who he is, he says, thus opening up a prospect for the visitor to position himself in the same station as the retired educator. The lesson of Saito's yarn is, of course, like Teacher's in Armah's novel, the overarching idea that challenges can offer opportunities for individuals to develop the capacities to master and possess puzzles seemingly at first sight beyond their abilities.

Not surprisingly, Julius blithely uses an analogy drawing direct equivalency between the travails of immigration and those of the marathon. The labor of the nameless lone cross-country runner that he meets at "Sixty-second Street" gives Julius cause to believe so (15). Not long after exiting Saito's apartment, Julius runs into this "lithe man with graying sideburns who carried a plastic bag with a tag on it and was visibly exhausted, limping on slightly bowed legs" (15). This unaccompanied jogger, wearing "shorts and black tights, and a blue, long-sleeved fleece jacket" and suspected to be "Mexican or Central American" based on "his features ... had just finished the race" (15). But, as Julius notes, conflating his condition with that of the exile, "after twenty-six miles and 385 yards, he had simply collected his bag, and was walking home. There were no friends or family present to celebrate his achievement" (15). Yet, when "asked if it had been a good race" the long-distance runner answers in the affirmative, adding that "the conditions were good for running, not too hot" (15). No reference is made by him to how satisfying the exercise is. Whether Julius' estimate of this athlete's ethnicity is accurate or not, the lonely immigrant and the marathon runner definitely can both be viewed as engaged in an equally tiring "act of

extreme human endurance” (15). Just like the immigrant must summon uncommon moral fortitude in solitude, a dogged refusal to give up, so the marathoner, disconnected from loved ones for prolonged durations of time, must exert physical and mental tenacity and resolve (15).

Talking about favorable conditions, one would be remiss not to bring up the issue of the challenge which the weather poses for immigrants. There is no question the weather in the tropics is different. Anyone leaving the warm and largely humid tropical climates to face the extreme climatic conditions in Europe and the United States will have to contend with the adjustment. Rightly, the novel insists that the challenge posed by unfavorable weather is one which is easily overcome by wearing appropriate attire: light apparel during the simmering hot months of summer and bundling up—having many layers of warm clothing—during the frigid winter season. So the weather is therefore easily the least worry for immigrants when stacked against the other, weightier matters related to the many layers of the racism built into the socio-economic and political hierarchy that they confront.

Julius does give due acknowledgment of changes that the world as a whole has seen over time, among them welcome developments. He counts some of the blessings of living under more favorable conditions overall in this century, for example. Scientific progress is among these. Peace is another, relative to earlier times which were incessantly troubled by internecine disputes among nations that led to armed combats, some ending up as large-scale wars resulting in massive death tolls, sweeping destruction of property, cities, and other living spaces, widespread epidemics, and other scourges which also took the lives of thousands of human beings. Standing out indisputably among the atrocities of the past, the novel rightly notes, were “the final terrible moments in the camps, moments that no one has survived to give first-hand account of, when the Zyklon B was switched on and all the human captives breathed in their deaths,” the horrifying events of the Holocaust, at the concentration camps at Auschwitz, where millions of innocent Jews were gassed under Adolf Hitler (229).

For sure, with the wind of multiculturalism swiftly sweeping across the world as a whole, New York City in particular, and the United States generally, can to an extent boast of becoming increasingly the melting pots of cultures. The “sight of a white man teaching Chinese to an Asian woman” is no longer an abnormality or a rarity (217). Restaurants are serving an abundance of a variety of international cuisine, “yellow rice, fried plantains, chow mein, barbecued spare ribs, and the various Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Chinese dishes ... for the lunch hour rush” (217). An entire section of New York City is even designated a minority ethnic zone, China Town, where the “signs on the shops, restaurants, businesses, and advertisements were in Chinese characters, and only occasionally were these supplemented with English translations” (188). In this area “Everyone in sight seemed to be Chinese, or could be easily taken for Chinese” and Chinese monuments proliferate everywhere (189). Capping the human experience of living in a pluralistic United States is “the snaking queue ... in

front of the largest of the federal buildings” (218). All these people are waiting to receive credentials; it means that the dream of coming to America is alive and well. The massive passport line of immigrants pressing forward to formalize their American citizenships stands for the millions of people from around the world still wanting to come here to pursue the American dream; they are represented by applicants comprised of “a group of Bangladeshis ... African-American and Vietnamese ... a Hispanic family group” and others (220–221). It demonstrates the growing and continuing deep interest which people of different nationalities have in becoming permanent residents and citizens of the United States, notwithstanding the nation’s many glaring markers of imperfection.

This text attends meticulously to the new maladies that in this generation have steadily supplanted the old afflictions, adding a depth of gravitas to its pretensions to being a novel of realistic portraiture, not of the dream world. In the order of the realities are the epidemics of religious charlatanry, mental disease, depression, psychosis, and schizophrenia in humans and the unknown diseases leading to the disappearance of many insects like “the collapse of the bee populations” (200). Too many people just walking down the streets or sitting in their offices peering into computers simply lose their minds. People becoming mad is a constant reality, but the paramount problem remains the intractable question of race, the racial tensions which worldwide have engulfed many countries even as drug and coffee addictions and sexual promiscuity become endemic.

Stylistically and thematically, however, *Open City* tries to find a ray of hope. This optimistic impulse, ironically, giving rise to the search to provide affirmation of our humanity, leads to the most unlikely place: a powerful glimpse into the drama of the colorful burial culture of the Yoruba people of Nigeria which is ultimately a celebration of the dignity of human life. With this look back to the anthropological sweep of the novels of Chinua Achebe and of Nigeria’s first-generation fiction generally, author Cole in so doing pays supreme homage to the past in a bow to the ineluctable pressure of tradition.

Notes

- 1 See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third Edition (New York: Routledge, 2015).
- 2 Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2011). All subsequent page references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parenthesis.
- 3 See Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 4 See, for example, Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).
- 5 Edward Newman, *Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English?* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974).
- 6 Hayden White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” in Angus Fletcher, ed. *The Literature of Fact: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 21–44 (p. 22).

- 7 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851), Oxford World's Classics with an introduction by Patrick McGrath (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 8 William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Smith and Haas, 1932).
- 9 Joseph F. Healey, *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change*, Fourth Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006), pp. 154–155.
- 10 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); see also Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- 11 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Penguin, 1986); first published in 1845.
- 12 Chris Abani, "Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self," in Michael Hanne, ed. *Creativity and Exile* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2004), 21–30 (p. 26).
- 13 For details, see Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
- 14 Isidore Okpewho, *Tides* (Essex, UK: Longman, 1993).
- 15 Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158–182.
- 16 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, rev. ed. (New York: Modern Library-Random House, 1961).
- 17 See Chapters 5 and 6 of Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968); Reprint, London: Heinemann, 1969, pp. 46–90.

5 Subverted Narrative of Disappointed Expectations: Immigration, Chattel Sex Slavery or Prostitution, Horrors of the Unutterable on the Borderline of Magical Realism (Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*)

The topics that preoccupy Chika Unigwe in her complex immaculately executed novel *On Black Sisters Street* and the style in which she explores them all firmly plant her text within the genre of Nigeria's third-generation fiction. These subjects are the perniciousness of class privilege, traditional gender biases within African societies, Christian fundamentalism, and their intersections with immigration. The text plays out the ways in which these forces work cooperatively with other on-going debacles, introduced by this novel for the first time into the third-generation fiction, such as African internecine wars and the United Nations' posturing on aid promotion and peace-keeping in war-torn regions of the continent, to push African women into the sex slaughterhouses of Europe. The chief narrative form is the personal story told by each of her characters, supplemented by authorial observation and commentary conveyed with intensity of vituperation. It is a style given definition by her central concern to explore the conditions of citizens of the country both in their societies and elsewhere globally, with the aim of throwing light on the fetters of tradition, economic shackles, and other facets restraining especially women, the most vulnerable members of their societies.

On Black Sisters Street, a novel about sexual servitude of the most uncharitable kind, is a stellar example of the destabilized story of unfulfilled dreams. It portrays the ordeals of African women exported to Europe for the purpose of female prostitution under the surveillance of pimps in collaboration with their male clients. These women are taken to Europe knowing little or nothing of the terror they are about to undergo. But the dreadful situation they are soon to be confronted with is that prostitution in Europe with imported African women is a spectacularly abhorrent, life-changing practice. It is a chattel form of slavery which not only takes advantage of every available opportunity to maximize the sexual and economic exploitation of the victims of the trade but also finds striking ways to aggressively snuff out every ounce of dignity from its victims, who are mostly forced against their will into prostitution.

On Black Sisters Street depicts the impact of the worst and most reprehensible form of merchandising of the bodies of African female migrants in Europe—the

turning of these women into objects of erotic and lucrative swindling. The unspeakably sordid and horrific events experienced by the four aspiring young Nigerian women are made even more deplorable through the underhand manner in which their troubles were orchestrated by unfavorable conditions in West Africa, even long before these women's expatriation. Problems within Africa itself are thus the fodder feeding the demands of the giant European sex industry. The women are lured away from countries in the throes of economic collapse and imminent political instability by dreams of work in Europe that promises to make their lives better, but their abysmal experiences as prostitutes only spark new anxieties.

Stylistically, *On Black Sisters Street* falls within the mode of the subverted life narrative, a key distinctive feature of Nigeria's third-generation literature: an account of people's real-life experiences that is unsettled by its focalization. One element of the perspective from which some of the information in the novel is filtered elevates exponentially its technique of rendering lived experience: the use of extended conversations, dialogues, in which four housemates tell each other about their pasts and share information concerning their present, ongoing experiences. The four actors in the events depicted recount their own stories in self-interested chats that sometimes convey unintended misrepresentations but which are always bone-chilling and revealing hidden half-truths. From their limited perspectives, the recitals of the women's misfortunes often end up not entirely successful in fully chipping away to the facts that lie beneath the tales they tell. But the storytellers do raise debates or conversations about the problems of historiography, calling attention to the fact that these authors of their own stories are often caught up in issues larger than themselves and which therefore are beyond their narrow understandings. This narrative approach—conveying the victims' own too narrow and simplistic perceptions, which gloss over the cultural dynamics that, more than anything, determine their fortunes—is complemented by the interpolation of the third-person, omniscient, non-participant observer, who reliably shuttles between the personal stories of the protagonists and reports and comments on the events with the benefit of a broader grasp of the issues. This voice completes the design of a story that is told basically through two narrative angles.

The non-participant observer is nameless, but always maintains objectivity and provides far-sighted monitoring, eye-witness accounting, and investigative reporting. The four Nigerian prostitutes portray their own pasts animatedly, but they set forth self-serving accounts which must always be taken with a grain of salt. These women do not represent an entirely reliable frame of reference because they have only a partial and therefore misleading perception of the things happening to them. Thus the critical method of reading between and behind the lines must be engaged, keeping in mind that the storytellers are so wounded by their circumstances that the intensity of their emotions precludes them from seeing with unclouded eyes. These young ladies' stories can be seen as pure raw materials in need of competent processing to reveal the light which they potentially can throw on the subject of the prostitution of migrant African women in Europe.

In terms of both the scope and the depth of its rendering of the experience of such women, the achievement of Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* is phenomenal. Readers are afforded new insight through the map of the route by which African women are trafficked to Europe. The text locates the foundations of this movement, illustrated with the four young women's stories and what constitutes the draw of the West for each woman, her aspirations in wanting to go there. Then, the shocking and disheartening outcomes of the fantasies which drive the mission are presented, dramatizing the reality of life on the ground in Europe for African women prostitutes there. The nature and the scale of the women's economic, mental, and psychological torture and the resulting disappointments they deal with are rivetingly mirrored, captured through the swirl of anger, bitterness, confusion, shame, and self-disgust that follows. The climax of these troubles is the gruesome and apparently racially motivated murder of Sisi, formerly Chisom, which turns out to have been masterminded by her pimp Dele and his agency which sent her to Europe, as punishment for her decision to abscond before her debt is completely paid off. The brutality of that episode in itself shows what the cabal is prepared to do to maintain the financial interests in its investment.

Owing to an inadequate understanding of the complex underlying issues involved in her heritage, each of these women thinks that becoming a prostitute was a voluntary choice she made. But each woman's surface explanation of the deeply entrenched situation predisposing her career brings up hidden elements which all point to the sources of oppression of women in African societies: women's exclusion or marginalization in the domains of power. In each of the cases represented in the novel, the culprits are cultural practices such as ethnic prejudice, class oppression, African internecine tribal wars, and the traditional gender roles and taboos like the prohibition of premarital sex; values which are driven into the consciousness of young girls as the ideals of womanhood and which can only reinforce the sense of worthlessness in a violated female.

Once virginity is lost outside the confines of marriage, for example, emotions of emptiness conspire with the forces of economic dependency, and women's difficulties in gaining access to alternative sources of livelihood, as in the cases of Ama, Efe, and Joyce, may push them into a corner where prostitution seems the only means open to them to meet their basic material aspirations: "to make the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs."¹ Again and again, it is a recurrent pattern in the lives of the women arrayed in *On Black Sisters Street*: that prostitution is merely a symptom of wider, more deep-seated diseases rooted in the culture of male dominance in society; its causes are therefore punitive traditional values working in collaboration with family and ethnic misfortunes, as revealed in the stormy backgrounds of these four young women.

The effect is widespread discontent, precipitated by the women having prostitution left as their only option, their only means of survival. This is the sense in which each woman is a victim of the forces responsible for taking away freedom from women in African societies generally. In each instance, the problem is connected to the matter of women facing the fatal temptation to take

matters into their own hands by making use of their bodies, and in so doing inhibiting the exploration of other human resources such as their mental capacities and inventive ingenuities.

It seems fairly certain that many a female prostitute will see some variant or other of the events leading up to the beginning of her own career in selling her body in the story of one of the four young African women hustling in Antwerp, Belgium. For Joyce, originally known as Alek, for example, her agony begins with a catastrophic family trauma which leaves her disconsolate. Born in Daru, close to Khartoum, in Sudan, her Dinka family background is trailed by one misfortune after another. Many of Alek's family members have vivid memories of her regal grandmother; "every man wanted her for a wife" as "her beauty was unrivaled; she could have been a queen: the way she carried herself was simply regal" (158).

Tragically, however, Alek's "imperial" grandmother was unexpectedly killed by "a rabid dog bite" (158). Alek herself does not possess her grandmother's regality and feminine, radiant beauty, being more of a tomboy. And now she is hit by a disaster of her own, of enormous proportions. "The SPLA—the Sudan People's Liberation Army—which had been guarding the predominantly Dinka town, was withdrawing," readers are told, and Alek and her family attempt to flee (160). Unable to run away from the growing crisis, Alek's parents shield her and her brother by hiding them in their closet, and giving themselves up as sacrificial lambs. But the militia men drag Alek out, and she loses not only all her family members but also her own until then well-preserved virginity in the bone-chilling attack, having just passed the tender age of 12.

The scene of Alek's horrific gang rape by the Arab militia men is the most explicit depiction of such events ever rendered in all of African fiction. To the accompaniment of ethnic slurs aimed at her as a black African, the Arab bandits carry out their insane and atrocious acts of debauchery against Alek immediately after completing the execution of her father and her mother in a program of ethnic cleansing against the Dinka people. When her own brother, the last surviving family member, tries to intervene, he too is murdered in the genocide. This violent attack is described in all its gruesome detail:

The soldiers looked at her ... Breasts like baby mangoes straining against her flowered dress. One of the soldiers smiled. A lopsided grin that caused her to instinctively cross her arms over her chest ... He slapped her hands away. Grabbed her breasts. Pinched them as if testing some fruit for its firmness before buying. Her nipples hurt under his fingers. "Stupid African slave!" ... He tore my dress. I fought, but he tore my dress. And. And. And he threw me on the bed. She tried to bite him. He felt her teeth graze his arm and slapped her. She dug her nails into his arm. Another slap. She aimed for his eyes. He pinned her hands down. I wanted to gouge his eyes. She wanted to inflict on him a darkness that he could never emerge from. A pain in her back. One of the other soldiers had hit her with the butt of a rifle. She could not stop it. A scream. It catapulted her brother from his hiding place. A soldier aimed his

gun at him and shot. Landed him with a whack on the floor. He did not make a sound. Not before. Not after. Alek tried to scream but could not. Her voice failed her. And then her body followed suit. A warm trickle from between her legs. Soaking her dress. (163)

In such a cruel manner Alek's innocence is taken by force from her by total strangers. Alek's sexual violation is itself atrocious enough; it is made even more awful by the location and the atmosphere surrounding the savage act. The Arab militia men who perpetrate this barbarous crime manifest a complete lack of humane feelings: they subdue a helpless young woman at the very scene in which they have mercilessly massacred her family members. Such is the brutality of Alek's sodomization that it sends her into a coma as she is ruthlessly abused and scourged. Readers are made to witness the horror of Alek's defenselessness, with "No energy to fight back" as her attackers "spread her legs" and "tore off her underwear" (163).

The horror of this assault, both while it is taking place and after she regains consciousness, unsurprisingly leaves Alek in total disbelief, denial, and shock. "This is not happening. This is not happening ... A mantra to keep away the layer upon layer of pain that seared through," readers learn, is the reaction of the woman we will come to know as Joyce. There is a perverse hatred mingled with sadism in the rapists' mental, psychological, and physical torture, the violence they direct at Alek, as "One by one the other men thrust themselves into her, pulling out to come on her face. Telling her to ingest it; it was protein. Good food. Fit for African slaves" (163). After taking such unfathomable perversion from total strangers who treat her worse than even sworn enemies ought to treat each other, Alek is never the same again; not even when she reinvents herself, emerging from the baptism under a new name as Joyce.

The state of disorientation and existential despair that descends on Alek illustrates the difficulty of recovering from the kind of trauma of sexual and ethnic violence perpetrated by the Arab militia men. Such horror could not but leave a permanent mark on its victim, as Alek's psychosis proves. The sense of filth which overtakes all of her consciousness from then on, manifested in her need for endless cleaning, is just one major outcome of her ill-treatment by the marauders. It emanates from the emotion of existential corruption, which perpetually makes Joyce see dirt all over her own body and in all her surroundings. Alek draws strength from the memory of her parents, "determined to survive"; as she says, "She owed that much to her parents. And to her brother. They had sacrificed themselves for her" (165). Stepping over corpses right from her own parents' bedroom to outside the house, "She had to be strong. Outside, dead bodies scattered on the streets" (164). Alek joins the procession of "Women in brightly colored clothes walking in a line, bright flashes of color in the midst of such utter desolation," looking for the refugee camp, employing selective memory's sustaining force in the endeavor to survive (164). But "She wished she could take a bath. A cool, refreshing bath to get the filth off her. Beyond the fishy smell, she could smell herself. Almost. And what she could almost smell

scared her beyond fear. And filled her with the rage of a haboob" (165). This is the origin of Alek's germaphobia, her obsession with purity and her own consciousness of a cosmic impurity dominating her.

Alek makes it to the refugee camp, and, there, "For the first time, she told her story to someone else: a white-haired United Nations worker who spoke through her nose like a European even though she was black" (166). The refugee camp hands her "a ration card, told her it was for food. Gave her a plastic sheet for her tent"; but that is all it can provide survivors of atrocities like the genocide (166). The United Nations refugee camp is so ill-equipped, for example, it offers Alek little by way of empathy or any form of therapy (166). That's why Alek's recovery from grief is aborted, so that the trauma of her loss and bereavement lingers in perpetuity. Alek's emotional injury is re-aggravated by intense remembering and recapitulation: the recalling of "how she had heard the shots that killed her parents. How the soldiers had taken turns raping her. How she had watched her brother die, his brains splattered on the walls of her parents' room" (166). But the United Nations' refugee personnel give Alek the impression that "Hers was nothing special. 'Next!' the woman called out. Next. All the way at the end of the line, they heard her. Nextnextnext. She dispensed of the refugees. Doing the job she was there to do. NEXT!" (166). All of Alek's thoughts are conveyed in sentence fragments, reflecting the storm in her mind, the turbulence of ideas tumbling through her head in disconnected ways.

Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* is notable for some of the most trenchant criticisms of the United Nations' so-called rehabilitation programs in war-torn Africa limned in the literature of the continent, giving readers a rare glimpse into their inner workings. As a refugee in the camp in Sudan, "At fifteen, Alek was setting up home with a bed. And a wooden table. Her dreams of going to university and becoming a doctor buried with a past that she could never get to again. Her new home a tent that she was not sure could keep out the desert sand in the face of a strong wind" (166). Apart from merciless exposure to the elements, the thoroughgoing neglect of the mental well-being of the inmates goes hand in hand with the disruptions in their education, which are never redressed. This compounds the security problems and the squalid conditions in the refugee camp. The scrubbing that will be Alek/Joyce's trademark domestic conduct in Antwerp develops here: "Once she could, she washed herself. Scrubbed the dust off her feet. Until it seemed they would bleed. She willed them to bleed. She would never scrub herself like this again until she moved to Antwerp. The pain of the scrubbing was cathartic. Ridding her body of the weight it carried, so that by the time she was done she felt reborn. Her feet shone, gleaming in the dark, and her ankles felt light" (166). Clearly not only do Alek's mental, emotional, and psychological wounds remain as unhealed as her physical ones but they will be incrementally re-opened by the program.

Readers witness Alek's eventual relapse into mental breakdown at the refugee camp, even though it is ostensibly charged with the duty of rehabilitating patients like her. In a painstakingly detailed moment of her psychosis, readers eavesdrop on the "conversation" she thinks she "had with her father about

school. About how hard she would work once she could go back to school” (166). Then, “She talked to her mother about her period, which had become painful” (166). Also, “She had a quarrel with her brother about his shoes, which she had found in her room. ‘Your shoes are stinking out my room,’ she told him, and he pushed his tongue out at her” (166–167).

Alek airs her grievances about the deplorable state of the refugee camp. She complains intensely of the depth and the scale of her disorientation there: “She was afraid to go to bed. I was afraid of the dreams I’d have. But I did sleep. When she slept, she dreamed of her father. When she woke up, she allowed herself to cry. Not even wiping the tears that trailed down her cheeks. It was a silent cry. Not the noisy howling that she had anticipated, the way she had cried at her grandmother’s funeral years ago. The tears moved the boulder on her chest and left a cavernous hole where the boulder had been. And in the middle of that hole was the epicenter of a sandstorm” (167). Alek’s grief, bottled in, remains untreated in the absence of social networks or communities that will publicly allow her to process the agony of bereavement and loss through bonding, shared pain, and cathartic release.

On her own testimony, Alek is so unsettled in the refugee camp that she cannot stand the indignity of life there, “standing in line for food and soap ... the shoving of those behind her” and going with “some of the women and young children to fetch firewood for cooking ... something distressingly humiliating in the routine of her daily life” (167). The persistence of images of “her parents lying on the floor of their bedroom” and recollections of “the laughter of the soldiers as they tore her dress and squeezed her breast” take such a toll on her that she is driven to the edge of suicide. The sessions in which women gather to “tell one another about their lives in the belief that the exercise would help heal them of the trauma they had gone through” do not help her (167).

It is conveyed in Alek’s testimony that the utter ineffectiveness of the so-called program of psychotherapy at the refugee camp is in direct proportion to the indifference of the aid workers there. They show little interest in the patients, many of whom are put off entirely by their noncommittal attitudes. From Alek’s testimony, the refugee camp was merely a dumping place for the patients. The routine recollection of the sadism inflicted on the patients in the so-called psychotherapeutic ritual sessions at the camp near Daru is not helped either by the invasive attitude of insensitive aid workers there. The framework of the aid program, which is not grounded on service to the needy or the workers’ empathetic identification with the conditions of their patients, makes the project become a self-serving exercise in which the so-called aid workers boost their own personal professional ambitions and interests. The aid workers never get involved with the patients’ conditions, never feel the patients’ pain; they keep their distance, remaining aloof to the suffering around them. They show no inclination to come to any understanding of the patients; to participate in their sufferings. This is the source of the intense frustration of refugees like Alek and the other inmates.

Without some firm structure by which hope can be generated and transmitted to the refugees, this prevailing disinterestedness of the aid workers provokes only

endless fatigue for melancholic inmates like Alek. That is why there is nothing more transformational than the way Alek comes to overcome all the odds there. Just when she is so helpless in the darkness of despair at the camp, a ray of sunshine rises on the horizon. In a rare gesture to the motif of someone finding a jewel in the rough, she falls in love in the most unlikely place; at the least expected time; and with the most surprising individual. Alek is magnetically drawn to an Igbo man named Polycarp, a member of the Nigerian contingent to the African Union peacekeeping forces. However, it is another paradox that Polycarp brings Alek not only this unexpected momentary reprieve but also permanent dislocation and upheaval, for it is through him she will make acquaintance with the pimp Dele, who will facilitate her exportation to Belgium to become a prostitute there (98).

Although Alek vouches that it is like love at first sight when she meets Polycarp three months after arriving at the camp, and “a month before she turned sixteen,” the termination of the story of their blossoming romance is one for the books. The coming down of the walls—walls created by ethnicity—between Polycarp and Alek also shows the insidiousness of ethnic prejudice. So steady is the bond of love between Alek and Polycarp, their fondness for each other becoming so strong, that when Polycarp is redeployed to Lagos, Nigeria, readers learn, “He took Alek with him” (171). Even with all the chaos of Lagos, the extreme disorganization, pollution, yawning class divisions, and the apparent contrasts of rank poverty and opulence co-existing uneasily side by side, the couple is looking forward to a future together, enjoying moments of joyous rendezvous, finding an apartment, furnishing and decorating it, and having fun at popular spots like the Bar Beach in Victoria Island. So Alek cannot understand Polycarp’s reluctance to take her to meet his family in Onitsha, or why the other army officers’ wives do not accept her. Not until his mother’s visit to Lagos does Alek discover Polycarp’s family’s stiff opposition to the idea of his long-term conjugal union with a woman of another ethnicity.

The irrationality of ethnic prejudice is played out in the way it tears this couple apart, the forces of exclusion gathering like a storm, like a ball of fire in a volcanic eruption, consuming everything in its path, completely dissolving the glue holding these two people together. The scene of Alek rushing enthusiastically to receive her anticipated mother-in-law, “My mother. Mama, Alek,’ nodding to one and then to the other. And froze when Alek threw her hands around her in a welcome embrace”; but meeting Polycarp’s mother’s “freezer eyes and hissing lips” and her rejection of “the hug with a ferocity that landed Alek on the floor, buttocks first” shows the violence of ethnic hatred (190). The victim’s shock, humiliation, and perplexity are explored with dexterity. “Alek looked at Polycarp” but “he averted his eyes and said something in Igbo to his mother,” as “Mother and son walked into the guest room and left Alek sitting there like a scene from a still film, her mouth opening to form a surprised ‘O’. Around her, she felt the stirrings of a sandstorm” (190). The lunch table resembling a funeral scene, “Polycarp’s mother spoke only to her son.

They chatted in Igbo, and often the woman burst into raucous laughter, a ke ke ke that, in its cheeriness, sounded false to Alek, a show staged for her, although she could not tell why. She had been there for an hour and had yet to say a word to Alek. Nor had Polycarp, for that matter, brushing Alek's infuriated 'What's that all about?' away with a contained 'We'll talk later. I promise you.' His voice not quite sounding like his" (190–191).

This kind of unprovoked hostility is just what many of literary figures know all too well to be the corrosive force of xenophobia—from Shakespeare's Othello through Achebe's Clara and Bessie Head's Maru, the extravagant fury of hostility it spews out against the outsider.² It cannot be contained; that is why, when "mother and son retired to the sitting room and left Alek to clear up alone" after lunch, it is incomprehensible why they "sat side by side, conspirators, speaking in soft tones even though Alek did not understand Igbo, so it would not have mattered if she had heard them" (191). Not surprisingly, that night, Polycarp lets the cat out of the bag: "I am the oldest son, and my parents want me to marry an Igbo girl. It's not you, Alek, but I can't marry a foreigner. My parents will never forgive me" (192). This is when Polycarp makes Alek a proposal: "I know you can't go back to Sudan. You want to leave Nigeria? Go abroad? I remember you said that your father had hoped you could go abroad. I know a man who'll help you. I will pay him, and he can get you into London. America. Anywhere you choose" (193).

The two weeks that follow, before Alek can get over her anger at Polycarp, are hellish for her in a way perhaps only Clara, another woman separated from her fiancée by ethnic prejudice in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, could possibly know. Swiftly, Alek is taken to meet Dele in his home, and her instant submission to a change of name clearly expresses her forlorn state. With her back against the wall, Alek offers no resistance to the ruling by the pimp: "The name has to go. Alek. Sounds too much like Alex. Man's name ... Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her," before he baptizes her with a new name: "Joyce. Yes. Joyce. Dat one sound like name wey de always jolly. Joooooyyce!" (196–197).

Here, then, things come full circle, Alek returning to the site of her original hurt in preparing her mind for what already seems inevitable. The anger that "rose in Alek's throat and threatened to make her shout" is a throwback to that key episode in her life, the manner in which the "soldiers who raped her that night in Daru had taken her strength. Polycarp's betrayal had left her unwilling to seek it back" (197). To go with her passport for the transit to Antwerp, she is also assigned a new country of birth and a new ethnicity: "Joyce Jacob"; "Nationality: Nigerian"; "Place of Birth: Benin City." She is accurately informed of her European destination, Belgium. However, the job she is told she is going to do—a nanny—intuitively she knows to be a lie, as her own thoughts reveal. Alek cannot stop wondering "why she needed a change of name to be able to babysit children" (198). The exclusive negotiation among the two men over the proposed new name to be assigned to Alek, without her own involvement, is another expression of the oppression of women, of which prostitution, the profession she is being

enlisted into without her express approval, represents the ultimate form—a breach of the fundamental dignity of women in general.

The launch of Efe into prostitution is no less harrowing as she is literally forced to appropriate her sexual agency prematurely at the age of 16, long before she is even old enough to legally consent. After being persistently stalked, Efe is cornered and then coached by her pursuer to barter her innocence for money in a horrific sexual assault which takes place right “BEHIND HER FATHER’S HOUSE” (45, original emphasis). “The man who held her buttocks tight and swayed and moaned and was responsible for all that pain was forty-five,” the reader learns (45). To suggest that she literally decides to sell her body willingly, as Efe herself does, is a stretch—a misunderstanding and distortion, in fact, of her experience as an injured party, perhaps induced by the trauma that is typical of how victims of such crimes are prone to the complex of self-blame.

Efe’s selfish seducer and violator, a middle-aged man named Titus, takes advantage of the financial hardship in which the death of her mother leaves her family. Titus gets his way by promising Efe material things which her family cannot provide, along with other things which girls of her age ought not to desire, capitalizing on rumors of his riches being “endless. Money wey full everywhere like san’ san” (45, original emphasis). So, “He had promised Efe new clothes. New shoes. Heaven. Earth. And everything else she fancied between the two as long as she let him have his way. ‘Jus’ tell me wetin you wan’, I go give you. I swear! You don’ turn my head, dey make me like man wey don drink too much kai kai. I go do anytin’ for you. Anytin’!” (45).

This child molester, “setting eyes on Efe as she admired a tricolored handbag in a stall close to his Everything for Your Hair supermarket,” starts “waylaying the girl as she came back from the market loaded with foodstuffs for the week” (45). The “moaning in the backyard was a culmination of two and a half weeks of laying the groundwork” (45). The rapid incapacitation of her father gives her stalker more windows of opportunity to carry out his evil scheming. Unresolved grief over the death of his wife, upon whom his stability was dependent, causes the destitute “laborer renting himself out to building contractors” to fall apart mentally (56). In this state of cognitive impairment, and the alcoholism into which he has sunk, he has little awareness of happenings around him or control of events in his household. A sober and vigilant parent might arrest a situation of child abuse before it escalates. But her father’s incompetence prevents that from happening in Efe’s case, enabling the offender to stalk and prey on his innocent underage daughter undetected (56).

The predator finally catches his prey by offering “her a ride in his car” (45). He follows up shrewdly by buying her “a bottle of chilled Coca-Cola when they got stuck in a traffic,” before closing the deal by slipping “a crisp thousand-naira note into her shy fist as he dropped her off at home” (46). Alarming, “it was the last act that swayed her. It was not just the money, it was the crispness of it, the smell of the Central Bank still on it, the fact that he had drawn it out of a huge bundle of like notes, so that she believed all the stories she had heard of his enormous wealth. The smell was enough to make anyone giddy” (46).

In someone as impressionable as this extremely vulnerable teenager, the seemingly unlimited new purchasing power accruing from the sale of her innocence unleashes a power Efe could only have fantasized about. With this money, apparently endless possibilities open up before her and she cashes in on the bargaining powers which she possesses and which are made concrete, and without question, are placed squarely in her hands. Here, then, is a career prostitute in the making; little by little, Efe is exercising a mentality embodying the willpower that reconciles individuals to make “the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs” (25). Absent a vigilant father to track her movements and nip the daughter’s descent into waywardness in the bud, Efe is vulnerable and defenseless, standing on the edge of a cliff. After much soul-searching, she yields to promptings by her abuser to incrementally leverage her bargaining power. In so doing she increases her reward money and her privileges, and her journey of no return, her launch into prostitution, is irrevocably underway.

In return for his monetary investments in her, Titus cashes in his privileged access to her body, bringing “his face down to hers” and breathing “into her nose”; kissing her “on the mouth” and wiggling “against her”; and her “back, bare on the brick wall, itched. His stomach pressed on hers, and she wished she could push it out of the way” (47). Efe “tried to ignore the pain between her legs, which burned with the sting of an open sore (with fresh ground pepper rubbed into it)” (47). Following her successful deflowering by this scum, the sordidness of Titus’ sexual exploitation of a minor continues unabated. But the chain of molestation happens partly because of the expanding lists of Efe’s wants. Her accumulations of clothing and accessories become endless, as does Titus’ funding and need of her services in repayment of it.

Stories like Efe’s and the manner of her becoming a slut are doubtless common in Lagos. That is why the scandal of her being taken from one hotel room to another across Lagos by her abuser Titus can so easily draw dirty looks from the knowing and unforgiving public. Efe is forced to “quit school to look after the family” as a result of her mom’s death, making more space and time for the intense frequency of her molestation by the opportunistic Titus, alongside the severalfold increase of the payouts from him. Not unexpectedly, she is taunted by the receptionists, who ignore her greeting, “occasionally looking at her with the same disdain they did the bugs that infested the hotels” (51–52). All of them witnessed the grooming of a prostitute; people in the hotel lobbies are evidently thoroughly disgusted by the criminal conduct of this serial rapist and the complicity of his victim in the perpetuation of her own assault.

His lack of character is the more contemptible because it takes Efe’s pregnancy for Titus to dump her. This low-life pedophile is extremely selfish. Titus shows exceeding callous indifference to the predicament of his prey, taking instant flight upon hearing the news. The abandoned pregnant teenager is now forced as well to shoulder the responsibility of fending for the baby who, in turn, unquestionably faces an uncertain future without a biological father to stand by his side.

On Black Sisters Street explores the far-reaching implication of the teenager's sound decision against having an abortion with a keen eye for detail and a firm grasp of the motivations of human behavior. Efe bases her decision on the long-shot hope that, should her child turn out to be male, his father would want to claim him and "At least my baby will never want for anything" (56). But she has to endure all the ridicule and scorn of her adult neighbors, judgmental people who take notice of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and try to impugn and ostracize her, discouraging any association with her. The women even go so far as to encourage their own children, Efe's previous playmates, to keep their distance from her.

The scene of Efe's innocent baby's presentation to his wayward and runaway father resembles the idea of walking into a lion's den with the hope of snatching up its mane, and may well be one of the most memorably visualized of such encounters in all of African fiction. Although neither Titus nor Mrs. Titus questions the paternity of the baby, Efe's claims are rejected outright (60–61). At once it becomes clear that her child "Lucky Ikponwosa will never see his father again," that she herself is "the sixth woman in as many years to come to Titus with an offspring from an affair," and "all six the wife had dismissed in more or less the same way, marching them to the door with orders never to return, asking the house help to bolt the door behind them." Efe knows the problem of the child which she carries is hers alone, one which she must resolve on her own (62). Mrs. Titus tells her point-blank, as one woman speaking candidly to another, how foolishly she acted in opening her legs for a married man. The truth hits Efe that now she must take full responsibility for her idiocy. The duty to raise her child as a single mother confers on Efe a single-minded passion, one which will quickly consume her, regarding how to get money to provide the best for him. This drive will become so acute and persistent that she resolves to do whatever it will take, which will ultimately lead her into the trap set by the pimp Dele (66).

A dominant trope explored in relation to the road which Efe takes to her final destination in prostitution is the parental burdens that will overwhelm her and make selling her body her only means of getting out of dire financial straits. The baby grows, and "his mother worked to provide for him, cleaning first one office and then a second. She left early, before her son woke up, and by the time she came back he had worn himself out from playing and was winding down, ready to end his day. Left in the care of her sister, Efe did not see enough of him, and it pained her, so she took to praying. She prayed for longer hours in a day. And then she prayed for more work so she could save enough, soon enough, to take a break. It was only the second prayer that got answered" (67).

But once damned by her original sin of premarital sex and consequent out-of-wedlock parenthood, there is no escaping her doomed fate; so that even though an apparent answer to Efe's second prayer follows upon her speedy response to an advertisement calling "for a cleaning woman for an office on Randle Avenue," it will lead her on the course to her fixed destiny (67). It matters little that Efe is another victim of a brutal sexual assault. The commercial was placed

by none other than Dele the pimp: "Dele and Sons Limited: Import-Export Specialists" (67). The bumpy motorcycle ride which takes Efe to the interview foreshadows her tempestuous, daredevil experience as a prostitute in her ultimate destination in Belgium. Instructively, the tricks which the pimp employs to recruit her for the eventual employment in Europe, which begin from the moment that Efe secures the stop-gap cleaning job at Randle Avenue, invoke the same recurring patterns of tactics the child molester Titus employs in scouting for his teenage female victims.

Like Titus, Dele starts by tempting Efe with money, turning out to be "the most generous of her three bosses, giving her huge bonuses at holidays" (69). Like Titus, too, the pimp employs flattery as he "often complimented her, noticing when she had her hair done, when she looked worn out, or when she had a new outfit on" (69). In his game of entrapment, detailed information about his potential victim is as important to Dele as it is to Titus, so that he conducts careful reconnaissance on his target. It does not matter how long it takes; Dele waits for as long as seven months to put one and one together and surmise that Efe has "given enough hints that she was available but not loose, the sort of girl he could have an affair with but treat with respect at the same time. And, if she played her cards right, even marry" (69). Discovering that Efe has money problems, he figures that the appropriate time has come to unfold his evil plan. So, he pops to her this enticing idea: whether "she would like to go abroad. 'Belgium. A country wey dey Europe. Next door to London'" (70).

Efe's awe and insuperable wonder reflect the general infatuation that the idea of living overseas has for Nigerians: "If I wan' go abroad, Oga Dele? Anybody dey ask if de pikin wan' sweet?" (70). Going abroad is an over-romanticized notion which touches the central nervous system of every Nigerian. Dele could not therefore have chosen a better target for his offer. As we learn, "Who did not want to go abroad? People were born with the ambition, and people died trying to fulfil that ambition ... People knew risks and people took them, because the destination was worth it" (70). The deciding factor for Efe not turning down Dele's proposal about becoming a prostitute in Europe is her desperation to give her son L.I. "a better life" (70). She badly wants resources to enable her child to go "to good schools, become a big shot, and look after her when she was old and tired ... L.I. was a worthy investment to encourage her to accept Dele's offer" (70). Efe succumbs to the magical notion of "going abroad" that has always been floating about in her part of the world. She informs her sister Rita simply, "I am going abroad" (71). She is gripped by the fairy-tale idea as "the word 'abroad' brought a smile that stretched her lips from one end to the other and a sweet taste to her longue, a taste not unlike that of very ripe plantain. 'I'm going to Europe. Belgium ... Close to London. Next door to London'" (71).

On the draw of Europe, one of the young ladies, Sisi, is more expansive, and her governing perspective can be taken to represent the entire group's. She talks to the empowering materialization of the dream that binds all women, openly perpetuating the lie that the end justifies the means. "That night, just before she was shaken awake by Madam" to start work as a prostitute, "Sisi saw her car.

A Lexus lit up in such splendor that she could not look directly upon it" (172). Sisi "could not see the driver. And it was not her. It was being driven by a headless form with a candlewick for a head," but that is immaterial because the dream of affluence is all-consuming for Sisi—whether or not it is out of her reach (172).

The elusiveness of wealth is not a reason for Sisi to give up her dream. "When she woke up, she snapped her fingers over her head to ward off any evil that the dream might portend and, under the gaze of Madam, opened up the bag she had been given earlier and picked out the clothes for her first night of work" (172). By this act, Sisi conveys her determination to hold on to her dream, to take the long view: "The car and the wick flittered at the periphery of her mind, so that when she was not even thinking, they strayed into her mind's eye and filled her with a certain disquiet while she dressed" (172). With all her apprehensiveness overtaking her as she prepares for her first day as a prostitute, Sisi ascribes her fate to the destiny of the underprivileged in her society. By contrast, she notes, for example, the unlimited opportunities on offer to the children of the privileged. She asks, "Obasanjo's children, were they being forced to do things just to survive? She had heard that they were in Ivy League universities in the US," she muses (173). The unfairness of having to undertake all the years of education only for her to end up as a prostitute troubles Sisi to no end.

The superficial contrast Sisi draws between the poverty of her Nigerian experience and the relative material plenitude in Belgium furnishes an instance of the unimaginable compromises and concessions which many people like her are prepared to make when temptations arise to exchange morals for a pot of porridge. She certainly appears naively ambitious about the consequences of the morbid passions driving the new mercantilism sweeping the country. Under this new mood, people completely gloss over the moral cost of modest material gains. "I'm very lucky to be here, living my dream. If I'd stayed back in Lagos, God knows where I'd have ended up," she declaims (15, original emphasis). Sisi places the destitution of her childhood in panoramic view before her, and uses the experience of growing up in Lagos, in a family as poor as church rats, as a means of giving herself a reason to keep her mind on the challenges of living in poverty. That way, her past becomes for her an inspiration to do whatever she must do never again to return to those appalling conditions.

Having been mired in want in the past that she keeps spread out before her fundamentally colors Sisi's perspective, and serves as a constant impetus for her to accept her current status as a prostitute. As deplorable as selling her body undoubtedly is, she tries to convince herself that it is a source of appreciable personal material improvement. Her survival tactic takes the form of an incessant backward glance, looking back to her life in Nigeria as a way of pushing her way forward both in the present and into the future. Sisi's descent into prostitution thus has its genesis in the forces compelling her to make an unequal exchange: trading off her economic deprivation against moral destitution.

Sisi constantly reminds herself about how draining her past was; how stressful it was to live in a two-room apartment with all three members of her family, all

dependent on her father's meager salary as "an administrative clerk for a company" (18). Her father's limited education, which terminated after secondary school, stands out to her as the main cause of "his stagnant career. Destiny had not lent him an extra hand, either, by providing him with a peep into a sure future" (18). Yet, to show just how badly things have degenerated in the failed state that is Nigeria, in Sisi's own day even a university education no longer proves itself the expected ticket to material abundance. Sisi puts all her soul into education, receiving her degree from the University of Lagos. But her big dream becomes sham idealism, to put it mildly and charitably. Despite all her hard work, her dream dries up, a dream to "get a house for herself. Rent somewhere big for her parents. Living with three people in two rooms, she wanted a massive house where she had the space to romp and throw Saturday-night parties" (17).

The fact that a university degree no longer opens economic doors in Chisom's era in Nigeria is what instigates her dream of emigrating from this suffocating environment. Chisom bought her father's dream that a university education would secure her a good job and entry into the middle class, and above all provide her with the associated perks: "a company car, with a company driver to boot," with her sitting "in the owner's corner" and her mother "beside you," driving them "fia fia fia around Lagos' ... a house with room enough for her parents ... sitting room with a large color TV ... kitchen with an electric cooker ... cupboards for all the pots and pans and plates that they would need" (18). It means "No more storing pots under the bed! A kitchen painted lavender or beige, a soft, subtle color that would make them forget this Ogba kitchen that was black with the smoke of many kerosine fires" (18). She will have "A generator. No more at the mercy of NEPA. A gateman. A steward. A high gate with heavy locks. A high fence with jagged pieces of bottle sticking out of it to deter even the most hardened thieves. A garden with flowers. No. Not flowers. A garden with vegetables. Why have a garden with nothing you can eat?" (18–19).

However, the corruption within the Nigerian corporate establishment renders the modest anticipation of instant postgraduation employment and the achievement of those aspirations as just a pipe dream for Chisom. The Nigerian system, far from meritocratic, is oiled principally by networking among the privileged classes, with little or no room to grant entrance to the not-so-well-connected denizens of the land—people like Chisom. Consequently, *On Black Sisters Street* trumpets the survival instinct as the primary factor in propelling her to dream of leaving Lagos. She finds poverty suffocating, but ironically the ambience of her Belgium living space will turn out to be far worse.

Chisom's story stresses the role of providence, a key technical device in Nigeria's third-generation literature. A meeting with a pot-bellied old man known as Senghor Dele at a hairdressing salon, in the company of a girl no older than 17, is propitious in putting Chisom in touch with the contact that will satisfy her longstanding aspiration of European migration. The invitation extended to Chisom by Dele the pimp springs from her flattery of his vanity in showing him the reverence he continually craves with her adoring eyes which he sees light up: "If you wan' comot from dis our nonsense country, come see me,

make we talk” (30). Yet even someone as desperate as Chisom is initially put off by Dele’s uncouthness, asking in exasperation, “Why couldn’t the man eat properly?” as if he did “not grow up with a mother” (33–34). Despite this, his boasts about routinely getting “girls everywhere” soon have her mesmerized, and she seals her own gloomy fate when she accepts the carrot being dangled before her. “Every month I send gals to Europe. Antwerp. Milan. Madrid. My gals dey there. Every month, four gals. Sometimes five or more. You be fine gal now. Abi, see your backside, kai! Who talk say na dat Jennifer Lopez get the finest nyash?” he boasts (39).

Chisom’s inability to resist temptation and her acceptance of Dele’s offer to take her to Belgium suggest a fatal character flaw. But the role of providence also cannot be overlooked: the coincidental series of occurrences coming together so quickly as if in a conspiracy to make going abroad an irresistible proposition. These events unfold as though destiny itself is involved, the hand of fate moving things around her so rapidly in a direction that will lead Chisom to her own self-destruction. The chain of actions begins with Chisom getting home “that night and she had to eat gari and soup for the third day in a row”; then “the next day when her father came home to announce that there were rumors of job cuts in the civil service” that would impact him (31). The retrenchment exercise, purging out-of-state personnel, would lead to her father’s loss of his employment, compounding the family’s already dire economic woes. In this apparent orchestration of Chisom’s fate by what seems like supernatural agency, nothing could be worse than what happens next: the unpredicted failure of another critical facility, with the event of a city-wide water shortage in Lagos which renders the toilet in her apartment “broken and overrun with squirmy maggots and a day’s load of waste” (31).

This is the straw that breaks the camel’s back, as it were, compelling Chisom to pay a visit to the pimp Dele’s office which will result in her being trafficked to Antwerp in a matter of weeks. Principally, Sisi is seduced by the idea of material prosperity Europe promises her, an escape from the vicissitudes that mark the lives of poor people living in Nigeria. In her strife for material well-being, all the pleadings of her boyfriend Peter and his promises fall on her deaf ears. Peter is effusive with his assurances, but all to no avail: “I will take you abroad. London. Holland. America. Spain. Whichever one you choose. You know, no condition is permanent. We will make it. I’ll marry you, give you children” (42).

For all her initial trepidation about the nature of the job Dele has laid out before her in no uncertain terms, her doubts that she could “really resort to that” as she was “not that sort of girl,” Chisom chooses to take the plunge. She makes a deal with herself to sacrifice her integrity momentarily, her heart hardened by greed. With her eyes set on putting an end to her parents’ suffering, living in want, and distress, she convinces herself that her career in prostitution will be nothing more than a temporary station.

On Black Sisters Street underlines the fact that the prime dream of the majority of Nigerians is exile. Within the focus of this dream, “America was coveted. It was the promised land that many heard of but only the chosen few got to see”

(121). Within the scope of this dream, Europe comes in at a not-too-distant second place as the destination of choice. In alignment with this misplaced vision, in which the Western world is the preferred place to be for Nigerians, Chisom's long-term plan proposes that, as far as she is concerned, even whoredom in Europe will still be better than remaining trapped in Nigeria because it will be merely a launching-pad to a bigger and more dignified profession: "She would rename herself. She would go through a baptism of fire and be reborn a Sisi ... She would earn her money by using her punani. And once she hit it big, she would reincarnate as Chisom. She would set up a business or two. She would go into the business of importing fairly used luxury cars into Nigeria" (41).

Many other prostitutes yet may identify with Ama's story, seeing themselves in her shoes. The circumstances which catapult Ama into the trade are not as uncommon as one would like to think. The ubiquity of domestic violence that finds its outlet in the guise of incest and child molestation places it among the most under-reported categories of assault worldwide. The veil of silence maintained by those who have been assaulted as minors is firmly broken by this novel. Readers encounter a truly bizarre chain of events in Ama's defilement, kept concealed until her story is told to her fellow prostitutes as an adult.

Through the character of Ama's stepfather, a man known as Brother Cyril, Unigwe seizes the opportunity to develop a key topic of third-generation literature—Christian fundamentalism—focusing on a characteristic of it not seen before in the vast literature on the subject: the uncontrollable sexual urges of men of the clergy. The public image of Ama's background presents the picture of a girl that no one would anticipate ending up as a prostitute. One can scarcely question what at first looks like the pious setting of her upbringing, but it turns out to be a façade put up by a family living one big lie after another. Ama recounts growing up an introvert, sheltered by self-professed god-fearing parents: the man who calls her his daughter—Cyril, a sanctimonious assistant pastor of a mega church, in reality her adoptive stepfather—and Ama's birth mother Rose, apparently well respected within her church community as assistant pastor Brother Cyril's chaste wife but, in reality, a once fallen woman with a dark history of out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Ama recounts being outwardly adored by both parents and held up as a princess by the man who will turn out to be only her stepfather. Ama's parents provide her with immaculate clothing, creating the false image that their daughter was being taught to "follow her mother's footsteps and become a model wife for a Christian man someday" by being "married a virgin" (112). However the image of Ama's mother as someone who "married a virgin" is just another lie told by her parents, later debunked when Ama's exposure of Brother Cyril as the criminal responsible for her stolen childhood incenses him to expose his own wife's dark past as payback. Cyril himself offers no retreat, explaining Ama's paternity by warning her not to "call me ... Papa. I am not your father, lying girl ... I am not your father. You hear that? I took in your mother, and this is all the thanks I get. All the thanks I get for saving you from being a bastard. All the years

I raised you, fed you, this is all the thanks I get. You know what happens to children without fathers? Children who are born at home? Father unknown. Ime mkpuke” (126).

The ultimate irony is that, like the fiction of the claim that Ama’s mother “married a virgin,” all of Ama’s parents’ other actions amount to no more than knotty gimmicks, possibly because the greater the theatricality the more chances the pair believes it has of fooling people. No one could therefore have suspected that Ama’s parents were only putting up appearances; their religion was not even skin-deep. Yet another big lie was Brother Cyril’s pretense that he had renounced sin and taken on the full character of God as manifested in his son Jesus Christ in such attributes as humility, thinking others to be better than oneself, meekness, kindness, and selflessness, when in reality his life was fueled by ambition, arrogance, avarice, boasting, greed, pride, and self-seeking.

Displaying the precociousness ascribed to her throughout her childhood, the young Ama shows an accurate understanding of her stepfather, observing that “he probably regretted that he wasn’t the *pastor*. That he didn’t fucking have the last word” (112, original emphasis). Brother Cyril’s rapid rise up the church leadership ladder is itself a proclamation of his vaulting ambition: “Two years after he joined the church, he had risen in the rank to assistant pastor, only one set of ears away from God”; and readers learn that Cyril made his way by crafting an unmistakable impression of someone with “moral uprightness and the holiness that shone off his stiff white collar. The sins of the world curdled on his forehead, causing furrows, five or six lines that lay like lax S’s, one on top of the other” (112).

Brother Cyril maintained a posture vaingloriously exhibiting his holier-than-thou attitude, and was punctilious in sniffing out sin wherever it hid itself within the church: “whenever he saw a female in clothes that did not cover her knees,” this “threw” him into “a righteous coughing fit, coughing out curses on ‘the daughters of Eve who destroy the reputation of women’; or parading his own wife by contrast as a model of Christian behavior, “a woman fit for Christian eyes” (112).

The non-Christian music played by their neighbors met with the fierce resistance of Brother Cyril and his wife Rose, and they were more than anxious to broadcast that they regarded it as “the devil’s music,” which they did not welcome into their home (110). Such music did “not edify the things of our Lord ... The devil shakes his waist and sways his horns when he hears music like that” (110).

To further reflect their own avowed sanctity, Brother Cyril and his wife Rose hoisted the banner of strict discipline as a key principle of Christian precept in the upbringing of their daughter Ama, so that as a girl she was made conscious of the severe consequences of sin: “She knew that her father would put her across his knees and, with her mother watching in a corner, tear into her with a treated koboko, the cow-hide cane that he nicknamed Discipline” (110–112). These parents were to all appearances so over-protective of their daughter that they did not even allow her to mix freely or unsupervised with other children in

their neighborhood for fear of bad influences from outside. To dazzle the church body and draw attention to his assumed piety, Brother Cyril himself insisted on arraying himself in “a white robe” which he anxiously wore not only to church but also at home (112).

Ama’s stepfather thus concealed any observable behavior which could have triggered anyone inside or outside the church to suspect him to be capable of committing incest, let alone the sexual pillage of his own eight-year-old stepdaughter. But Brother Cyril emerges in the end as a false prophet, the devil himself cloaked in fake garments as a holy servant of God. Readers who thought they had seen the worst scenario of child molestation before encountering Ama’s story would be proven wrong because Ama’s launch into prostitution supersedes the horror of anything seen before, since it involves repeated abuse from a most unexpected quarter and by the most unlikely person. Not only will the heinous statutory offense be committed against a mere minor, the eight-year-old Ama, by a family member of hers; but the heartless aggressor, it will turn out, is none other than someone who had called himself her own father.

The hideous dastardly act by “Brother Cyril,” as he was known in his Christian community, becomes all the more outrageous because the criminal was to boot the assistant pastor of one of the biggest churches in the city of Enugu, Eastern Nigeria, the “Church of the Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahweh, Jehovah El Shaddai, Jehovah Jireh” (112). His conduct thus raises the question whether the church itself was aware, even subliminally, that it had a pedophile in its ranks, and, if so, why the church chose to maintain a regime of silence. Unquestionably, Brother Cyril is so sick, and his crimes so atrocious they are nothing short of the most grisly ever exposed in all of African literature, from the novels of Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono through Flora Nwapa down the line, of the rank hypocrisy of the leadership of the prosperity gospel Christian Mega Church movement.³

It is a further irony of the situation that Brother Cyril will dishonor the tender eight-year-old Ama, the girl that he calls his daughter, the very day that he has organized a birthday party in what he ironically calls her “honor.” Readers witness this much: “A big party. A big cake with eight candles. And ribbons in her hair. The house smelled of jollof rice and moi moi and beef. Her mother and two of her mother’s friends sat on low stools in the sweaty kitchen, sipping Maltina and supervising the housemaids’ cooking” (106). Brother Cyril claims the stepdaughter’s birthday party is also paying tribute to her academic distinction of being top of her class at school for the third time during the year. Brother Cyril “celebrates” his stepdaughter with fanfare, only to turn round and shame her that very night.

Ama’s own description of the revolting and degrading act portrays moments of terror like no other in African literature. Her eerily graphic pictures of the shocking, savage acts of sexual violence visited by Cyril against a young girl he calls his own daughter report assaults so brutish, so cold-hearted, so harrowing, and so callous and unconscientious they should make the heart of any reader, not just all parents, bleed. They present frighteningly enacted, deplorable scenes

of unnatural disorder which no young person, boy or girl, should ever face. To be robbed of her dignity, robbed of her safety and sense of security, robbed of her innocence, so crudely and so violently raped by her own stepfather in the familiar surroundings of her own bedroom as happens to Ama is so baffling, so terrifying, and so devastating.

Readers recoil, like the tender stunned scapegoat herself, holding their breath as with utter apprehensiveness, shame, and total disgust they witness how close to home her anxiety and torment come. It is a nightmare to watch helplessly as these macabre events unfold, as the ghoulish misconduct brings on the mystified young girl's frantic fear, puzzlement, and bewilderment which then morph into panic and terror and then into excruciating pain as she is held down by a person who calls himself her father but who forces her into submission to his ill-will and evil purposes. These moments are without question among the most horrific scenes of sexual brutalization in all the tableaux of world literature. For that reason, readers must witness for themselves, in all its sordidness, this grotesque and incomprehensible episode in Ama's life to enable them to begin to fathom the terrible permanent aftermaths, the crushing impacts which the horrifying incidents will leave on the young girl's future.

No one but a servant of the devil himself could so blasphemously twist and distort the meaning of God's holy commandment, citing it not for doing His will but for his own self-gratification by redeploying it in the service of such sadistic, self-serving, selfish, morbid carnal interests as the apostate pastor Cyril does. Cyril's acts of sexual battery against his own stepdaughter not only fall below all standards of human decency, perpetrating a grievous betrayal of the trust upon which the foundation of family rests, and violating the rights of a child to be protected by its own parents. He also transgresses the very bases on which parental authority is vested, the responsibility that God entrusts to all parents, proving himself totally unworthy of the divine trust of parental authority. The Assistant Pastor's crimes extend the long list of immoralities and sexual abuse scandals of Christian religious officials, among them monetary extortion of the laity, fornication, and infidelity, as presented within the works of literature of Africa from Oyono and Beti through to Nwapa and Ndibe. With Unigwe's addition in *On Black Sisters Street* of incest and sexual battery of an underage girl by her own father who is also a member of the clergy, the image of the depravity of the Christian leadership figured in fiction from Africa surely cannot sink to a lower level.

Samuel Kirson Weinberg observes in a remarkable study, *Incest Behavior*, that incest sets the child victim into a state of protracted confusion about familial roles, provokes defiance of parental authority, isolates the guilty family by limiting its contacts with the outside world, and elicits rivalry that promotes family discord.⁴ Ama's reaction to her abuse by her father is clearly not out of character with the patterns of behavior observed by Weinberg. Readers find Ama at first confused and resigned to her fate, as "Every night her father came, and as time passed she came to expect it, her palms clammy and her mouth dry" (114). Then, boiling with imperfectly concealed rage, "she tried to get out of it,"

before she increases her level of resistance by telling her mother that “she did not want to sleep alone ... she was afraid of the darkness” (114).

Ama’s evasive and negligent mother, of course, dismisses her daughter’s entreaties and instead resorts to lecturing the young girl, admonishing her “not to be silly, she was eight years old, old enough to sleep alone, and did she not know how lucky she was to have her own room? How many children her age had their own bedrooms? ‘Eeh nne? A beautiful bedroom all to yourself, and you want to sleep in my bed?’” (114).

The scene of Ama’s heated confrontation with her stepfather Cyril itself resembles an encounter between peasants and their exploiters in a Ngugi novel.⁵ The constancy of the assault on her by her violator is ruthless enough, but Brother Cyril aggravates the injury further by not taking responsibility for his role in Ama’s waning interest in school work. Cyril has the effrontery to criticize her publicly for failing the university entrance examination. “Get out of my face, you lazybones ... Idiot. You crawl around like a lizard, ngwere, how do you expect to pass JAMB? You think passing JAMB is drinking akamu? Get out of my sight,” he commands (125). Ama, having had enough, angrily blurts out, “You call yourself my father? ... You call yourself my father? You call yourself a pastor? You disgust me! I na-aso m oyi” (125). Ama could no longer hold in the secret she had been keeping, and so she spilled the beans, even as she was being forcefully hushed by her own mother: “Mba. No. I will not shut up. Mama, do you know what he did to me when I was little? He raped me. Night after night. He would come into my room and force me to spread my legs for him. Remember when you always thought I had apollo?” (125).

The cover-up move hatched out by Ama’s mother and supported by her husband shows how economic imperatives so often determine the decisions women make in their society. When forced to confront the stark choice between protecting her daughter and preserving her own economic security and social standing, many a woman like Ama’s mother, squeezed by the necessities for survival that are beyond her control, has leaned on the side of her own self-protection. Rather than allow the matter of Cyril’s criminal sexual molestation of his own stepdaughter to develop into a full-blown scandal and jeopardize her established status, Rose chooses to hush things up.

Rose’s refusal to believe her daughter’s story and instead to stand by her husband reminds us of Mrs. Titus’ response when confronted by her husband’s mistress Efe. Encouraged by his wife’s support, Brother Cyril presents Ama with an ultimatum: “I want you out of my house. I want you out. Tata. Today! As God is my witness, you shall leave my house today!” (126). Within this context, the cover-up that is put in place by Ama’s mother, who promptly devises a plan to send her daughter to live with her cousin in Lagos, is truly hideous.

The misery of a life soiled by rape was already matched for Ama only by the passion to leave that space, the place of violent injustice. Her anger against the shadow of the perpetrator grew into a strong compulsion in her to renounce her sociopath stepfather completely along with her mother, his enabler. Ironically, the action to put that distance between herself and her parents had to await an

opportunity to present itself for both of the parents to need to cook up another cover-up. Amid her discontent, Ama's receptiveness to the plot would take her to a location where she would be immediately exposed to the unfettering potency of secular music and liquor, two factors that in the years following her initiation were to leave their permanent legacies on her, and with devastating consequences.

So, the confusing signals which hide the real danger that will follow upon the heels of Ama's move to the home of her mother's cousin, Mama Eko, in Lagos, the first stage of the journey that is ultimately to take her out of the country to Antwerp, Belgium, will quickly disappear. Settling in quickly under Mama Eko's wings, the writing is already on the wall for Ama, beginning with her immediate seduction by the liberating power of the music she hears in Mama Eko's flat, the sounds from the "irreverent titles that stood out in luscious contrast to the pious titles of those by the Voices of the Cross," accentuated by Mama Eko's own vulgarity which fortifies the appeal of her residence for Ama (130). The sense of freedom from abstract moral codes of conduct sweeps over Ama, as Lagos offers her everything denied her by Enugu, an impression reaffirmed after her first meal is washed down by alcohol, as a drink of Guinness "went down her throat and released something wonderous on the way" (133). It is only a matter of time before Ama's path crosses that of the pimp Dele, a standout patron of "Mama Eko's Cooking Empire," her canteen where the newest member of the household is helping out as an honorary customer-service attendant.

The freedom conceived by Ama, however, was not part of the plan of a pimping scout like the crafty Dele. His ulterior motive is clear from his investment in the plot he develops to groom her, contesting for public attention in the canteen with his elaborate modes of dress, his "rich lace suits," and courting Ama's recognition in particular by leaving her "huge tips," and it is clear he is biding his time before making his move. That is why he gives Ama time to take in the sophistication of the professional female patrons at the canteen: "young women slinging expensive bags, coming in from the bank on their lunch break ... accompanied by eager young men in suits and ties ... bringing into the buka the sweet-smelling fragrances of perfume and freedom" (136–137). Finally Ama can no longer hide her enchantment with and longing for the high culture of these customers at the canteen, her fascination finding expression in unrestrained compliments such as "Sister, your hair is very well done. Where did you have it fixed?" (136). The professional women are accustomed to "[d]oling out thousands of naira for their hair," but Ama knows that she herself "could not afford the exorbitant rates charged by the hairdressers at the Headmaster's" as she instead "got her extensions fixed at small salons, cubicles with one hairdresser or two, who charged sixty naira for their labor" (136–137). Seeing her behavior, it was time for Dele the pimp to pounce.

The seduction of Ama was concealed by this impostor under the impression that there was nothing particularly unusual about his tipping and that he was not singling her out, a standard tactic deployed by pimps to cover their tracks. The occasional generosity Dele extended to all regular customers at the canteen, not leaving out the owner of the canteen herself, by offering to pay for all diners,

was an investment he needed to make in order to obtain a much larger payout in the future. “Mama, I dey declare today! For everybody. Even you! Eat! Drink! Senghor Dele is paying,” he would rambunctiously announce (137).

The characteristic shrewdness of child molesters and pimps is represented in Dele’s pursuit of Ama. He is keenly attentive, always looking for the moment to become ripe to make his move. He senses her boredom with the routine of Lagos life and the predictability of the daily grind of work at the canteen wearing her down, and her growing longing to have all the things that the professional women diners were showing off. The rest of Ama’s tale, spent on her insuperable idolization of the white-collar ladies, of which Dele takes ample notice, shows the aspiring young woman swooning over the attire, the glowing jewelry and sweet aromas of the perfumes oozing off the sophisticated salaried women eating out at Mama Eko’s canteen. Indeed, she takes exceptional delight in hobnobbing with these ladies, with such familiarity she “became somewhat friends with the regulars, interspersing the food and drinks with tidbits about the day and with questions about their families and work. ‘Is your son better now? Poor boy. Typhoid fever is a hard illness even for an adult to handle ... Did you get the promotion? Ah, we have to celebrate it oo. We go wash am oo’” (137).

Ama’s pining for luxury items is carefully depicted to project the image of her material seduction, and all readers watch is a clever pimp as he manipulates a puppet. Dele, a diligent observer of human behavior, watches for the most opportune moment to swoop upon her, like a hawk on its prey. The resemblance to the moment when he pounced on Efe becomes remarkably close. Dele develops a conviction of having gained Ama’s confidence considerably, and his meeting with her at the canteen “in the morning, rather uncharacteristic of him” shows how spotting the auspicious moment is a strategy of criminals like him, taking the opportunity when he “was the only customer, and Ama came out to greet him and take his order” (137–138). However, rather than choosing from the menu, the pimp instead makes the catch. “‘Today I just wan’ talk to you,’ he said, dragging her down to sit beside him on a wooden chair. ‘You been working here now for how long? Seven months? Eight months? Almost a pregnancy! You na fine woman. You deserve better. You wan’ better? ... If you wan’ make easy money, if you wan’ go abroad, come my office for Randle make we talk. But only if you dey serious o. If you no dey serious make you no waste my time and yours. You hear me? ... I no wan’ food today. Na jus talk I wan’ talk’” (138)

Here Dele the masterful manipulator pitches his line: a mixture mostly of lies and half-truths, giving his target the impression that she is not being pressured to do anything; that she has free will and should exercise it because the choice open to her is a voluntary one. So Dele bases his pitch on premises that appear supportive of procuring the advancement of his target’s economic well-being and social interests, when in fact the opposite is true, as he deploys all his standard tactics of manipulation to cash in on Ama’s most vulnerable moment. He lets her know that he prioritizes her as a person; he has her interests at heart; he understands her hard situation, all her travails of waiting for so long for a

breakthrough; he is flattering of her physical attractiveness; and he makes her know he considers her deserving of a better station, telling her there is “easy money” to be made “abroad,” an opportunity which he is willing and generous enough to facilitate for his potential client.

In this way Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Streets* offers readers a peep into the culture of pimping. Here, even in view of the terrifying story this novel tells about the scouting processes which emerge from the hellish episodes encountered, its picture of the underground where the pimps do their work repays detailed attention. It is constructed like Kafka’s castle, where it seems that every step the target of the pimping business takes to wriggle out of the degrading control of her pursuer pushes her further down the rabbit hole from which it is impossible for her to dig herself out, for once the scout sets his eyes on the target it is a done deal.

A first-hand look is afforded the reader into the worst of the pimping strategies through the twists and turns which follow from the moment the idea of prostitution as a likely profession is mooted to the unsuspecting Ama by pimp scout Dele. Instantly the young lady is thrown off balance by the formerly remote idea anyone could even look at her in that way, making her shoot spit on him like a bullet, only to turn around a few days later when her temper has cooled and she has reconsidered, bringing him her profuse apology and begging earnestly for his reinstatement of the initial offer.

Like Efe before her, Ama could not run away for long from the long arms of the pimp in his pursuit of her. She rests her decision to become a prostitute in Belgium in large measure on having at the back of her mind the perception of herself as damaged goods, with nothing more to lose. She reminds herself that “Brother Cyril had taken what he wanted, no questions asked ... discarding her when she no longer sufficed” (141). She becomes convinced that making the “easy money ... abroad” would be a way to assert her economic independence, “own a business and show fucking Brother Cyril that she did not need him” or “her mother ... and their fucking blinding whiteness standing in her way” (143).

These four apathetic young women thus find themselves tangled up in the world’s oldest profession and caught up in their dingy, cramped, Zwarte Zusterstraat Antwerp apartment bonded by a shared sense of shame and despair. A feeling of being dirty and disgusted, and trapped in their situation, sweeps over them. One of the four, Efe, expresses the thoughts of the group, describing the reality of becoming a prostitute in a rare moment of candor as “a botched dream” (23). Europe encountered by the group falls drastically short of the place they had imagined before leaving the shores of their West African country. In place of the elegance envisioned, the neighborhood they find themselves thrust is a place where “huge offices stand alongside grotty warehouses and desolate fruit stalls run by effusive Turks and Moroccans ... dark streets carved with tramlines, houses with narrow doors and high windows nestle against one another” (23). “The house itself,” in which they must live, “was not much to look at,” readers learn. “Truth be told, it was quite a disappointment,

really. A ground-floor flat with a grubby front door ... five bedrooms not much bigger than telephone booths. The sitting room a cliché. An all-red affair except for the long sofa, which was black against the wall right beside the door" (86).

All of this is far from the glamour that the women have dreamed about and hoped to attain for themselves. There is therefore a palpable sense of the discomfort of the young ladies in the apartment. Within their new surroundings in Belgium the young Nigerian ladies have moved out of the frying pan only to find themselves in the fire. They can neither sleep peacefully here nor find the voice to articulate their feelings. They are so dumbfounded by the circumstances in which they find themselves, "They are mostly silent ... a deep silence entombing them, filling up the room, so that there is hardly room for anything else ... the silence is a huge sponge soaking up air" (24). Under the imminent threat of asphyxiation, they want to "open the door," but restrain themselves "because they know that would not help, as the door opens unto a short, carpeted hallway," in which "the air ... seems vile" (24). "Still, no one says a word ... They will not talk about it. Their eyes are mainly on their laps, their arms folded across their chests" (24). Evidently, speech has failed the young ladies; stunned beyond expression, the identical gesture of folded arms signifies their absolute helplessness.

The garbled public statements and private thoughts ostensibly affirming the appeal of prostitution by the young Nigerian ladies are in fact flat denials of reality. These pronouncements are clearly at odds with their authors' own actual reactions to the horror of their experiences, showing how the brutish events they have endured creep into everything they do, affecting all their behaviors even when they are unaware of it. The hard time these young women have coming to anything resembling a clear understanding of, let alone an ability to coherently express, the unforgiving brutality of the aftermath of defiling the temple of their bodies as prostitutes mirrors the complex Elaine Scarry has described as the "fifth dimension of physical pain": its "ability to destroy language, the power of verbal objectification, a major source of self-extension, a vehicle through which the pain could be lifted out into the world and eliminated."⁶

The inarticulacy of one of these young ladies, Ama, in particular, backs up this observation about the longstanding corrosive effects of repressed memories of trauma. Ama's claim that there is no other job she would rather have is an astonishing statement of self-delusion for anyone who has suffered the sorts of violations she has experienced to make. Her claim also reflects a sensibility deadened to feelings that have been tightly bottled up for a considerable length of time: "I don't know if I'm happy or not," she states. "I meet interesting people at work. In what other job do you earn money just for lying on your back? Heaven knows there is no way I can be any of the other alternatives open to us here" (99). She goes on to compare other professions unfavorably with what she is doing, including "fucking ruining my manicure cleaning up after snotty women too busy or too lazy to clean up after themselves" or being a hairdresser standing "for hours on end ... for peanuts" (99). "I made this choice," Ama asserts: "At least I was asked to choose. I came here with my eyes wide open" (99).

Another of the women, Sisi, concurs with Ama, claiming that she too has willingly chosen to do the job. In a vain attempt to pull the wool over the reader's eyes, she says she has accepted her fate, making a shocking and outrageous declaration which she arrives at with her eyes on a "big blue-and-white bag with ALDI written across it" (90). This grocery bag, being carried by one of her new roommates, itself signals the coveted material acquisition to which all the migrant workers aspire, hence its supernal ability to dazzle a newly arrived migrant like Sisi into waxing poetic and declaring: "*Soon I shall know this and more. I shall part my legs to this country, and it, in return, will welcome me and begin to unlock its secrets to me*" (90, original emphasis).

The "secrets" of her new country of residence which she is anxiously looking forward to discovering are of course its material riches, which sets her up for a colossal disappointment, as she mistakes the mirage for the fancy jewelry with which her own roommate Efe is adorned. In her words, her hope is that "*this is another thing Europe will teach me. To spot real gold ...* And like this woman, she would wear them with an air of someone who was used to the good things of life, so used to them, in fact, that she no longer noticed them" (90, original emphasis).

The image of Belgium projected in Sisi's imagination prior to getting there is like some sort of Eldorado. She was looking to "work for a few years, keep her eyes on the prize, earn enough to pay back what she owed Dele, and then open up her own business" (89). Even when her heart is faltering and she hears her mother's voice chiding her, "telling her that she was disappointed" in her daughter selling "her body for a chance at making some money," Sisi strives to keep her larger goal in view: "She tried to crowd her head with visions of a future in which she would have earned enough to buy her father a car, buy her mother a house in Ikoyi, and buy herself a good man who would father her children and give her parents the grandchildren they had always dreamed of before they were too old to appreciate them" (146).

Sisi has maintained her resolve with the long view, the big picture. In the long run, she "would resurrect as Chisom, buy a house in Victoria Garden City. Marry a man who would give her beautiful children. And her beautiful children would go to a private school. She would have three house girls, a gardener, a driver, a cook. Her life would be nothing compared to what it is now. And nothing compared to her parents" (89). Sisi will get her money swiftly as a prostitute; then, bingo, her life will normalize itself and she will be reintegrated back to society.

But Sisi has totally overlooked inconvenient truths about the stigma that attaches itself to this way of earning a livelihood, its degrading character. She imagined Antwerp, Belgium, instead as a place where dead dreams come back to life. Always at the back of Sisi's mind was the indignity of life in Nigeria, and "Lagos was not a memory she liked to dredge up ... Not the house in Ogba and not Peter. She tried to think instead of hurtling toward a prophecy that would rinse her life in a Technicolor glow of the most amazing beauty" (15).

Historian of medieval history Ruth Mazo Karras has put her finger on the matter regarding the "degrading" nature of prostitution which shames its practitioners:

“Very few if any societies have treated prostitution neutrally as work; it has always had implications for the status of the women involved which derive from its sexual nature.”⁷ This is true of these young Nigerian ladies too. *On Black Sisters Street*’s depiction of them excavates information about the life of shame, how it hides itself in the human consciousness, employing the public and private declarations and thoughts of at least three of the women as attempts at deflection from the cold reality they have in front of them to make a statement about what human behavior reveals about character. All their denials illustrate the problematics of maintaining one’s self-definition, dignity, and sanity in the messy terrain in which prostitutes find themselves, which is why these ladies are neither willing nor able to process the psychological and social (moral and ethical) implications of the loathsome things they are going through in Belgium.

When one of them, Efe, does come around in due course to openly acknowledge the hard facts about her situation, she is led to concede the gap between appearance and substance; the difference between her dream and the bitter reality. Efe becomes tired of allowing pretensions to the middle-class status to dominate her passion, and knocks the blinkers from her eyes. In a rare moment of audacious contemplation, she puts aside exclusive fixation on the money that prostitution supposedly could bring her, and instead begins to count the costs.

Efe improves her perception of the wretchedness of her condition, yet resigns herself to embracing it, her mind made up to ride out the storm. Efe’s honest, humor-coated public admission comes close to self-flagellation but is also closest to a statement of truth: “Me, I try not to think about happiness. L.I [her son Lucky Ikponwosa] is getting a good education. Dat one suppose dey enough for me ... Sometimes I think my life is like a set of false teeth. The world sees what you show it: clean teet’ wey white like Colgate. But you know for inside dat your real teet’ don rot finish!” (99). The image of the false teeth serving as camouflage over rotten ones, indeed, is most applicable to the notion of material improvements attached to the sordid experience of prostitution endured by each of these ladies.

The mistreatment of these young women in Belgium begins at the hands of Madam, their boss. Immediately on arrival, Madam puts them through a process of dehumanization, intended to break them in and turn them into a zombie-like state to facilitate their economic and sexual extortion. The procedure of Sisi’s de-personalization is typical. Madam starts by taking stolen glances at her. Madam confirms the tastes of her recruiting scout pimp Dele to be peerless. Sisi has the perfect body image. Though a beauty queen, she is now someone’s property to be used as the owner pleases, Madam informs Sisi, sadly. “My dear Sisi,” Madam instructs her, “it’s not your place to ask questions here. You just do as you are told, and you’ll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen. You understand?” (103).

Sisi’s role, Madam instructs her, is to follow all commands issued here; it is not her duty to think or use her own initiative. Sisi should know she is now someone’s property. Madam lets Sisi know that no initiate of prostitution avoids this rite. “Three days ago I gave Joyce the same instruction. She did not ask me questions” (103). This is the norm in the process of robotization of the prostitute

in the making. The goal is to turn Sisi into something like a Vending Sex Machine. That is why Madam asks her to stand ready to take on this new role of a robot. So “Sisi detected Madam’s tone, the way she spoke as if Sisi were a child. Back in Lagos, nobody would have dared talk to her in that manner” (103). To be a prostitute is to be so rudely and suddenly removed from one’s privacy and placed in the domain of public property, a total assault on the initiate’s inner being, mangling it and locking away her ability to think clearly for herself.

Another layer in the depersonalization of the initiates is to have them pose as asylum seekers. Concurrent with the disfiguration of her mind, during the initiation rite Sisi officially must undergo an identity change. This involves taking on a false persona and identity, being stripped of her birth name and nationality. Falsifying her family history, fabricating a new horrific family story, owning it, identifying with it, getting assigned a fake name and a forged nationality; all are involved. A new passport will be assigned, lending an official stamp of approval to the rebranded entity. Here is how Sisi, a Nigerian, is instructed by Madam to submit to this identity transfer:

“I shall get you a cab that will stop you in front of the center. Tell them there that you are from Liberia ... your father was a local Mandingo chief, and soldiers loyal to Charles Taylor came at night to your house and killed your entire family: father, mother, sisters, and brothers. You escaped because you hid yourself in a kitchen cupboard. You dared to come out only after the massacre ended and the soldiers had gone ... you heard a soldier shout that one family member was missing, that they were under obligation to kill you all, and that they would be back to do just that. Look sad. Cry. Wail. Tear your hair out. White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear about us killing each other, about us hacking off each other’s heads in senseless ethnic conflicts. The more macabre the story, the better.” “Talk about seeing the corpses of your dead family. About stepping on the corpses as you made your way out of the house ... you couldn’t trust your neighbors, most of them were pro-Taylor and would have killed you themselves if they had caught you. Don’t forget, cry. Make sure tears come out. Real tears, eh? ... Remember, you are Mandingo. You have no passport. You escaped Liberia with only your head and the clothes on your back. A white man took pity on you and helped you escape. He saw you outside a church begging for money. You understand?” (104)

Quite remarkable here are the questionable ways in which even an illicit underground business such as prostitution sustains itself by exploiting so many potent stereotypes. One might object to the obnoxious idea of African strife and internecine conflicts, and certainly misinformation mixing up the experiences of certain African ethnic groups like the Mandingo and conflation of histories of neighboring African countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia are downright stupid. But they all lend themselves as useful tools in the hands of the criminals

in the underground sex industry, who ally these fragmentary truths, lies, and good causes embedded in notions of Western humanitarian ventures in Africa to further their own nefarious enterprises.

The initiation rite completed, the prostitute is now ready to start work, and this begins with clothing that reveals the body sensually. On Sisi's first night at work, for instance, "The blouse hugged her intimately, sequined in silver. A gold-colored nylon skirt that showed her butt cheeks when she bent ... She felt naked, silver and gold nude. Long gold-plated earrings dangled from her ears and rested on her shoulders, thin strings of a setting sun. And on her lips, the rich red of tomato puree. Lips pouting sensually (she hoped), their redness gleaming" (173). Then the prostitute is displayed with her mates in cages like curios, objects brought in from exotic lands and made "to stand in front of the glass showcase, strutting in sexy lingerie, lacy bras, and racy thongs to attract customers" (152).

Their degrading display to be sold as commodities is a routine subject of the women's own self-deprecatory conversations, "the strutting and waiting to be noticed by the men strolling by, wondering which ones are likely to tip well and which are not" (152). Sisi's discomfort is visible, for example. "Her skirt rode up her thighs" as she walked to the cage, "and she was sure that her butt cheeks showed," making "walking somewhat difficult" (173–174). The prostitutes' display stands are in "Huge windows like showcases, the edges of the windows lined with blue and red neon lights, and behind the windows, young women in various poses. Mostly poses that involved their chest being pushed out, eyelids fluttering, a finger beckoning. Pretty girls all in a row. Bodies clad in leather or half-dressed in frilly lingerie. Boots way up the thighs" (174).

The prostitutes are sporting such sexually provocative attire that the "few women Sisi saw" on the nearby streets "held their men around the waist and dragged at their hands as if to show possession, walking rapidly with their leashed men behind them" (174). The seeing eyes are of different classifications, some innocent and so quickly withdrawn, but many are intentional, indecorous, and more than voyeuristic:

Tourists with their cameras slung around their necks, mostly Japanese tourists who do not know Antwerp, seduced by the antiquity of the city and deceived by the huge cathedral, they wander off and then suddenly come face-to-face with a line-up of half-dressed women, different colors and different shades of those colors. They look and, disbelieving, take another look. Quickly. And then they walk away with embarrassed steps. Not wishing to be tainted by the lives behind the windows.

Those who know where they are and why they are there walk with an arrogant swagger and a critical twinkle in their eyes. They move from one window to another and, having made up their minds, go in to a close sale. The street starts filling up at around nine o'clock. Young men in their thirties with chins as soft as a baby's buttocks and pictures of their pretty wives in their leather wallets, looking for adventure between the thighs of een afrikaanse.

Young boys in frazzled eagerness to grow up, looking for a woman to rid them of their virginity. Bachelors between relationships, seeking a woman's warmth without commitment. Old men with mottled skin and flabby cheeks, looking for something young to help them forget the flaccidity time has heaped on them. Vingerlingstraat bears witness to all kinds of men. (152)

In all of the literature of Africa it will be difficult to find a more dehumanizing treatment of women than this. Were it not an eyewitness account of real-life happenings, the humiliation encapsulated in the cage display of the Nigerian women prostitutes in Europe would have come across as a project of vicious lampooning, a sort of beguiling caricature on fictive scales of human degradation in an environment that touts itself as civilized society. The wholesale phenomenon of ill-clad women caged up and commanded to dance about in sexually provocative ways for the perverse delight of men will be justifiably morally reprehensible for many.

The outrageous displays of the Nigerian women as sex objects, as sexually available for the gratification of the lasciviousness of the Western public, completely run afoul of the basic tenets concerning respect and human sympathy, the fundamental premises of international relations. It is a violent throwback to the tradition of ethnological show business in which foreigners from distant places in the world were once put on display in Europe for commercial and educational purposes. The female descendants of "brutes" from the continent of Africa, displayed in the past on stages as sources of spectacle in Europe to be viewed from safe distances for sport, amusement, and instruction, now emerge as sexually available for pick-up by those Westerners who have the means. Now, these Westerners are at liberty to have these lewd objects relocated within close enough proximity to their own homes or hotel rooms and command them to play the roles assigned them, which is to engage in personal intimacy of the most private kind with the buyer of the services. In the bursting new sex trade, an emergent variant of the slave trade, the manipulation of marginalized people like the Nigerian women is now incorporated into the mercantile culture of Europe.

The middleman in this enterprise is the pimp, who works in cahoots with other facilitators like Madam. So zealous is Madam in her bid to guarantee the uninterrupted supply of young Nigerian ladies that she could not care less about privacy, to the extent that she "sometimes inspected their underwear as if they were schoolgirls in boarding school, checking for signs of dirt or wear, telling them that her girls were always at the top of the range. 'I don't want to find you wanting in any respect'" (234). Giving the prostitutes a medication called "a period break" is a management strategy Madam employs to ensure a steady and continuous supply of sexual services to meet the high demands of her clients (234).

Sisi recalls the surreal intimate physical and emotional subjection of the prostitute's body, ill-use of unimaginable proportion and magnitude, projected by her earth-shaking horror the night she receives her first customer. "She stretched her lips and parted them ... the smile came, faltered, and died out. She was a

woman sinking. How could she smile while she sank? Smiling at a stranger for whom she felt nothing but who would probably have her tonight” (178). Sisi had “slept with only two people her entire life, Kunle, her boyfriend before Peter, when she was eighteen and experimenting, and Peter” (178).

Of the individual who selects Sisi on this night, she says, “this was not the type of man she would have slept with. She did not find him attractive at all. His face was too wide, his eyes too far apart. What sort of a man would go to a prostitute, anyway? Could he not find a woman? ... What had pushed this man to seeking pleasure between the thighs of a woman he most likely would not recognize outside the café? Laziness? Too ugly to find a woman?” (179).

Sisi cannot “forget” the odium she must put up with. Her first customer, Dieter, “reaching across the table to touch her cheek, his palms clammy. Sisi’s natural instinct was to shake it off, but in her new life common sense ruled over instinct ... She tried to force herself to imagine that it was Peter’s palm ... It did not work ... he moved his hand to her breast, cupping each one in turn,” but “*I can’t do this*, Sisi thought,” readers learn (181, original emphasis). Sisi then slips in her reaction in a mode of flat denial that this is all happening to her: “This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping on my bed. This is not me. This is not me. This is somebody else. Another body. Not mine. This is not me. This is somebody else. Another body. Dieter got up and motioned for her to follow him. This is not me. This is a dream. But I need the money. I can’t do this. The money. Return to Lagos? Can’t. Won’t? She tottered behind him, averting her eyes from his buttocks, her sadness abysmal ... This is not me. I am not here. I am home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me. A Lexus sparkled in her head. Think of the money. God help me!” (181, original emphasis).

It takes all of these tangled emotions of anger, bitterness, disbelief, disgust, worries about financial insecurity, aesthetic recoil, prayer, and no less than a gargantuan act of will on her part for Sisi to overcome her trepidation to frontally accept and pull through with her first client. In the end, her Trojan Horse is the bad situation in Nigeria that Sisi is running away from. That is why she convinces herself that “There were worse things to become ... She was not a robber, not a cheat, not a 419 sending deceitful emails to gullible Westerners. She would make her money honestly” (180). Here is how Sisi’s inaugural moment in prostitution is described:

In a men’s toilet with lavender toilet paper littering the floor, soggy (with urine?), and a shiny black toilet seat, Dieter pulled his trousers down to his ankles. A flash of white boxers. A penis thundering against them. A massive pink knob. Sisi gawked. Everything she had heard about the white man’s placidity, his penis as small as a nose (so that the greatest insult she could heap on an annoying schoolmate was that he had the penis of a white man), was smashed. He heaved and moaned; one hand tore at his boxers and the other at Sisi’s skirt. His breath warm against her neck, his hands pawing every bit of her; he licked her neck. Sisi shut her eyes. Raising his head, he stuck his tongue into her ear. In. Out. Eyes shut still, she tried to

wiggle out of his embrace. She did not want to do this anymore. “I don’t need this. Stop!” she said. He held her close. Pushed her against the wall, his hands cupping her buttocks, and buried his head in her breasts. “Stop,” she shouted again. Eyes open, she saw his face, his mouth open and his jaws distended by an inner hunger. “Stop!” His moans swallowed her voice. His penis searched for a gap between her legs. Finding a warmth, he sighed, spluttered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus, inaugurating Sisi into her new profession. She baptized herself into it with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth, feeling intense pain wherever he touched, as if he were searing her with a razor blade that had just come out of a fire. Her nose filled with the stench of the room, and the stench filled her body and turned her stomach ... The revulsion stayed inside and expanded, and she felt a pain, a tingling, start in her toes. The pain that could not be contained began to spread out around her and rise, taking over everything. Even the sound of her heartbeat. (181–182)

This passage deserves to be quoted at such length because it shows the hour of reckoning for Sisi in the line of work she has entered. Troublous times have come upon her, whether she is in prostitution willingly or has been forced against her own will—it doesn’t matter anymore. Sisi is in, and every reader should witness the most revolting things the profession has opened up to be done to her body by total strangers with whom she may have nothing even remotely resembling any bond of affection. The excerpt demonstrates not only the pain that a country cursed with irresponsible individuals at the helm of its affairs can cause its citizens worldwide. It also exposes the utter devastation that people’s heritage as well as wrong decisions can cause them. In this portion of the novel readers see first-hand the huge price which people can pay when money becomes their all-encompassing passion. Sisi’s agony is captured here as an object lesson of what a combination of poverty and the love of money can do to human beings. When people become desperate to make money, readers witness, they are exposed to all kinds of degrading situations. The indignity suffered by Sisi is the heartbreak which can result from obsession with material things.

Once she gets into the groove of things, Sisi switches her mind out of her circumstances as if she was absent. She “learned the rates pretty quickly ... Fifty euros for a P&S, a blow job. A bit more if a French kiss was required. Twice the price for half an hour of everything: P&S, French Kissing, and full penetration. With a condom. Without a condom, the client paid thirty euros extra. Sisi did not like to do without—what with everything one could catch—but thirty euros was not something she found easy to turn her nose up at. It took a lot of strong will to do so” (203).

So Sisi learns the art of solicitation quickly: “to stand in her window and pose on heels that made her two inches taller ... to smile, to pout, to think of nothing but the money she would be making ... to rap on her window, hitting her ring hard against the glass on slow days to attract stragglers ... to twirl to help them make up their minds, a swirling mass of chocolate mesmerizing them, making

them gasp and yearn for a release from the ache between their legs; a coffee-colored dream luring them in with the promise of heaven” (203). Even “In winter, she tried to forget the cold and displayed her body in front of her window, push-up bras and tiny thongs, rapping her gold-plated-ringed middle finger on the window to attract men. Rat-a-tat-tat. See me here. Let me be the one to satisfy you tonight. She had swallowed her pride, chucked her shyness in the bin, and gotten on with her job” (236).

Sex work is difficult in all ways for the women. “The customer was king even when he was obnoxious, Madam warned them, and Sisi never forgot that. ‘As long as he’s paying for your services, his wish is your command, and you do what he wants you to. No complaints. Make him forget that he is paying for the tenderness that you are showing him. That is the secret of the game, the golden rule of the game’” (236). Notwithstanding their strict compliance with this cardinal principle of the business, it is extremely difficult for the Nigerian prostitutes to make any money for themselves. “There were days when Sisi had two customers,” for example, and one of them “just wanted a cheap service. ‘I’m on a budget. So just a blow job, sugar,’” but “The money was in delivering all the works: penetration, blow job, no condom. Black men avoided them” because “Many black men here are just struggling to survive” (223). “When business was good, Sisi did an average of fifteen men” (223).

Besides its being non-lucrative for the women, psychological and physical abuses by their male clients came with the territory of prostitution. “Sisi’s first epiphany came on a Wednesday night while she was waiting for clients” (210). Readers learn that “a man with a toupee that he had insisted on hanging on to, told her he felt cheated. Her performance had been so poor, he said, that he was never coming back to her. ‘The girl who used to stay here, she knew her job. You just waste my money!’ Today I have no release. No release! I have to masturbate” (210).

On one occasion, “When a customer asked her to lie spread-eagled, while he yelled ‘whore’ at her and jerked off to that, she felt something akin to revulsion” (212–213). Sisi talks about countless numbers of the “men who had shared her bed, entangling their legs with hers ... Mixing their seat with hers. Moaning and telling her, ‘Yes. Yes. You Africans are soooooo good at this. Don’t stop. Don’t stop. Please. You. Are. Killing. Me. Mooi!’ Asking her, ‘You like it here?’ as if she had a choice” (34). The taking by these European clients of Nigerian ladies, who must endure such extraordinary ill-treatment of their bodies, as representatives of their continent, along with the outright physical and mental abuses meted out, makes one obvious linkage. The sex trade may be an avenue of empowerment and self-exploration for some women in Europe who have the luxury of other professional choices that are open to them. From their participant testimonies, however, the situation of African women prostitutes in Europe is completely different. The ruthless sexual exploitation of immigrant African women prostitutes in Europe cannot be read as having anything less than a linkage to the prevalent racial prejudice and moral decadence of a host society which tolerates whoredom to the extent it has conferred legitimacy on it as an open line of business.

Indeed for Joyce, another resident of the Zwartezusterstraat tenement hostel, prostitution cannot be remotely an avenue of self-exploration. From Joyce's perspective, what is most distressing is her knowledge that she cannot even be herself. She seriously loathes one of her regular clients, Etienne, but professional etiquette requires her to hide her true feelings. Joyce finds the paradigms of acceptable behavior for the profession shackling. Etienne is "a generous tipper," but she "cannot stand him ... when he comes, digging into her waist with his nails, his breath smelling of garlic. She cannot stand the way his gel leaves stains on her pillowcase so that she always has to wash it once he has been. But she smiles whenever she sees him, a reminder that her life has changed, that her affection is for sale" (153). Joyce detests him so much that "Etienne is, more than any other customer, the motivation for her to leave the Vingerlingstraat. He makes her fear that she has forgotten the person she used to be and that, if left for too long, she may never find that person again" (153). She notes also that some of the male clients have "a few front teeth missing" and "hair melted" (180).

The misuses of these Nigerian women confirm Richard S. Randall's definition of prostitution as "remission of society's moral demands ... a social outlet for various unacceptable sexual wishes, impulses, ambitions, and inclinations, some of which may be antisocial and most of which are pornographically informed. These impulses are alien to preferred channels such as marriage, or preferred motives such as love and procreation, and often even to preferred acts such as conventional intercourse. And because they are, they make prostitution difficult to dismiss or eliminate."⁸ In the same passage, Randall quotes approvingly, among other conceptions of the subject, Thomas Aquinas' delineation of prostitution as "the 'sewer' that allowed the 'palace' to remain unfouled," adding "It has served at all times as a kind of sexual lightning rod, deflecting 'deviant' energy from sanctified paths and possibly preventing other antisocial transformation of it" (130).

The difficulties are great, but the Nigerian women prostitutes face them headlong, leaving no means untried to offer their clients the greatest satisfactions. But they can offer no guarantee that all are contented. The women are afflicted with unrest and unsatisfied desires. Consequently, many of their public pronouncements, lauding the material benefits of their business, cannot be taken at face value. Behind the façade of financial well-being, in truth, none of them has inner peace or a healthy body. Yet their biggest disappointment as migrant sex workers in Europe is financial: the elusiveness of the dream of riches. The expectation that prostitution will bring them instant wealth is not realized. It never happens, and they find out the hard way that there is no money to be made by them in the business, while the pimps make a fortune out of their miseries.

Sisi, for instance, "had rarely any money left for herself after paying off Dele," "paying her part of the rent on the Zwartezusterstraat" and "paying the rent on the Vingerlingstraat she was subletting from Madam ... Five hundred and fifty euros a week they paid" (217). Sisi does all the calculations and she cannot "see how she could do this job long enough to save anything" (217). The mental and

psychological toll this economic disappointment takes on the prostitutes is enormous. It is the source of apathy among them, and it is also the reason prostitution becomes a breeding ground for fantasy. The most popular of these, “still being peddled of the Ghanaian prostitute on the Falconplein—not too far from the Vingerlingstraat—who had a client in love with her,” is the dream of every prostitute because “he was a rich client. A top footballer or something ... the Ghanaian girl did good. He paid off her pimp, married her, and installed her in his villa just outside Brussels ... She had everything: fancy cars, a swimming pool, designer clothes, holidays to the South of France, weekend drives to the Ardennes, holiday homes in Morocco and Barcelona, the works” (218).

The harsh reality, however, for the rest of the migrant African women prostitutes like Sisi and her housemates as well as others like “Anita, the Zimbabwean who worked the window a few doors away from the Ghanaian” is financial hardship. Sisi, for example, contemplates quitting before her sudden death. In addition to suffering physical, mental, and psychological abuses, the women all feel economically exploited as well, and it is the reason they feel so bad with themselves, nauseated and reacting in different ways to their common situation.

Sisi, for example, relapses into bouts of manic depression which send her on shopping sprees to try to fill the void within her. Self-pity takes over, as she sizes up her life, starting with a satiric attack which she directs at the soothsayer who had predicted at her birth, “This girl here has a bright future ahead of her ooo. You are very lucky parents oooo,” and questioning the motives of the clairvoyant who made a false prophesy in order to dupe her parents of “a carton of beer that day” (210–211). Sisi even lashes out at her own parents’ naïve convictions about the intrinsic value of education. “Study! Read! You will have all the time in the world to rest once you graduate” (211). She laments the worthlessness of her learning, “the burned candles when there was a power failure ... straining her eyes ... all that hard work straining and worrying about exam results” only for her college diploma to lead her into the hands of Dele, “the big man with an office in Randle Street” who “had the key” (211). In her calculation, Sisi says her life “was a series of mistakes” (212).

Shame overwhelms Sisi, even when clients compliment her on her difference from “a lot of black prostitutes who tried to wrangle more money than was originally agreed upon” (212). Sisi feels “now a certain aversion added to the discomfort”—self-disgust—for “she could no longer bear to look at herself, not even when she was alone. When she took a bath, she sponged her body without looking at it. Regrets assailed her day in, day out” (212). Remorse for leaving home assails Sisi, causing her to curse “the day she met Dele. Why, oh why, had she gone to his office? Why had she been taken in by his promises of wealth and glamour and happiness that knew no bounds?” (212). Sisi tells Luc, a young white Belgian recently divorced and looking for love, whom she meets at a Pentecostal church pastored by a Ghanaian minister, “I do ugly things and I am not beautiful” (228). Luc is effusive in his compliments, but she rebuffs his advances, fearful that if he finds out about her job, he will snub her. Sisi’s self-inadequacy makes her question both herself and Luc’s estimate of her: “How could she be beautiful if she was

tainted? How could anyone think she was beautiful?" (229). Sisi is so nauseated with herself, her self-loathing will push her to attempt to escape into other bodies and roles by assuming identities other than her own, which is clearly a debilitating affliction.

The different reactions of the ladies to the common calamity which has befallen them reflect, above all else, their confused, agitated, and distressed mood, as their initially optimistic outlooks rapidly give way to a season of despair and an abject state of disillusionment:

The women are not sure what they are to one another. Thrown together by a conspiracy of fate and a loud man called Dele, they are bound in a sort of unobtrusive friendship, comfortable with whatever little they know of one another, asking no questions unless they are prompted to, sharing deep laughter and music in their sitting room, making light of the life that has taught them to make the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs, dissecting the men who come to them (men who spend nights lying on top of them or under them, shoving and fiddling and clenching their brown buttocks and finally [mostly] using their fingers to shove their own pale meat in) in voices loud and deprecating. (25)

The ladies' perplexity in their quagmire, the different strategies they employ in their struggle to secure peace, all reflect their exhausted spirits. Their attempts to defy the crises of identity facing them lead to their recourse to endless loud music, laughing to keep from crying, and the attempt at genial trivialization of the clearly weighty matter of the abuse of their bodies. All these conducts represent unsuccessful attempts at alleviation of the horror, the pain, and the overwhelming sense of shame and self-disgust their degrading treatment has inflicted on the women. Having thrown all personal integrity to the wind, there is no escaping the anguish in the soul and the torment in the body for these ladies.

The nightmares that keep Sisi from sleeping soundly are illustrative of the common lot of these four young Nigerian women. Deeply troubled and restless, Sisi "imagined everything she could buy with her brand-new wealth," her foremost wish being that it "would buy her forgetfulness, even from those memories that did not permit silence, making her yell in her sleep so that she woke up restless, wanting to cry" (3). Like her colleagues, Sisi's headache is in coming to terms with the soreness from the gross and inconceivable abuse she is permitting to be done to the most private parts of her body in the dirty, disgusting, and disease-ridden business of prostitution yet with no money to show for it all. The overwhelming, gut-wrenching emotion of disgust swirling through Sisi springs from awareness of her irreversible contamination.

Prostitutes such as these four young Nigerian women everlastingly harbor bodies and souls in pain. Consequently, they bewail the psychological and mental strains as well as the physical aches on their bodies that come with having sexual intercourse with multitudes of men daily, many of them total

strangers, all compounded by the paltry monetary rewards. When the women are getting ready for their trade, Sisi tells us their “expectations: that tonight they would do well; that the men who came would be a multitude; that they would not be too demanding ... that they would be generous” (4–5). This is her way of saying the numbers game is as important as the quality of the treatment received from each of the clients. It is implied in Sisi’s wishes not to come across ungenerous clients because they are not only frugal with payment but also “demanding,” physically rough and insatiable. In order to mitigate the physical strain of such challenging clients, prostitutes’ make-up bags always include not just the optional “deodorant spray ... beach towel ... and duster” but the mandatory “lubricant gel, innocuously packaged in a plastic see-through teddy bear” (5).

The realization by the ladies that they have bartered away their purity for nothing is the trigger for the twinge of sensation that keeps them restless. The trauma is incensed by personal loss of face, along with hidden and imperfectly suppressed revulsion and heartbreak resulting from the horror of what they permit to be done to her bodies, all causing a yawning void within them, impelling them to undertake one form of activity or another to help them cope with the deep chasm within them. They all have trouble ameliorating the terrible pain of the emptiness and dirt they are carrying with them.

The novel has each woman mask her emotional injury distinctly, responding to her pain in her own unique manner, which is as should be expected of people with such divergent personalities. Some thrive on riotous humor and jesting, often including self-deprecatory humor; others betray constant agitation, anger, and irritability; others yet seek a panacea through a carnival atmosphere and revelry, a wild spirit of feasting, binge drinking, and compulsive shopping.

A discussion of this range of responses by the women might begin with the issue of the never-ending wiping of surfaces that ceaselessly preoccupies Joyce. Germaphobe Joyce is driven to panic of hysterical proportions, and the way to keep her sanity is through the perpetual act of cleaning. She is obsessed with getting rid of dust, so she “grabs a rag from the kitchen—one of the many that she stocks in a cupboard—and starts to dust the walls” (24). Her convictions are so strong that she completely disregards the opposition of her own roommate Efe, who asks her to “Stop. It’s not dusty” (24).

Yet Joyce is unstoppable, and her cleaning efforts are even intensified when news of Sisi’s violent murder in a suspected racist attack reaches her and her roommates: “There is dust everywhere,” we are told, “Joyce thinks, dusting hard, clutching her rag tight, imagining it’s Madam’s neck” (34). Joyce’s perception of dusting as synonymous with an action directed against Madam, who is regarded by all of them as their greatest pain in the neck, is surreal. For Joyce, the cleaning is part of the cure for the ailment. That is why Joyce is nearly psychotic in her preoccupation with sanitation, an action which she equates with serving justice. The oppressive mood of hopeless restlessness is not relieved by Joyce’s perception of the pervasiveness of dust which won’t go away in defiance of her tireless cleaning motions. This ineradicable cloud of dust stands for the sense of filth from

which they all yearn for detoxication. Each one of them is frantically questing for a cleanliness in her own life and body which is unattainable because the setting in which she is entangled has eviscerated her sense of personal decency.

Ama, on the other hand, constantly displays temper tantrums, often giving her roommates cause to ask her to “lighten up” (8). Not only is Ama a confirmed hater of men, stating on one occasion that “Men are bastards” (8), but she relentlessly clashes with other women, especially her companions, over trivial matters, whether it is “over what TV program to watch” or over where dishes should be stored after washing (13). She is not even in harmony with herself. The tumult within Ama has turned her into a control freak, too, an aspect of her personality seen when she and her roommates are making arrangements for a party that Efe is planning to host: “Ama turned toward Sisi and hissed. ‘Move the plates, abeg. If you leave them there, they’ll only get wet again. Why don’t you put them away as soon as you’ve dried?’ She hissed again and went to work scrubbing the kitchen. ‘How could you burn rice, Sisi? I can’t get the fucking pot clean!’” (8). Ama’s fixation on getting everyone and everything to line up with her wishes is as revealing as her resort to profanity.

Ama is very restless, angry with the world which she considers to be in a state of disorder that she wants to correct, her mind all over the place; her eyes keenly set on everything in her surroundings. Here is a woman totally dissatisfied both with herself and with the things around her in a continually disordered world; living a stormy life trying desperately to get things under her control. Ama is therefore very irritable, quarrelsome, and temperamental, often forcing Efe to try “to calm the storm” (8). “Girls, girls, it’s a beautiful day. Make una no ruin am!” Efe would chime in (8).

Ama cannot even stand a joke, taking everything too seriously. When Efe compliments her for getting into party mode so easily, for example, stating “I can see you don’ dey get ready for the party,” Ama takes it entirely in the wrong way, in particular at being enjoined to “shake that booty, girl! Shake am like your mama teach you” (8). “Oh, shut it!” Ama thunders, “What has my mother got to do with dancing?” (8). The reader learns that “Ama moved away from Efe ... Her anger seemed blown up. Exaggerated” (9). Another roommate, Joyce, nails down Ama’s bickering personality precisely: “That Ama. She can be tiresome sometimes” (13). Joyce describes Ama as “a basket case given to bellicosity” (13). For Joyce, “everything set her off ... Efe was definitely more likeable than Ama” (13). All of her sadness erupts in outbursts of swearing like “fuck it,” “fuck off,” “fuck,” “the fucking booze,” “fucking problem,” and “how the fuck,” marking out Ama’s distinctive speech and reflecting her discordant, sour-grapes attitude (8, 14, 99).

The issue of Ama’s alcoholism is a troubling subject well known to all her roommates, and a subject of numerous conversations and complaints. Ama constantly attempts to drown her sorrows in binge drinking. Even before breakfast, “Ama already has a bottle of Leffe on the floor between her legs,” then “picks it up and starts to drink,” the “sound of her gulping the beer” taking “over the silence for a while ... Glup. Glup. Glup” as she empties the bottle (24). She elicits a gentle reprimand from Efe: “Isn’t too early to be drinking, Ama? Day

never even break finish” (24). Ama’s reply is saucy: “It’s early, and so fucking what?” Ama burps ... ‘You dey always get ant for your arse. Every day na so so annoyance you dey carry around’ (24). At the party organized by Efe, Ama is the first to ask for “the fucking booze,” and readers watch her find “her way to the beer” as she grabs “a bottle of her favorite blond beer. Swigging the beer, she danced alone in the middle of the floor, bumping into other dancers, shouting at intervals that life was good” (12). On the announcement of Efe’s sudden murder, of all days, what will Ama do but be seen taking cover in “smoking and downing liquor”? (35).

Efe, on her part, seeks escape from the terrors of prostituting her body so cheaply through moments of revelry. The sordid reality of her profession leaves her heart cold and her body sore, but festive activities warm and comfort her, calming her body like a balm even if only momentarily. Efe therefore seeks comfort in merriment, finding her delight in partying, letting off steam, being in crowded places hobnobbing at parties with her admirers. Efe is therefore always on the lookout for a reason to organize a get-together, while nonetheless avoiding alcohol like a plague, an attitude clearly conditioned by the loathed memory of its destructive effects on her own father—a subject that we will turn to shortly.

One of the flimsiest of excuses that she finds to indulge her insatiable appetite to whoop it up presents itself in an unlikely moment: the rumor of the death of a former neighbor of hers in Nigeria. Efe even has to falsify the nature of her relationship to this dead person, incorrectly declaring the deceased elderly lady to be her “grandmother” to justify the scale of the events she is planning to organize in her honor. Not until pressed by her skeptical roommates, who all know her character well and rightly question the veracity of her narrative, does she change her story: “I been dey call her granny, but she be just dis woman wey dey live near our house” (9). In a lengthy confession, which is itself filled with half-truths and juiced with tall tales Efe, finally takes a step toward owning up: “On Sundays, she made moi moi. When I was in primary school, if my mother wasn’t home, she’d make lunch for my younger ones and me. Ah, the woman was nice to us. Which kin’ granny pass dat one? Good bye, Granny. Rest in peace” (9).

It matters little that “Even Efe did not know how the woman had died. The news of her death had been intermission between ‘Buy me a Motorola mobile phone’ and ‘Papa Eugene wants to know how easily it is to ship a car from there to here’ ... carried along a faint and crackling telephone line from a telephone cabin in Lagos to a glass-doored booth in a Pakistani Internet/telephone café in Antwerp” (9–10). Efe’s elaborate party brings together other emigres: Ghanaians, Nigerians, and South Africans living in Antwerp. Efe is the life and soul of this party, wearing “a bobbed black wig, so it looked as if she were wearing a beret. It was not a wig her housemates had seen, so it must be new. Bought for the occasion. It was not as voluminous as the wigs she normally wore, and the effect was that her features looked exaggerated: her nose, her hips, her eyes looked blown up, as if they were under a magnifying glass” (12). “Under a

magnifying glass” she certainly is at the party; and evidently a good time was had by attention-seeking Efe, even if not by all.

For the young woman now known as Sisi (at one time Chisom), the quest to mentally escape what horrifies and revolts her, the source of her restlessness, finds expression in a different outlet. Sisi’s escape takes the form of an insatiable appetite for consumer goods, an impulse which drives her unquenchable desire to spend, as well as gravitation toward the bright lights. During her compulsive shopping sprees, Sisi gets the chance to vent her materialistic demons as well. Sisi kills two birds with one stone, so to say: relieving her pain by giving her acquisitiveness free rein, drowning the reality amidst her binge shopping. “Now the shops sparkled and called her, and she answered, touching things that took her fancy, marveling in the snatches of freedom, heady with a joy that emitted light around her and made her surer than ever that the Prophecy was undoubtedly true. This was the true epiphany” (3).

Sisi gratifies her shopping passions as well as her attraction to crowds at the Keyserlei, the premier shopping street in Antwerp, which she likes a lot because of “its promise of glitter ... with its gold façade and the lines and lines of shops,” the “Ici Paris,” “H&M,” “United Colours of Benetton,” “Fashion Outlet”; she has “So many choices” (219). Sisi “bought more and more stuff: bottle openers in the shape of beer bottles. Postcards of Antwerp by night. Dainty coasters of delicate lace. Tablecloths. Swelling her suitcase under the bed, so that it was difficult to close and she feared she would need to buy another one” (213). In concert with her obsessive accumulation of household goods, Sisi also “liked the rush of people, the mixing of skin colors, the noise on the streets. The Jews with their Hasidic discs and their women pushing cherubic babies in strollers with big wheels. They all made her heart race, made her feel alive, a part of this throbbing, living city” (219).

Sisi takes great comfort in impersonation, assuming her fantasy identity, acting like the person she really wants to be. Window shopping at “the Pelikaanstraat, with gold and diamond jewelry calling from the display windows, beckoning to customers, Look at us, are we not pretty? Look at us, won’t you buy one?” Sisi quickly transitions from imagining (220). At “the souvenir shops, with their laces and fancy chocolates and postcards ... she was a tourist, some rich woman who could afford to travel the world for leisure, taking in sights and trying the food” and dressing “for the role” (220). “A cap, sunglasses, a bum bag hanging from her waist, a camera dangling around her neck, and a Dutch phrase book in one hand,” Sisi “walked into shops and smiled at shopkeepers, who, eager to make a sale, smiled back, all sweetness and light” (220). Sisi is encouraged to believe “She was somebody else with a different life,” and she “lived out her fantasy,” as she “drooled over novelty chocolates in the shape of penises and breasts, telling the shop assistant who sold them, ‘These are simply amazing. I’ve got to take some back,’” stating to the woman selling “a pair of booties ... she was visiting from Lagos” (220).

“[G]ushing to the saleswoman about how excited she was to be in Antwerp,” and commending it as “absolutely gorgeous, darling,” Sisi claims to be an

American tourist. She proclaims that she is “having such a wonderful time here that I am worried Paris will be a disappointment. That’s my next stop. Then London on the ... the ... the train, the Eurostar, that’s it. Doing Europe, you see. We Americans don’t travel half as much as we ought”; she “giggled girlishly when the saleswoman replied that America was so big, Americans must have their hands full traveling around America” (220–221). Often, Sisi “stopped in front of a statue ... and asked a passerby to take a picture of her,” luxuriating in “intentionally mispronouncing Dutch words and looking appropriately relieved when the passerby asked if she spoke English in impeccable English” (221). Sisi’s response to such silliness, of course, adds a layer to her gratified bourgeois tourist pretensions: “Oh, yes, I do. Could you take a picture, please? Thank you,” as she “smiled at the phrase brook at her feet and took a picture that she would never develop” (221).

Sisi “did the Pelikaanstraat, entered shops, and coquettishly tried on gold and diamond rings she found unbearably expensive” (221). The justification she offers is a tall fabrication: “My fiancée has asked me to choose an engagement ring. He’s too busy to come himself. Sometimes I wish he had less money and more time. It’s Mexico today, Singapore the next. Oh well, I guess a girl can’t have it all. Money or time, which would I rather?” (222). Sisi follows up with a “laugh high and loud”; and the politics of hypocrisy and politeness kick in, so that the civil “shopkeepers would laugh with her, their laughter softer than hers, a thoughtful demureness that was mindful of the fact that she was ... a customer with lots of money who therefore should not be upstaged” (222). Still seeking attention, chasing the spotlight, Sisi will “dangle a smile, bait, in front of the seller, twirling the ring on her finger, raising the finger up to the light, watching the light bounce off in incredible sparkles of color, miniature miracles of pink and white” (222). After “saying how much she liked it, turning it this way and that so that it caught the light, before declaring that maybe the stone was a bit too big. Or a tad too small. Or simply that it looked all wrong,” all while watching “the seller fight to maintain a smile in the face of an almost-sale that fell through, watch the clip-on smile slip, before walking out of the shop, hips and handbag swaying, imagining she was on TV” (222).

Sisi keeps up her false appearances and pretenses beyond her tour of the secular parts of the city, shops, and tourist attractions such as statues. The cathedral is not spared this travesty, either; there, she “aimed her camera at paintings she found uninteresting and vulgar—really, all those huge breasts spilling out of clothes were in extremely poor taste—and pretended to take pictures,” trading “conspiratorial smiles with tourists who thronged the cathedral, all solemn and wide-eyed, and whispered, ‘Isn’t it beautiful? Rubens was a brilliant artist!’” (222). Sisi’s motivation in play-acting and attention-seeking is to gain the public’s estimation as “a married woman with a husband named Peter and a huge duplex in Ikeja: the sort of woman who could afford regular holidays abroad, living from hotel to hotel in cities across the globe, MasterCard and Visa Gold at her disposal ... a professional woman with money to burn and places to see ... any story she wanted to be. Far away from the people she knew and who knew her” (222).

Consistently, Sisi misrepresents her situation in Belgium to her folks back home in Nigeria, too. During regular phone calls to family members, she gives carefully calibrated one-liner responses to queries about her life abroad, intentionally framed in such a way as to hide the nightmare she is going through and is too embarrassed to disclose “Yes, I started school,” “Yes, I work part-time in a nursing home,” “Yes, everything is wonderful,” “Yes, I have made some friends,” “Yes, I never forget to say my prayers,” “I shall send some money home soon” (224).

Aesthetically, it is perhaps fitting that Sisi does not escape paying the supreme price. Within the structure of the novel, however, it is ironic that her demise should come just as things are beginning to look up for her. The premature termination of Sisi’s burgeoning romance with Luc is perhaps the saddest unfulfilled promise in the novel. After initially discouraging Luc in his pursuit of her, Sisi starts to open up warmly to him as he rekindles the flames of her amorous passions that had been stolen by prostitution. Optimism builds up as the two look forward to a possible future life together. “The more she thought about it ... she stood to gain a lot,” Sisi begins to reason, “No more strange men in her bed. She could get another job, maybe a cleaning job ... And Luc had offered quite generously to give her a monthly allowance she could send to her parents. She might even be able to invite them to visit her in Belgium. She would show them the wonders of her new home. There would be no need to lie to them anymore. The lies were starting to distress her” (233). Luc says he does not want to share her with anyone else, and his love is reciprocated by Sisi: “He wanted her. She wanted him” (232). Sisi “could already feel the taste of freedom rush into her mouth, intoxicating her into a rapid dance that pirouetted her round and round the room until she had to stop to catch her breath” (234). Horribly this budding new start in her life is suddenly aborted with Sisi’s disturbing murder, throwing her housemates into a state of consternation.

Chisom’s unexpected and miserable death, under her assumed name as Sisi, discomfits her former housemates deeply. This is not only in the usual manner in which the demise of another person reminds people of their common mortality, their shared human frailty, but also it suggests that the calamity which befell her could very well portend their own futures. In the unwelcome climate in which the general public views them as unwanted exiles in a foreign country, they fall into acute anxiety. Their worry throws them into an unimaginable state of confusion and distress. They are visibly shaken by the uncertainty of existence.

These ladies’ inchoate, rambling thoughts spring from the elemental sense of their collective horror. But their spirits are dampened even more by the cavalier and disinterested reaction of the person who should be their guardian, Madam. The bereaved women harbor no high expectations that the person ostensibly responsible for their welfare will be of much assistance to them during the misfortune which has befallen them. Madam’s confirmation of their fears is a source of great exasperation. After the gruesome murder of Sisi, nothing could have prepared the ladies for Madam’s nonchalant reaction and trivialization of

the loss. They take in the whole scene and their hearts sink; seeing that their guardian is without sympathy or compassion fills them with righteous indignation. Madam is “going about her normal business” because “for her Sisi’s death is nothing more than a temporary discomfort” (37). Madam grotesquely exposes her low-life sadism when she does not “even have the decency to assume the type of sad face that the gravity of the news demanded” (37). She is completely devoid of empathy, stone-cold deadened in her response to the woes and sorrows of others. Madam does not comfort the survivors with condolences in a situation where such words can go a long way in giving consolation to the weary soul: she does “not try to soften the blow” or “couch the news in a long story about how death was a must, an escape, an entry into a better world—the proper way to do it” (37). Rather, Madam casually makes a quick transition to other subjects dearest to her heart, even in these somber moments pertaining primarily to her monetary profits from the labors of the ladies and the legal troubles which can potentially jeopardize them.

Joyce is puzzled that Sisi’s death has not caused everyday life to come to a standstill. Sisi’s demise is mourned deeply by her former housemates, alright. But Joyce finds it “odd ... Sisi is dead, and everything’s going on as normal”: “A child shrieks happily outside. A sound that seems almost anomalous, slithering the room” and “even inside this house,” Joyce notes of the home Sisi once shared with her former colleagues that “nothing’s changed” (214). Joyce’s sentiment has its echo in the fall and drowning of Icarus in a quiet and tiny corner of the world, depicted in W. H. Auden’s heavily anthologized free verse ekphrastic poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” an allusion to a painting by Pieter Brueghel.⁹

Following the mythical figure’s daring and astounding step for mankind in taking flight, his fall from the sky and going under the water pass unnoticed beyond the immediate site of the splashy disaster, as the speaker in the poem observes. In its swift contemplation of astonishing events, “the miraculous birth” and “the dreadful martyrdom,” that take place amidst the commonplace movement of life, Auden’s poem stresses the routine human indifference to the extraordinary that has afflicted mankind through the generations: the ploughman ploughs on, oblivious of the incident; the sun runs its course uninterrupted; and merchant ships sail away without taking notice. So Sisi’s death is not earth-shaking. Like the fall of Icarus, Sisi disappears as if she had never existed and it is as though no one will remember her, a warning about the gamble involved in pursuits of unbounded aspirations, reinforcing the emptiness of all human ambitions.

Even after the revenge murder of Sisi by Segun, the half-idiot handyman at the pimp Dele’s agency in Antwerp, who pulled the trigger delivering the blunt object, his hammer work tool, to Sisi’s head, there is no sign that the prostitution of migrant African women in Europe is likely to be ended anytime soon, for it is a self-perpetuating institution. Ama and Efe, for example, who have been in Antwerp “for almost six years” and “going on seven” respectively, having “repaid quite a huge amount of their debt to Dele,” have huge plans (239).

Efe believes that “within the next two years she would be free of debt” and she is “already talking of maybe acquiring some girls and becoming a madam herself. She would buy girls from Brussels, because it was more convenient ... to get girls who were already in the country” (239).

It is impossible to miss the new stage that the marketing of African women in Europe has reached. The women are not just selling their bodies, but they are being lined up to be sold and to be owned in their entirety by other human beings with the means to buy them as one buys merchandise in stores. This is the closest contemporary society has come to a reincarnation of the old form of slavery. As in a scene depicting the slaves waiting for sale, complete with auctioneers and African women being inspected by buyers and then auctioned off, this new form of slavery recalls the ways in which Africans who were in the past forcefully taken away from their homelands and transported to Europe and the New World were displayed and sold. The only difference this time is that the European and American middlemen in the former African slave trade have been replaced by fellow Africans in this new slave trade involving Africans; and so, it is now Africans selling and facilitating the sale of each other with the goal of their being used to serve Western interests.

Sex trafficking of women from Africa to Europe persists because pimps exploit underprivileged African women’s willingness, even eagerness, to escape poverty and other cultural institutions that oppress them at home. These women fall for a lie about finding work in Europe, driven by the dream to make money there. Like their East European women counterparts, especially from Bulgaria and Romania, however, these African women are clearly the victims of forces that include but are without question larger than merely the brutal female sexual commerce. Within the personal accounts of the sexual bondage proffered by the four young Nigerian ladies in *On Black Sisters Street* is clearly expressed as a coping mechanism. They say publicly that they do not sell their bodies unwillingly. Rather, they claim that they possess the agency to use sexual slavery affirmatively to redefine and reconceptualize the intersections of the notions of sexual object, work, and citizenship. But these public statements by the desperate women overlook the cultural practices impinging upon their experiences, putting a whitewash on their picture of the ugly business of prostitution and the painful souring of their own dreams, still holding on to the fantasy of migration as the apparatus of upward social mobility, and anxious to save face. These self-deluded creatures’ self-construction in their own stories succeeds in getting their perspectives across to readers. The survival tactics employed by these victims of patriarchy and pawns of men’s sexual desire, and the sex industry feeding it, may seem well-intentioned. However, by concealing the degradation of prostitution, these runaways who call themselves sex workers unwittingly expose their complicity in the continuation of male oppression.

Any defense of one’s public image will seem to be a legitimate form of self-preservation. Nonetheless, blurring the outlines of unethical and respectable conduct ultimately stifles a sharp projection of the horrors of female sexual chattel slavery that *On Black Sisters Street* unarguably sets out to highlight.

The notion of a “conspiracy of fate” apropos the four young Nigerian women making “the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs,” which the narrator uses as a summation of the travails of the young ladies, is a striking mixture of insight and empathy with an undercurrent of irony and derisive humor. The metaphor of the most private female organ as something giving women the upper hand is a false perception by the women themselves, who have been coerced into prostitution. Here it becomes an emphatic indirect way through their own error of reasoning in drawing attention to the many events in their lives which confirm the sense of being born a female coming with a curse rather than as a blessing in a part of the world like theirs (24). It is therefore no laughing matter that all of the four young Nigerian ladies actually find themselves thrust into the compromising situations which predispose them to make “the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs” rather early. Prostitution is forced on all of the young Nigerian ladies while underage, making the nature of the apparent misfortune of being female all the more nauseous.

Notes

- 1 Chika Unigwe, *On Black Sisters Street* (New York: Random House, 2009), p. 25. All subsequent page references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parentheses.
- 2 See William Shakespeare, *Othello* (originally published in 1603); Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (London: Heinemann, 1960); and Bessie Head, *Maru* (London: Heinemann, 1971).
- 3 The Cameroonian writer Ferdinand Oyono, followed by his compatriot Mongo Beti, pioneered the satirical representation in the African novel of the immoralities of Christian missionaries, with specific focus on the Catholic religion/faith, but other African writers have since broadened the skepticism to take into the canvas the misconduct of various Christian denominations. See Ferdinand Oyono, *Houseboy* (London: Heinemann, 1966); Mongo Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (London: Heinemann, 1971); Flora Nwapa, *One is Enough* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1992) discussed in Ode Ogede, *Intertextuality in Contemporary African Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2011); and Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Chapter three in this study.
- 4 Samuel Kirson Weinberg, *Incest Behavior* (New York: Citadel Press, 1955), p. 258.
- 5 See, for example, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1978).
- 6 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 54.
- 7 Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Woman: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 9.
- 8 Richard S. Randall, *Freedom and Taboo: Pornography and the Politics of a Self Divided* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 130.
- 9 W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” in Sven P. Birkerts, *Literature: The Evolving Canon* 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), p. 674.

6 Ethnography, Patriarchy (or Male Dominance), Anecdotal Portraiture, and the Unspeakable Subject of Co-Wife Rivalry, or the Dilemma of the Western Educated Woman within Polygyny (Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*)

Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, a superb debut novel, sparkles with originality and energy and is representative of the most innovative third-generation Nigerian literature. Its subject, the contention between co-wives that is endemic within polygyny, has never previously been captured in quite the same light in earlier Nigerian literature. The nuanced plot structure of this work, the beauty and lucidity as well as the imaginative and dramatic vitality in the handling of its subject undoubtedly place it among the best novels ever to have come out of the country.

This chapter locates in the ethnographic project the author's interest in the representation of polygyny, brimming with participant eye-witness observation, testimony, and psychological realism in mapping the intricacies of co-bride intrigue. In this tour de force, it is argued, author Shoneyin presents an authentic vision of the marshland of polygamy and deploys an astute array of images, motifs, perspectives, episodes, and supporting data to enact and demonstrate it. By so doing she pushes to unprecedented heights both the characteristic concerns and narrative techniques familiar to readers in the works of her compeers. Shoneyin offers stunning insights into one of the most authoritarian family units in human society.

"Ethnography" here means, as George Marcus defines it in the Weberian sense, "a mode of contextualizing portraiture in terms of which the predicaments of local subjects are described and analyzed."¹ "In this mode," he goes on to explain, "a vital literature continues to appear on the historic (colonial) and contemporary incorporation of peoples as working classes or on the apparent reduction of local cultures by the macro-processes associated with capitalist political economy in the forms it has taken." He identifies in the same passage as a key method of the ethnographic project the "concern with the dynamics of encapsulation, focused on the relationships, language, and objects of encounter and response from the perspectives of local and cosmopolitan groups of persons" (79).

In so far as the novel is preoccupied less with the excavation of buried historical matter than it is with throwing the searchlight on a cultural residue, Shoneyin's narrative methods and objects in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* replicate the subtle representational methods and goals of the ethnography of contemporary social life. She focuses on the texture and density of a recalcitrant and undying marital tradition, contributing a rare insider perspective to the understanding of an unsettling, lingering variant of an age-old custom. Her arresting exploration of a current manifestation of polygamy, a tradition that continues to blight the lives of hordes of women as it has for generation after generation of their predecessors, gives an uncommon glimpse into the evolving dynamics of an ongoing culture. The investigation unveils the many ways in which the practice of polygamy is not frozen in time but a constantly changing heritage, and creates genuine interest in the matter with the clarity of the prose and discerning mode of storytelling.

There are lots of elements pulsating with deep cultural meanings within *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, as there should be in any novel of this nature with a demonstrable objective to provide an enlightened engagement with a deeply troubling and complex subject like polygamy. The conglomerate of ethnographic sketches glued together through intricately woven connecting threads, each vivid portrait invested with a critical role within the patterns of pressures that life in the polygamous household entails for co-wives, operates like a hermeneutic circle in which one understands the whole through each of its parts in the same manner that the parts illuminate the whole. All the components, brought together, collaborate productively in providing the reader with a composite image of a robust tradition that isn't letting up any time soon because of the nature of the inherent power imbalances that hold women in bondage in the culture of misogyny.

Within polygamy, this novel demonstrates, contest for their joint husband's divided attentions, affections, and material support is a commonplace, primarily related to food rations and clothing for the co-brides themselves and for their children. In Baba Segi's household these resources are extremely limited; the co-wives are enormously constrained and their fights cannot be expected to be anything short of bitter and fierce. In the interconnected series of episodes documenting these scuffles, the wives are pictured within the unfriendly confines of polygyny as looking every which way they can, feeling impelled to do whatever it takes to gain a leverage. Even the little battles, waged in tactically effective ways using all the implements in the combatants' armories, all hide truths rich with meanings and deeper implications than may appear on the surface.

If there is a unifying pattern, a running signature in third-generation literature, it is revealed through the sometimes imperfectly concealed and often overt, deadpan and angst-driven realistic portraiture. In Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, historically grounded exploration takes on a peculiar moral importance in the subtle interrogation of the politics of co-bride antagonism situated within the context of other symptoms that point to the failure of Nigeria as a nation-state. The subject of wife-hoarding in all its unsavory facets is thus aligned with other oddities of the republic, like rampant kidnappings for

ransom and Boko Haram insurgencies (aspects which are not fictionalized in any of the texts examined in this study). This richly textured novel wisely spreads its dragnet wide and pulls in within the canvas of the exposé other fiascoes of the polity. The juxtapositions reveal the contradictions of a social order marked with armed robbery, a culture of mismanagement and infrastructural decay, linguistic absurdity, Christian fundamentalism, corruption, the rise of new mercantilism, bureaucratic red tape and inefficiency, class prejudice, and systemic violence against women, including rape, stereotyping, the stigma of widowhood and what protagonist Baba Segi's fourth wife Bolanle calls "a secondhand woman," another name for a divorcee, and the absence of protection by the law for women in particular and for children and orphans.²

A very troubling aspect of the education of females in a failed, male-dominated nation-state like Nigeria is integral to the fabric of the novel. It is the way that girls take enormous trouble to go to school and yet have nothing of material value to show for their efforts. The plight of educated female citizens is so skillfully woven into the pattern of the novel that it runs like a powerful undercurrent, driving the text. So many women make distressingly unimaginable sacrifices to acquire credentials. In return, they end up finding themselves again and again in the jaws of poverty, the lack of economic security for educated females as a result of the general absence of employment opportunities both while in school and after graduation. Students in this country generally have no access to the legitimate sources of income available to their counterparts in many other parts of the world, with the consequence that any dreams they may have of attaining personal financial independence are quashed, leaving the females in particular helpless and vulnerable to exploitation by opportunists.

It is simply bizarre that the educational road for girls remains so criminally laden with booby traps. Innocent girls trying to get an education are so beset by pressures from all fronts, leading to all sorts of risks, exposing them to people posing as helpers who are potentially looking to exploit them. The squeeze is exerted not only by financial exigencies but by other uncompromising situations into which schoolgirls are inordinately exposed. All too often this results in rape and the females being taken advantage of in other ways by monied men. The 15-year-old secondary school student, Bolanle, who will later become the fourth wife of the eponymous anti-hero of the novel, for example, accepts a ride in a Mercedes-Benz, little suspecting that the gentlemanly-looking car owner will re-route her to his fortress and brutally rape her there. On the rain-drenched day, there is a distinctive shrillness to the horrific attack as the helpless, terrified teenage girl has her innocence forcefully taken away in a scene so graphically described it is not for the squeamish and will be too close to home for many. Bolanle is sexually brutalized but there is no accountability; no justice for her because breaking the silence can only lead to ridicule.

To fan the flames of injustice, in Bolanle's society there is the hypocrisy of double moral standards in which the same men who violate innocent girls sanctimoniously demand chastity of their victims while not holding themselves

to the same high standards. It is common in many parts of Africa, including Nigeria, for the shock effect of perceived moral devaluation associated with being female and embarking upon the educational journey to be so catastrophic that many female college graduates spend their entire lives unable to recover from the stereotype. Many are ultimately forced into the welcoming arms of either sugar daddies, prostitution, or polygamous marriages with affluent older men. The outcome of women leaving college no longer virgins is often disastrous, as they fall out of the orbit of many eligible younger male suitors for whom the premium is girls with fairer reputations.³ The case of Chisom (Sisi) in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* shows that young male suitors may also woefully lack the means to maintain sophisticated college-educated women.⁴

As consequential in the lives of females as the financial pressures and the stereotype of moral laxity associated with the educated are the pressures to marry brought to bear by family members. Even against their own wills women must marry to gain respectability, a status which tends to disappear with the death of the husbands. Mr. Alao, the anti-hero of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, gives such an account of his own mother's ordeal that begins with his father's premature death. As "a hunter," his father "caught his foot in the snare he'd laid up for an antelope" when he was "barely twenty," leaving his mother behind as a victim of the pernicious superstition attached to a widowhood condemned to a future that is far from secure (222). His mother spends the rest of her life not only joyless and restless but without an opportunity to re-marry because "No other man would marry my mother for they feared that they might die in a grave intended for a lesser beast" (222). It's as if, as she says, she is dogged by his ghost: "the smell of her husband's sweat was unmistakable" (224). One can only imagine what a hard lot this must be for a young wife. It is difficult enough to lose a husband; for that young woman to spend the rest of her life in widowhood truly throws a wrench into the healing process.

Apparently, a female has only one chance to marry in this society. Yet she may not necessarily get into that wedlock willingly to begin with, making the pressure to marry a doubly bitter pill to swallow. The experience of the 23-year-old who will later become Baba Segi's third wife, known as Iya Tope, is not unique. This young lady-in-waiting's teen years are a time of wild innocence, living her life like a playful child without any particular worries with her parents in the countryside. She "thought like a child and enjoyed childish pleasures like pursuing ants as they carried away sugar lumps and scratching hardened scabs from the edge of my old wounds. I even conversed with friends that only I could see" (86).

Then, all of a sudden, the future Iya Tope is rudely shaken by shocks she can feel but cannot control: "my older brother declared that I was ripe for marriage" (86). His remarks are endorsed by their mother, with the unflattering comment that "Truth be told, she is bordering on decay" (86). The exchange soon leads to her arranged marriage, and in a year of poor crop harvest in her farming village, she is hawked, like goods or merchandise, by her own drunken father to Baba Segi, who comes to her community as an agricultural merchant but also like a

tiger on the prowl. The scene as this young woman is offered to him by her own father is embarrassing:

“She is not a great beauty,” I heard my father saying as I closed the door. His discretion had dwindled with schnapps. “But she is as strong as three donkeys. And thorough too. What she loses in wit, she gains in meticulousness. This is a great virtue in a woman. I have three wives so I speak from experience.” (91)

In such a manner the young woman’s own father literally uses her as collateral, “as compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less, something strange—a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms and two legs. Without fanfare or elaborate farewells, I packed my bags” (91). She is carted away miserably to face an uncertain future in marriage with all her “belongings in the back: two plastic bags and two tubers of yam. I sat between the two men in the pickup and stared ahead at the roads I had never travelled before” (92). Her destination is the bustling metropolis, “Ibadan—the big city where all our secondhand clothes enjoyed their first outings, the place where cars honked, engines roared and bus conductors screamed” (92).

The adventure that pilots the person who becomes Iya Femi, Baba Segi’s second wife, into her arranged marriage illustrates the many profoundly unaccountable vicissitudes that can overtake a woman’s fortunes in her part of the world. The journey leads the young lady from a secure and sheltered life with her hard-working and relatively economically buoyant parents to a form of abusive servitude, hard labor, sexual molestation, and Christian conversion, ending in her last-ditch reliance on bribery—getting on her knees with a bowl to beg a guy—to help herself find a man to marry her, and a personal descent into intense viciousness. The death of her parents in a truck accident is the turning point, leading to her sale by her uncle and his notorious wife to become the housemaid of a woman who asks to be called Grandma but doesn’t behave like one. This woman’s ruthlessness demonstrates traditions that hold females in subjection to merciless exploitation because in this male-dominated society the custom of inheritance does not permit a dead father’s own daughters to be his heirs.

The story of the future Iya Femi is haunted by echoes of the malicious mistreatment by the Emenike family of a 40-year-old man it calls “boy” in Chinua Achebe’s short story “Vengeful Creditor.”⁵ The Emenike family takes the man on to serve it with the promise to send him to school but it ends up not keeping its side of the bargain. Like “boy,” Iya Femi to be is overworked and denied access to education while serving “the Adeigbe family for fifteen years” (138). She also shares with “boy” the passion to get even with her nemesis, in her case the callous Grandma. But the repeated indecent liberties taken by Grandma’s son, Tunde, who calls himself “a hedonist” and “says he lives for pleasure” and wants “to die both under and inside a woman who is not his wife,” turn him into a secret lover that she keeps even after marriage appends another element to her story (152). The impunity with which Tunde takes improper sexual license with

his family's female house-help highlights not only the utter vulnerability of girls under such exposure but the depravity of both the rich and powerful in the society, taking advantage of the weak and the powerless who possess no personal agency and are helpless to defend themselves in a culture undergoing a decline in decency.

The future Iya Femi's reckless plea to Baba Segi's driver Taju for help in finding her a husband centers the lens on the precarity of the fortunes of women who throw caution to the wind in the hope of escaping suffering through marriage. The defiant conversation she has with Taju is telling. "Baba Segi is the one who has enough money to marry many women," he informs her, adding: "The one I have complains everyday" (144). To his disclosure of Baba Segi's availability, she replies: "Then make him marry me. Convince him and put me in your debt forever. I have no relatives so there is no one to pay homage to" (144). This is a decisive moment in which the young lady's forlorn state, her extreme defenselessness, stands exposed in all its particulars. The appearance, out of the blue, of Baba Segi himself two weeks later introduces the element of destiny in human affairs. His visit to the village as a contractor to supply building materials, which leads to the rescue of the future Iya Femi, could not come at a more opportune moment.

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives demonstrates one clear custom. Whatever the reason that coerces a lady-in-waiting into a rushed and forced marriage—whether it be financial struggle, fear, and consciousness of the shadow of aging, particularly when raised by family members, the necessity of procreation, or any combinations of these factors—more likely than not the union is not undertaken for love. For example, in disregard of her own disappointments as an abandoned woman, Iya Tope's mother doesn't even hide her reason for sponsoring her daughter's arranged marriage. She not only gives a poor man the monetary incentive but goes out of her way to organize and fund the lavish ceremony: "You need one to bear children. The world has no patience for spinsters. It spits them out ... It's every woman's life purpose to bear children. Do you want to become a ghost in the world of the living? That is not how I want to leave you in this world" (113). The marriages of convenience of the young women who later become Iya Tope and Iya Femi may be variations of the traditional arranged marriage model represented by the future matriarch of the Baba Segi household, Iya Segi. But the one constant that remains is the practice of parents readily putting their money where their mouths are: in the betrothal and wedding of their daughters. With each new generation, this process repeats itself. Even as transformations of African marriage go on unimpeded—from customary to common law, monogamous, civil, religious, shotgun, and other forms—this exercise regarding the pressures of factors other than romance in forcing the hands of females into marriage remains persistent.⁶

What kind of society pressures its females to get married; demands that they conceive children immediately upon clearing the numerous hurdles to marriage; and then blames them when pregnancies are delayed or do not happen and they cannot have children within wedlock? It is a further slap in the face for them

that these women are always the ones blamed for not having children even if it is their husbands who are infertile. Baba Segi's apparent reproductive incapacity and the uncompromising positions that this places his wives into are illustrative of the sweep of the injustices of these patriarchal practices. The brutal cross-examination of her sexual history to which Baba Segi has his fourth wife Bolanle submit, ostensibly to find the reason she cannot get pregnant when, in reality, he himself is the cause, is just one unacceptable manifestation of the unfairness that is part of the anatomy of patriarchy.

The barbarous detailing of Bolanle's premarital sex history at the dilapidated University College Hospital exploits the traditional association of the college-educated female as lax in sexual behavior. Public shaming takes on a new life in this interrogation that is conducted in the name of a fertility test by Dr. Usaman, the resident physician. So retrograde, so discomfiting, so brutish is the assault on her privacy, the disclosure of Bolanle's premarital moral laxity and the abortion that followed is so resoundingly humiliating for the couple it sends the husband, Baba Segi straight into the men's room to throw up.⁷

The virulence of the vocabulary in Bolanle's unabashed ridicule by her own husband conveys the unjustified holding of her responsible for not conceiving children. He badgers her with questions directly asserting a presumption of guilt: "Does your blood not boil when you see other women carrying babies on their backs? Do tears not fill your eyes when you see mothers suckling infants?" (49). On another occasion, Baba Segi steps boldly into Bolanle's bedroom and addresses the elephant in the room. Questioning the credibility of her reaction to pictures of aborted fetuses at the family television watch party, to which we shall return later for more details, he thunders at her: "What do you know about what you saw? A woman cannot know the weight of a child until she has carried one in her womb" (15). Even if Baba Segi does not say these emotionally lacerating words to deliberately diminish his youngest wife, the effects are just as mentally and psychologically damaging. Not only does the heartless sarcasm cause her to submit meekly to the medical examination but her husband's chastisement forces Bolanle into self-examination, triggering guilt, self-pity, and self-recrimination over her premarital sex and abortion, behavior that is not uncommon among victims of the horrific gender constraints imposed by traditional African cultures that tie women's worth to the preservation of virginity outside wedlock.

In this tradition a woman's premarital loss of her virginity—in Bolanle's case before she turned 16—becomes a piece of cultural baggage that she must carry throughout her life because of the direct link made between a woman's ability to conceive children and premarital celibacy. In a country in which violence against women is deeply entrenched, Bolanle's capitulation to the conditions which stamp a badge of inferiority on her on account of not being a virgin at marriage becomes enfeebling. She confesses to "the feeling of filth that followed" her because of her failure to "preserve my dignity," acquiescing in the imposed image of "the soiled, damaged woman" (18). Bolanle's fate enacts a familiar story of the self-blame that victimized women are made to assume. There is a stark parallel to the experiences driving the shame, guilt, and

self-disgust that overwhelm the likes of Ama, Efe, and particularly Joyce (the Sudanese girl Alek raped by Arab militia men) in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*. Like Alek (Joyce), for example, Bolanle too is made to feel like a worthless criminal because her "first sexual encounter" took place "before my sixteenth birthday" (44). As she later tells her mother, "Mama, I am ruined, damaged, destroyed ... My life was wrecked and I didn't know how to fix it. I still don't know ... you were living with an empty shell. Everything was scraped out of me. I was inside out" (168–169).

Baba Segi's own articulation of his dejectedness sums up his perspective on womanhood: "I will be in the pickup ... he whispered ... Doctor, when you buy guavas in the marketplace, you cannot open every one to check for rottenness. And where you find rottenness, you do not always throw away the guava. You bite around the rot and hope that it will quench your craving" (45). Baba Segi's downbeat and insulting reference to his youngest and newest wife as "rotten guava" summarizes his society's common misconception of women as objects of men's sexual satiation. Women are conceived here as either delectable when eaten fresh as virgins, or rotten and therefore unsavory when virginity is already taken, and it is within this context that Baba Segi's cheerlessness must be understood. That is why, with her outing as a dishonored woman complete, at the end of the interrogation Bolanle says that her humiliation has already bottomed out: "What more can he do to me?" she asks about Baba Segi. "He can't humiliate me any more than he has done already. His other wives can't be any more hostile to me. He is my husband and I will return to his house" (46).

Bolanle's reference to where she lives as her husband's house emphasizes the broader issue of exclusion of females—wives, in this case—from property ownership in a culture of misogyny bred by a patriarchy that visits economic violence upon its female partners. Not granting wives the joint right of possessing the family homes they share with their husbands is a denial of equity under the custom. Yet females are out of luck with any aspirations to be heirs to their fathers' estates either. The young lady who will become Iya Femi is blatantly brushed aside when she loses both of her parents in a log accident. She is forced by her uncle to leave her parents' household to live and work as a housemaid for the Adeigbe family in Ibadan and told: "A girl cannot inherit her father's house because it is everyone's prayer that she will marry and make her husband's home her own. This house and everything in it now belongs [sic] to your uncle. That is the way things are" (135).

The open investigation of Bolanle's sexual history conducted is just one more measure of women's inequality, up alongside the verification of sins which is explored by Catholic priests during Confession at Mass. Like the priests, who are unaccountable to their congregations at Mass, Bolanle's joint husband Baba Segi's own sex history is never demanded. Readers, like Bolanle's other co-wives, however, all know that it is Baba Segi who is afflicted with infertility, not his newest wife. But it is she, Bolanle, who is not privy to this information, who stands accused and peremptorily condemned, denied a presumption of innocence.

Ironically, the knowledge of Baba Segi's questionable manhood and the pain and suffering of those she gets to share this knowledge with are the short-term sources of the secret power that his first wife Iya Segi has over her two illiterate co-wives. What she thinks is the immediate root of her influence will undermine her in the end. Nonetheless, before that happens—once she herself finds a way out of the paradoxical quandary that her husband places a premium on having children but lacks the ability to get his wives pregnant—the solution is a secret power she wields: to disclose to a co-wife she chooses or use against the one she dislikes through the mechanism of withholding it.

This is the short-lived power that Iya Segi determinedly holds back from the hated college-educated wife Bolanle in cahoots with the other two illiterate co-wives, who are in the loop and are themselves the immediate beneficiaries of the program. All of them hate their youngest enemy Bolanle so much that they won't tell her what's available out there beyond the plantation. Iya Femi, for example, is so pissed off that the fourth wife has displaced her in their joint husband's affections that she is as resolute as the mother-of-the-home to keep Bolanle out of the picture, thereby denying her the ability to "give her husband a son" because, as she says, "she won't hear anything from me. I want her gone. I want my place back" (154).

Ironically, keeping that information from the youngest wife will preempt the eventual exposure of the impropriety of its immediate beneficiaries. They can't hold up and it comes back to bite them. They are outed, their humiliating scheme exposed; and the members of the clique begin to cannibalize on themselves. Even before Iya Segi gets down on her knees in front of the doctors at the hospital to spill the beans, confessing what she and her mates have been up to, Iya Tope, speaking on behalf of these three deceitful and cheating co-wives, will concur that they will be tossed: "We deserve to be thrown onto the streets ... There isn't one thing that flies to the skies that will not eventually drop with the rain. Our time here is finished" (237).

Adultery is for sure revolting, the more so in the family's inner circle. But the anticipated break-up of Iya Segi's family prognosticated by Iya Tope does not happen. So degraded is the moral fabric of this society that Teju, an individual in the employment of the Baba Segi household, takes undue sexual advantage of his office as the family's driver, permitting himself to be seduced by his boss' oldest wife, the person who becomes Iya Segi, to sire all her children, only for the seducer to prevail upon her own husband to save face, hush up, and, in her passionate plea, "Let us not allow the world to see our shame. Let us keep our secrets from those who may seek to mock us" (277).

It is arguable that of all the hideous moral offenses of Bolanle's three co-bridés, none is as ethically contemptible as Iya Segi's descent into such a low moral plane as to not only contemplate but actually complete her scandalous work of family betrayal. Her vile and horrific elevation of self and self-worship, and her disregard of basic family ethics egregiously break one of the most appalling of society's sexual taboos. Not only does she carry out the unthinkable idea of having an affair with an employee of the family. She executes a plot to

murder another family member. This mastermind of the evil acts of terror is without question one of the most morally uncentered figures in all of recent Nigerian fiction.

Ironically, before Iya Segi is cornered, allowing Baba Segi to discover her shameful, unspeakable secret that “the children I have nurtured and called mine were sired by men my wives lay on their backs for,” she wields enormous power. She sends the young second wife, later to become Iya Tope, on a fateful errand to buy cow meat from a butcher at the market, which provides the solution to a very definite problem: how to get the young errand woman pregnant (265–266). That mission sets up the new co-wife to be seduced by the butcher, who takes her to his house and succeeds in getting her pregnant, initiating a pattern of secret amorous liaison with his concubine that the two will keep alive for three years as she returns to get pregnant and give birth to one child after another.

This is the incontinence of urban living that immediately creates a new form of illegitimate children. The dark phenomenon of so many people walking about calling someone their father that they have no clue has no blood ties to them is morally confounding. They are not children born of unwed mothers; they are children born of married mothers but not sired by the person they believe to be their father. They should constitute the smoking gun of the lack of manhood of the person they call their father but appear to prove the opposite in an instance of the deceit of appearances in the novel. Baba Segi’s long-term confidant, Teacher, declares them to be “bastards” toward the end of the novel as he calls upon his old friend “to let the deceivers who have brought bastards into your home return to their fathers’ homes ... Unless ... you want a home full of children that are yours in name alone” (261).

It is noteworthy that before her nefarious scheme is exposed Iya Segi’s influence seems limitless. She exercises this authority, for example, once the giddiness of stolen moments with the butcher makes Iya Tope neglectful of her duties to her three young daughters. Iya Segi takes notice and ends the illicit affair promptly for her own self-preservation—largely, it must be acknowledged, since it is in her interest to keep the secret lover undisclosed to the public. Iya Segi’s command, in ending Iya Tope’s affair with the butcher, therefore carries the matronly authority of a fixer, of someone who seemingly has the last word, and deserves to be quoted: “I will not let you destroy this home with your excesses. You have allowed a concubine to become the husband,” Iya Segi warns. “I have not known anyone to worship a penis the way you do! ... You will not see this man again. You are like a child who has not developed the temperament for secrets. You are lucky we have a husband who believes he is more than all women and most men. If he were more discerning, more like a woman, say, he would have seen through your madness. And anyway, a new wife is coming, so brace yourself” (97).

Iya Segi’s instructions to Iya Tope articulate the new spirit of commercialism pervading the institution of marriage in this society in which females view attachment to men with means as a form of social security. Iya Femi confirms this, expressing her gratitude to Baba Segi for rescuing her. The first impressions she

has of the household are far from positive but the luxury of having her own bedroom for the first time is irresistible. "I looked at the double bed and tested the softness of the mattress with both palms," she says: "I would have been a fool not to lie on it, even if it was for just one night. I know now why rich people sleep longer than paupers. When I woke up the next morning, I felt like I was suspended in midair" (145). It is no surprise she is thankful that Baba Segi "gave me a place of refuge when the wicked of the world were ready to swallow me whole. You see, when the world owes you as much as it owes me, you need a base from which you can call in your debts" (148).

If Baba Segi's wives' fascination with its material provisions implies a cynical image of wedlock, that is what it is. In their conception, it is a contractual obligation that individuals enter into to meet, each in his or her own way, selfish interests with no regard whatsoever for the other partner's feelings, needs, or desires. That contract requires each side to hold up his or her end of the bargain. The wives are to conceive and give birth to their husband's children and the husband is to support the wives with provision of luxury goods and necessities such as shelter, food, clothing, and medicine. The ultimate status that marriage confers upon women remains the respectability denied to singles since, for women, to be unmarried comes with the stigma of one not being desirable or good enough to be taken.

The anticipated new wife referenced by Iya Segi is the lady who will become Iya Femi. The mother-of-the-home will initiate her too into the same program of illicit rendezvous. The birth of her two sons (Femi and Kole) will follow. Indeed Iya Femi to be is already pregnant with Femi the "night when Baba Segi was pummeling Iya Tope," and "Iya Segi came to my room and told me how children were born in Iya Segi's household. She said it as if the solution wasn't out of choice but necessity" (148). Through her sons, too, the politics of male children, the fraught implications of the head-of-household's preference of male children over female children, will be introduced and they will play themselves out, owing to the fact that, as Baba Segi explains, "A daughter can never be like a son ... Only a son can become a true heir" (98). Thus these wives are in such a bind that getting pregnant becomes almost like a do-or-die situation. For the women in polygamy having to be creative in facing events of this nature puts them at their wits' ends. They must learn to thread the needle—to outsmart not only their oppressor, male dominance, but the other co-wives too.

Veteran women's rights advocate Martha C. Nussbaum, even though apparently writing with monogamy—usually perceived to be women's idealized form of coupling—solely in mind, has argued that the conditions within wedlock are not necessarily fair to women. Nussbaum makes a fair observation that "the institution of marriage as most frequently practiced both expresses and reinforces male dominance."⁸ Consequently, she proposes as a solution the need "to use law to change the most inequitable features of that institution—protecting women from domestic violence and marital rape, giving women equal property and custody rights and improving their options by intelligent shaping of divorce laws" (295).

Yet if monogamy is oppressive of women, there is no question that the polygynous system of marriage, as shown in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, can be said to be potentially even unkind to them. Reading the novel through, one discovers a profoundly disturbing constant within polygyny: the fact that getting married to men who are no longer single, while not the companionate ideal for the college-educated females and possibly for the illiterate ones, too, might be their next best option, polygamy more appealing than prostitution because of the great stigma attached to the world's oldest profession.

However, an even more cruel irony implicit in polygamy is that competing women, co-wives, pose the gravest threat to one another's autonomy, equality, and liberty. In as much as the women are lorded over by domineering males, they cannot always rule out being unreasonably threatened by their rivals' children still living within the household either. This causes some bemusement for both the diffident young woman who will later be known as Iya Tope and the newest wife Bolanle when they themselves experience it first-hand in the Baba Segi household. The young, timid woman taken as a new wife from her rural community tells us that she arrives at the Baba Segi household and "he pushed me toward Iya Segi and warned me that I should show her great respect. He said I should be grateful that I was in such good hands" (92).

The new wife's fate is now placed squarely in the hands of the oldest wife, and the evidence is overwhelming that envy, the root of co-wife friction to follow, is suffocating. Iya Femi "squinted at the lacy dress my mother told me to wear for the journey. It was more suited to a fifteen-year-old ... Her eyes swept across the tiny fruits on my chest, which had never been groped or suckled. If not for fists drawn like daggers at her sides, it would have been impossible to tell what she was hiding. She was not happy to see me and by the time her husband finished the introductions, the lamps in her eyes were dead" (93). It is a fate many more women that will join them as co-wives will find themselves in, what one can only describe as being between a rock and a hard place.

The institution of polygyny itself, as shown in practice here, revolving around the husband of the multiple wives and geared toward ensuring his ultimate sensual, emotional, and psychological gratification, causes all the co-wives not only to scramble for everything but to do so at one another's expense in that desperate, swampy terrain. One of the tactics employed by co-wives in their battles, little or big in the marshy conditions of polygamy, is to malign one's rivals, to undercut these opponents by presenting oneself in sharp contrast to them in jockeying for their joint husband's recognition. One makes oneself stand out by diminishing one's rivals. It is not dissimilar to a commonly used strategy in commercial advertising. Not even small errands that co-wives are sent on are immune to exploitation of this nature. In a particularly amusing scene, for example, an act that one would ordinarily consider inconsequential, Iya Femi makes much of an errand she is sent advantageously. The leitmotif of errand in this novel is one which will accrue special significance as a plot device in the furtherance of the skeletons in the cupboards from which the text takes its title, "the secret lives of the co-wives."

Baba Segi summons Iya Femi to go on a simple mission for him at a time when Bolanle is not yet a year old as a co-wife. He wants to make a huge impression with his family at a forthcoming neighbor's birthday by having "us all dressed in the same fabric from top to bottom," Iya Femi recalls, because, as he puts it, "I want you all to look like queens" (75). Iya Femi, who is commissioned with this relatively minor assignment of making "aso ebi," takes copious advantage of it (75). First, she treats it as fair game, chuckling over why "if he wanted wives that looked like queens, he married a woman like a toad and a scrawny rabbit that nibbles at Bolanle's burrow" (75). Then, deviously, when the project is completed, narcissistic Iya Femi ends up as the sole beneficiary. She ensures that the tailor has reserved exclusively for herself a special, distinctive design of the "aso ebi" complete with "beautiful gold thread," "fine sequins," making her beam with smugness that her "cunning knows no bounds" (75).

Iya Femi's waggish explanation of the outcome to the furious mother-of-the-home Iya Segi is an exemplar of the domestic brand of slapstick comedy of the polygamous household variety:

"The tailor said he ran out of sequins when he started to sew yours. He said the girl who sold them to him was in confinement. But if you want, let us exchange. I'll wear yours and you can wear mine." I even started to unzip my blouse at the side. Ha! She would be lucky if she could fit just one of her breasts into my entire blouse. She hissed and turned into her bedroom. (77)

Anyone expecting to see all hell break loose in the interactions of the three illiterate co-wives over the family uniform situation will be disappointed. As illustrated by the encounter here between two of these co-wives, who are also otherwise collaborators in other ventures, their interchange is conducted like a game of chess in which keen attention is a requirement.

Each partner, guessing the other's move before it is executed, will try to neutralize it, safeguarding a cardinal principle of peaceful co-existence. The episode gives an idea of how these women handle disputes, the set of unwritten rules that guide their efforts at conflict resolution. For example, both know that the allegation of the supplier of the materials being "in confinement" is a flat-out lie because no supplier of anything in their market has a monopoly. But the claim is also understood as a respectful maneuver aimed at defusing fruitless argument over spilled milk.

So it is understood that what would seem on the surface like a polite gesture—the offer to exchange clothing—is not, because of its overtones of mockery. Not only is the logic of the offer all too well grasped by both the offer-maker and the one to whom the overture is extended as not genuinely made to be taken up. Everyone also understands that the intention is not a good one. Both parties are aware that asking a woman to try on clothes that both the person asking her and she herself know wouldn't fit is not far removed from body shaming, which is a form of bullying.

Iya Segi's smile of discontent, her hiss, and speedy withdrawal from the site of the provocation all stem from her understanding of the nature of this insult. Her actions show her acknowledgment of the terms of dealings in polygamous households where silence is often golden. Like her other co-wives, Iya Segi too is cognizant that in polygamy every action is dictated by self-interest and every situation is potentially volatile and open to exploitation to advance selfish interests. She also understands that the control over one's emotion or temperance when one is handed the short end of the stick is the *sine qua non* of maturity. That's why she pulls herself away immediately from a scene that shakes her self-confidence. The issue of Baba Segi's tastes in women, which comes under the microscope here, in Iya Femi's brash snide remark, is instructive. His passion to balance the variety in his collection, between the heavy-set or over-sized women and the skinny ones, the focus of secret self-deprecatory scorn and mockery even among the co-wives themselves, becomes an approved prey of sarcasm.

Iya Femi here finds an opportunity as great as any that can come any co-wife's way to launch a double-edged attack. The critique is directed first at a rival, who manifests an unhidden weakness. It is ultimately an attack at the aesthetic taste of the man, Baba Segi, who desires such a dysfunctional woman enough to marry and keep her as his wife. Iya Segi, the primary target of the strike, averts its open conflagration, containing the monstrous idea in the mind of her rival dying to wonder aloud some unkind things. In this way, she prevents from being voiced publicly thoughts that are held privately regarding the mother-of-the-home's bad over-eating habits, which make her dress resemble "a pillow-case with long sleeves and a ruffled collar that extended all the way up to her ears" and the idea that "That neck of hers is an embarrassment. If she always wore clothes with high heel collars, maybe she would eat less. Maybe she'd stop grunting like a pig when she eats" (77).

There is a considerable amount of personal animus behind these unkind images but the comic undercurrent cannot be denied either. The passage portrays over-eating in a comic light, but everybody knows the compulsion comes with severe health risks—not to mention the financial cost. Food is expensive and over-eating can kill or cause many health problems. While it is comical, it raises matters which are serious and sobering. It suggests the animalistic behavior of someone out of control and using provisions to medicate emotional problems. But the subject also has implications which stretch beyond her own body weight to reflect on not only the judgment and authority of her husband but even the conditions in the home fueling the emotional crises being medicated by binge eating. While not lacking empathy with Iya Segi as a victim of circumstances beyond her own control, readers must surely laugh at the image of the mother-of-the-home as a pig endlessly ingesting food into its already bloated body. Some readers may visualize a wife's over-eating in part as a struggle with the effects of patriarchy, the stress of living under male dominance.

Iya Segi's diplomatic handling of the aggravation defuses the tension, enabling her to maintain her public image as a dignified, mature woman. She fends off the impression of a murmuring, petulant child grumbling over a situation in which

none of her other rivals besides the overseer of the clothing deal herself fares any better. Her composure in the face of provocation proves that she understands her rival's incentive and how determined she is to find a way to get back at her enemies, not excluding their children in the raw deals which she cuts each one. She does not wish to give her enemy another chance to re-victimize her by getting another ruthless laugh at the sufferer's expense. Readers are informed, indeed, of the widespread character of the offense that spares none of the perpetrator's rivals:

Iya Tope, for her part, looked no different from her three daughters. Did she not behave like them? Was she any cleverer than they were? I told the tailor to sew the skirt two sizes too big, and her blouse baggy and without darts. The neck gaped and slid off one of her shoulders. As usual, she didn't say anything; she was more concerned about Bolanle, who had just emerged from her bedroom.

Bolanle's outfit looked like it had been knocked together by a roguish hand. To be honest, I sewed it myself. I watched the tailor on a few occasions and made the skirt from discolored ends that he did away with. Instead of the square meter that the rest of the wives received as headgear, Bolanle's head was bound by a bright purple strip of cloth about eight inches wide. I don't even remember where the cloth came from. Her face was bland as if there wasn't a single thought in her head. Who knows what the lizard was thinking! Everyone stared at her. Iya Tope drew her palm to her lips but Iya Segi's eyes began to twinkle. Ha! I knew she would like it! (78)

Notice how the inevitable backlash against the family uniform screw-up by Iya Femi is appropriately contained from snowballing by the deft maneuver of Iya Segi, who deflects attention away from her own personal frustration. She upends her rival's plans to take open pleasure at her grief with merciless hilarity and glee. She moves the focus of the insult, instead, as it should be, to the lineaments of the collective scourge suffered by the family at the cruel hands of one of its own, Iya Femi, allowing the episode to show not just the chief miscreant but also the other co-wives who make common cause with her in their worst light. The response of all the co-wives conveys the ways in which they use the one thing that binds them—common hostility toward scapegoated Bolanle—as a rallying cry of solidarity while in practice all act in a manner which clearly shows that having no regard for others is the best way that each co-wife can achieve and protect her own self-interests.

One thing becomes clear: the illiterate co-wives are very cunning. Notice in particular the way in which Iya Femi herself shrewdly plays such a huge part in containing the ire of her co-wives, with whom she acts in league in other matters. She staves off scrutiny of the uniform scandal by making the garb of their common enemy Bolanle incomparably grotesque, awkward, and clumsy. This reality is not lost on them, introducing an element of merriment as the co-wives watch the greater pain of a bigger enemy that overrides their personal

griefs. The making of Bolanle's costume from clothing scraps is intentional, designed to present her in as poor a light as possible. It is not unlike the malicious way Iya Femi always serves Bolanle her food, giving her "the burned scum from the bottom of the pot and topped with a small piece of meat that had been chewed off at the corners" (239).

With Iya Femi's own regalia, the opposite situation obtains. She has herself stand out in a sexually provocative ensemble that instantly achieves her desired goal, the attraction of her husband's attention. The swagger and gaudiness in her self-presentation are consistent with her persistent pattern of grandiosity. "You can trust me," she boasts with self-satisfaction: "I gave him the queen he asked for. My skirt was fitted and the slit rode just above my knee. My blouse was adorned with crystals and the darts shaped my figure and lifted my breasts. I was well accessorized too: matching court shoes and bag; coral beads on my wrists; and a large, gold crucifix around my neck" (78).

The discordant image of the devil herself not only adorned in a Christian emblem but employing a sacred symbol for promoting indecency of sexual arousal is simultaneously hilarious and blasphemous. This transgressive act involves the suppression not only of the evil woman's moral but also of her spiritual conscience, though the pathetic incongruity of the unholy spiritual violation is obviously lost to the admiring Baba Segi. What really gives the reader a laugh here is the absurdity of the ironic dissonance of the evil incarnate herself turning around to denounce someone else in strong terms—unjustifiably mislabeling her rival Iya Tope "the demon who accused the gnomes of mischief" only to wake up "to find his sword inside his own belly and there was nothing he could do" (79).

There is no laughing matter, however, in the most major issue over which the bulk of the heated battles between the co-wives is waged within the polygamous household. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this fight is over the revolving connubial nights the husband spends with his wives; his sleep-overs, as it were. It is without question the one issue which, more than any, tests to the very limits the endurance, willpower, and emotions of the co-wives because it is intertwined with the allocation of other assets which are in short supply.

The third wife Iya Tope cogently situates the common ire she and her mates share over the addition of fourth wife Bolanle within the framework of this matter—the politics of competitive distribution of scarce resources among the co-wives. She reasons as follows:

Bolanle should have known how much her arrival would change our household. I remember the very day she stepped her foot in this house because it was our sharing night—the night Iya Segi distributed the week's provisions. That evening, our mother-of-the-home was quiet. The stone in her throat moved up and down like beads on a dancer's heap. Iya Femi's head was hot. She wanted the blood of this new wife who had taken her place as the newest, youngest, freshest wife.

My only worry was that Bolanle's arrival would disrupt the sex rotation. Baba Segi usually went from wife to wife, starting each week with Iya Segi. By Thursday, he'd start the cycle again, leaving him with the freedom to choose whom to spend Saturday night with ...

Now that a new wife had joined us, one of us would have only one night a week. Perhaps Iya Segi had many thoughts because she knew this mantle would fall on her. She was the eldest. She'd had him for fifteen years and was approaching the age when enticing your husband to your bedchamber was unnatural. It wouldn't matter to her that she already owned his mind and did with it as she pleased. Some women just want everything. (53–54)

In this passage, Iya Tope's honest communication of privileged cultural information from an insider's vantage point exposes clandestine happenings within the unfair institution of polygamy that otherwise would remain secret to outsiders. No matter gives more immediacy to the worries of the heart of the women caught up in this system of marriage. Readers gain access to the hush-hush affairs of the politics of co-wives, the power struggles fueled by limited supplies stretched among the rapidly expanding demands for them.

Umma Aliyu Musa reports similar outbreaks of skirmishes among the Hausa of Nigeria. There, initially, "Brides coming into a polygynous home succumb to the attention they receive from their husband while disregarding the feelings of the wives already in the house"; until, that is, breaches of conjugal rounds cause open hostilities.⁹ Not even the Islamic religion, it seems, can numb fraught relations among Muslim Hausa co-wives or dull temper tantrums enough to keep them from flaring up the way they do among their non-Muslim counterparts who tend to put the squeeze on each other elsewhere in Nigeria.

In Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, sooner rather than later a plot arises to oust the newest wife Bolanle primarily based on an appeal to the sentiment shared by two of her three older co-wives: that she jeopardizes the portions of their joint husband's affections due to them. After unsuccessfully employing several strategies, the chief architect of the plot against Bolanle cannot stand her rival much longer and decides in desperation to kill her with poison "collected from the fangs of a cobra" (155). "Yes, it is between us," she connives with Iya Femi, her collaborator, "We must settle this matter. And God will help us" (155).

What more effective way can Iya Segi find to convince her comrade in arms than to convey the impression that the threat which Bolanle's continuing presence in the household presents to them is reaching the level of emergency because of the danger it presents to their centering interest: the sensitive matters of their husband's affections and connubial rotations? Iya Segi, therefore, summoning righteous anger, tells her co-collaborator a story of the day it was her turn to have Baba Segi for the night and he denied her sex rights. "That witch [referring to Bolanle] has cast a spell on him. If we are not careful, he won't sleep with us unless he asks her first" (155). The ruse works and the two agree to forge ahead with the murder plot.

The notion of Baba Segi's uses of unallocated spousal rotations is autocratic enough. The suggestion that there is a rival who influences him reveals another major anathema within polygamy, the real monstrosity that it hides: the autocratic tendency of the joint husband and a favored co-wife. Custom allows Baba Segi not to negotiate with anyone, but, like a monarch, readers learn, unilaterally to either use these conjugal shifts to "reward the wife who had missed her night because of her menstrual flow" or decide "a wife would have Sunday if he knew he'd been heavy-handed in scolding her" (54). Nothing yields greater propensity to arbitrariness than absolute power, and it is Baba Segi who wields it in his household—to punish or reward any of his wives at any time, as he feels inclined. But now there is a complication to his deployment of arbitrary power, which he allegedly jointly shares with an enemy co-wife.

Martha C. Nussbaum counts accurately in another important study the inequities of marriage for women. In addition to being "less nourished than men" and being "less healthy," she notes, among other things, that women are "more vulnerable to physical violence and sexual abuse."¹⁰ A key practice she adduces to defend the institution of marriage, nevertheless, lies in its relativity to prostitution, since both in Nussbaum's assessment at once offer potential conditions for women's exercise of liberty and threats to its realization. To be sure, it is Nussbaum's view that "to rule that marriage as such should be illegal on the grounds that it reinforces male dominance would be an excessive intrusion upon liberty, even if one should believe marriage irredeemably unequal. So, too, I think, with prostitution: What seems right is to use law to protect the bodily safety of prostitutes from assault, to protect their rights to their incomes against the extortionate behavior of pimps, to protect poor women in developing countries from forced trafficking and fraudulent offers, and to guarantee their full civil rights in the countries where they end up—to make them, in general, equals under the law, both civil and criminal" (1). In principle, one cannot agree more; certainly, more equity under the law will help the women's cause exponentially.

In practice, Shoneyin's narrative indicates that the dreams of equality that Nussbaum and other feminist theorists and philosophers envision remain distant realities for many women. In a so-called developing/underdeveloped country like Nigeria, married women are shackled on many levels. The issue of Baba Segi's high-handedness, for instance, becomes rightly a matter of grave if publicly unvoiced concern for many of his multiple wives. What is referenced as the patriarch's "heavy-handed scolding" is actually a euphemism for actions which are nothing short of domestic violence. It is for this reason that Iya Tope's narrative language in the passage openly conveys her exasperation at Baba Segi's monarchical predilection which leaves no wiggle room for these women.

There appears so little margin for error that each of the victims of Baba Segi's despotism feels compelled to deploy all she has to please him. The mother-of-the-home Iya Segi, for example, engages every bit of her skill as a sensitive reader of moods. Baba Segi himself is not oblivious to her negative capability, observing his first wife's psychological penetration: "That woman knows every

thought that enters my head. She knows when I am thirsty and when my belly is full" (72). Iya Segi's use of food shows a flow of suavity; she entices her husband with "her groundnut stew, her ekuru with shrimp sauce, her yam balls, her asun," knowing "Baba Segi's belly could not resist her" (54).

On the other hand, Iya Femi's tactics highlight with grim hilarity the extent of her desperation. Her miserable effort to combat her apparent sense of her unattractiveness stems from her husband's lack of desire for her. Iya Femi's resort to skin discoloration does not reveal self-assurance, her theory of beauty voicing a clear statement of her inferiority: "I know true beauty. And it is in pale yellow skin. I was born darker than this but I use expensive creams to make my natural beauty shine" (75–76). That is the misconception of beauty which drives Iya Femi in her self-loathing to embroil her hands in "a horrible yellow glow," producing knuckles that look "as if they had been scuffed with stone" (54). Iya Femi personally feels disrespected and her low self-esteem erupts in her envy of Bolanle, the youngest wife: "I will not be cast aside because she is a graduate ... I do not want her in this house" (55).

It cannot be overestimated what the competition of the co-wives for the attention of their joint husband and their ruthless will to hurt each other will do in undermining them collectively. Their jostling for power, instead of having each other's backs, leaves these women with no functional weapon to defeat tyranny. Rather than showing even small signs of defiance toward it, the co-wives acquiesce to patriarchy, unwittingly enlisting themselves as co-collaborators in the further perpetuation of their own subjugation. These women leave themselves hopelessly helpless under their husband's implicitly and often explicitly expressed acts of violence, and individually each becomes progressively unable to defend her personal honor, as it were.

One can hardly imagine a more lethal tool for defeating tyranny than unity. But Baba Segi's co-wives do not have any incentive to come together, finding instead greater reason to see each other as enemies. Of all the weapons available to them for prosecuting the brutal politics of co-bride antagonism none is as powerful as their children, and they deploy these in creating further divisions within their own ranks. The potency of children in co-wife struggle is also partly the reason that the lowest rung in the social ladder among the co-brides is occupied by bewildered Bolanle, the wife who has no children. An abiding nasty element generally in polygamy is the greatly diminished status not just as a wife but as a woman which is the unimaginable lot reserved for one apparently unable to produce children of her own.

Both within her immediate household and in the wider society, the wife who does not have children is widely regarded as an embarrassment. The crown jewel of the marriage institution in Africa is the offspring which results from it. The shame associated with the abject condition of a married woman unable to conceive is great, the stigma attached to it a sign of something that is amiss. To comprehend fully how the smirch of Bolanle's childlessness is complicated by envy of her openly despised college education, one must first grasp the cut-throat politics of co-bride bickering and what a wife's survival within the

polygynous family rests upon: her shrewdness in the art of skillful conflict negotiation.

The unique quality of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is its copious documentation of co-brides' ginger navigation of the household. The lived reality of feuding in the polygamous household involves a delicate balancing act, such as Baba Segi's second wife Iya Tope, as we shall see, faces. In all sorts of ways, all the parties involved learn not to incite the wrath of the mother-of-the-home, and one of the means of placating her is showing awareness of the custom of keeping one's distance from a wife of whom she disapproves and running with the pack.

One sets aside one's own feelings, cutting off all association with the particular co-wife, shutting her out of the group, and honoring the dictum of each one inheriting the enemies of one's leadership. Keeping the hated co-wife out of one's friendship circles, maintaining all but distant and cold conversation, and never contracting prolonged interaction but subjecting her to a form of hard-hearted ostracism become the norms. In this context, a wife who does not have children becomes particularly vulnerable to bullying. She is differentiated, isolated, devalued, oppressed, and detached with impunity by the politics of motherhood in which not least among the assets are the mothers' own children and their exalted status which the group employs in the battle for appropriation and control of the household space.

There is such a strong bond among each co-wife's children that they form a clique that is hard to break up, presenting readers formidable evidence of why these young ones are so easily susceptible to manipulation by their mother in waging her campaign against her foes. The mother-of-the-home's relationship with her daughter is exemplary in this regard. "As a baby, Segi clung to me as if the spirits had warned her that I would one day run away and leave her," she discloses (116). "She has grown to be a loyal daughter. When I knew the damage that Bolanle would do to our home, I warned her. I told her that a girl who abandons her mother's breast for another woman's will be cursed. I told her that she must be my eyes, my ears, my nose and my hands when I am not in this house. She has been faithful. She tells me everything that happens in my absence" (116). Iya Segi's daughter's spying on her mom's behalf is not quite rivaled by any of the other co-wives' children's, but it sets a standard for them.

Not surprisingly, of another co-wife's children's developing process, Iya Femi's words say it all: "The blood that runs through the daughters that Iya Tope brought into this home of mine is dirty ... The affection they have for each other has become unhealthy. They are like forsaken triplets lost in a forest ... Each [is] unable to survive without the others. They want to eat from the same plate, wear the same hairstyle, speak with the same voice! Will they marry the same husband?" (80).

Iya Femi's complaint about the freakish sibling bonding among Iya Tope's daughters tactically hints at the metaphysics in the conduct that gives their mother, like the other mothers, the opening to haul in her children at a whim as offensive weapons against her rivals. Their own mother agrees that there is no

daylight between them: “My daughters were born with eyes in their stomachs so they are quick to digest all that they see. They cling to each other for comfort and move together like a single wave. When one cries, the others cry too, and when one laughs, the others smile before asking what is amusing. Sometimes I feel like I am one of them. We look after one another and I have taught them all I know” (98). Iya Tope’s children, conscientized by their own mother over the sensitive matter of the politics of gender, whereby they as females are considered by their father to be lesser than their stepbrothers, have additional good reason to make common cause. As though to lend the stereotype of presumed inferiority of females official approval, at The Ultrasound Center, where pregnant women are queuing up for hours under the supervision of rude and insensitive attendants, there is even a bold sign on the wall proclaiming “IF YOU HAVE ANOTHER BABY GIRL, BLAME DADDY” (121).

Nowhere is the agony of a wife who has no children at all and who faces opposition, ridicule, and rejection therefore deeper than in a polygamous household. The motherless wife’s anguish arises from her own deficit in this key vector of life: having no youngsters to deploy as attack dogs. If she even had female children, while not as prized as males, that would offer her some level of support—for, as the popular adage goes, “half a loaf of bread is better than none.” Yet, a co-wife’s woes over childlessness go beyond the issue of the effectiveness of the munitions children constitute in prosecution of co-wife strife.

Children are not just weapons in their mothers’ arsenals; they are, as Irene Assiba D’Almeida puts it nicely, the items a wife “produces ... for her husband and to gain acceptance and recognition within society.”¹¹ This is the fly in the ointment that is stressed when Baba Segi’s three uneducated wives gang up against Bolanle, the educated one. Their leader, Iya Segi, the oldest of the matriarchs, warns her two colleagues not to personally get themselves embroiled and bloodied in a fight with the youngest wife. Iya Segi calms their anger and bitterness with a word of wisdom. “You will trip over in your haste if you are not careful, woman” (56). She warns the group: “Let Bolanle draw on every skill she learned in her university. Let her employ every sparkle of youth! Let her use her fist-full breasts ... what does our husband value more than what fills his mouth? ... Children ... when she fails to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out” (56).

The troubles of the heart of the newest wife, who does not have children of her own, not only intersect with the agonies of the head-of-household and the politics of motherhood. They also converge at the crossroads of culture clash, in-tensifying the harrowing impacts of all the opposing forces. The two main cultures rapt in the contentious clash—Western education represented by Bolanle versus illiteracy or traditional African oral culture constituted by Baba Segi’s three uneducated wives—present a fight primarily opposing modernity and traditionalism.

The paramountcy of child-bearing within this milieu is emphasized in this case only to underline the supposed inferiority of the Western-educated woman who also happens to be the wife who does not have children. The forces playing

out in the co-wife rivalries in the Baba Segi household therefore crucially unveil a clash of two civilizations, in which the combatants deploy all their resources. The images in which these two cultures are cast, as well as the picture of the male patriarch who sits astride and dominates the battleground in which this contest takes place and is caught up in the middle of this apocalyptic class of civilizations, capture the perfidiousness in which the parties hold each other.

The male patriarch Baba Segi himself has some attributes of the character of Chief Baroka, the Baale of Ilujinle, emblem of traditional royalty celebrated with its accoutrements of Yoruba ethnic music and dance in Wole Soyinka's play on the same topic of culture clash, *The Lion and the Jewel*.¹² There is no question that Soyinka's play provides the model which Shoneyin's novel revises in significant detail. Soyinka, the cultural/ethnic nationalist, invests Chief Baroka with cunning, wisdom, charisma, and common sense but makes his opponent, the 23-year-old village schoolteacher, Lakunle, a symbol of modernity, the main butt of satiric attack for his awkward ostentatiousness and obtuseness.

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the diatribe is particularly aimed at Lakunle, above all, for his temerity in refusing to take a bow to tradition. Instead, owing to his folly of his uncritical adoption of an imported model of values, he resists the payment of the requisite customary bride price that would pave the way for him to marry Sidi, the young, vibrant, illiterate village beauty caught between him and Chief Baroka, causing his own decisive defeat in the contest.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, things are more scrambled up, however, with the introduction of an element of ambivalence. Baba Segi himself, the original defender of tradition, digs in. He settles to stay with his polygamous household, to keep it intact, rather than fragmenting it, so as to save face, even after the shocking revelation that three of his multiple wives have been living a double life. Yet, verbally, he pitches his last tent with the Western monogamous system of marriage, urging his non-biological son Akin, following on the heels of the death of his sister Segi, "when the time comes for you to marry, take one wife and one wife alone" (271). So does fourth wife Bolanle, the educated female who crossed over the barriers of tradition into polygyny, make a reversal of her stance at the end of the novel. There, as she arranges to depart the Baba Segi household for good, she is already thinking about the challenges and the prospects that lie ahead for her as a divorcee condemned to life-long existence as a single woman, although she is convinced that going through so much has hardened and equipped her with the mental toughness and the wisdom to endure anything the world will throw at her.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, in which Shoneyin dramatically reverses the iconography of the rival cultures, it bears remarking that the visual contrast between modernity and tradition is striking. Western education, represented by Bolanle, the trophy wife Baba Segi takes because of her university education and alluring physical looks, is presented in all its superficially attractive glory. But Bolanle, the dazzling object dangled in front of Baba Segi, under the spell of which he falls, being irresistibly as shiny as Sidi in Soyinka's

play *The Lion and the Jewel*, is also a morally refined gem—a diamond in the rough, so to speak. Both young women, Bolanle and Sidi, certainly are portrayed in their respective texts as being as tempting as the bait which fishermen use to hide hooks to attract fish. On her best days, Bolanle’s “eyebrows were penciled in so they were asymmetrical, not like the slapdash jagged lines Iya Femi sketched on her face” (29). Furthermore, “She had lined her lips with burgundy and used the tip of her pinkie to apply a sheer coat of gold to their fullness. Her skirt suit was well cut but two years without soft-scoop ice cream had made the waistband a little roomy” (29). In fact, it is Bolanle’s seductive, comely appearance, her “unpainted fingernails, her lean face, her dark, plump lips and her eyes,” which first draw in Baba Segi to her like a magnet and keep him riveted to her from courtship through the early moments of marriage (7). On account of all her sterling qualities, Baba Segi, thinking himself underserving of her, in a moment of panic cries out about his apparently lost prized possession when he thinks she has absconded: “My graduate ... These educated girls. They take your money and they abandon you ... She has run off with another man, no doubt” (29). Ironically, she will slip away from his grasp, as he fears, at the end of the novel when things turn sour in the marriage.

In contrast to Bolanle’s tantalizing appearance, Baba Segi’s three uncouth, uneducated wives are all characterized without exception as being in varying degrees quite physically unappealing and some of them even downright repulsive. In the characterization of Iya Femi, speaking of the two senior wives, images emerge of the gross appearances and manners of “the aging toad and the shameless goat” (145). According to her, “One ruled the pond, the other played with its shadow all day. And how they stank!” (145). They are so unwholesome that the filth around them is substantial. For example, “The walls of Baba Segi’s house were stained too. Everything was grubby,” that is, until Iya Femi scrubbed it all thoroughly upon arriving as a new wife (145). Bolanle refers to “the large one” that “rolled onto her toes”; the wife with “crimson lipstick” and awkward “contrast in skin color” that “might as well have been a Zebra. While her forearms had a naturally deep hue, her knuckles were a sandy yellow. Purple veins rippled as she attacked a blackhead on her chin” (23).

Yet, caught between these two polar shades of women, the delicacy of the educated one with high tastes versus the unpolished illiterate version, Baba Segi is depicted as a surprising blend of the crude and pathological, somewhat regal in his bearing while simultaneously prone to inappropriate conduct. The alpha male of the novel’s title, born Mr. Atanda Alao, is a typical male chauvinist. He has unlimited authority and does not bother to consult anyone within or seek others’ opinions over matters affecting them in the management of his household. Within the institution of polygyny, in which a man like him is married to a horde of women, the male chauvinist is entitled to allocated connubial revolving nights with each of his four wives that they have no power to refuse. Shoneyin demonstrates that he exerts an extraordinary influence ensuring that all the members of his household—wives and children alike—must adore and submit to him.

Baba Segi likes his “women to look like the old Oyo goddesses: queens who contemplated the lifting of every limb; deities who, when they heard their names, didn’t just turn their heads in one brisk, carefree movement but lifted their eyes from the floor and let their faces follow their long proud necks by a fraction of a second” (49). All his wives oblige. Even with all her education, her college degree in hand, Baba Segi’s new wife addition Bolanle easily falls prey to this expectation to be at the beck and call of her husband. She reveals that early in the marriage she “wanted so much to please him ... I would rub myself with osun so that every strand of hair dissolved into my skin. I’d go to the market, buy the biggest snails and painstakingly rinse off the mucus with sea salt and alum. Fry him a feast and then submit to him” (49).

Sexual torture is one manifestation of Baba Segi’s not treating women like human beings who have feelings and possess a value beyond the usefulness of sexual objects with child-bearing capabilities. To say that Baba Segi does not accord his multiple wives dignity as human beings is an understatement. Here is a male who has no respect for women, and regards them as merely sex organs to minister to his reprobate sexual appetites and to satisfy his need to produce children. This is to say nothing of his neglect of the female pleasure factor.

Baba Segi’s boorish subjection of his own wives to sexual violence is repeatedly accompanied by lacerating words. He reinforces the physical attacks with mental abuse. The second wife, who becomes Iya Femi, recalls the awkwardness of her first intimacy with Baba Segi. “He sat on my bed and grabbed my breasts ... jumped between my legs and tried to force his penis into me ... ‘I am still wearing my underpants,’ I told him” (146). She observes that “He wasn’t like Tunde at all. There was no sucking, no licking, no nuzzling, no moistening. Baba Segi was heavy; everything about him was clumsy. He heaved and hoed, poured his water into me and collapsed onto my breasts. Tunde never did that; he always shook his water onto my belly” (146). Iya Femi uses a powerful ideophone to decry Baba Segi’s crude use of his monstrous penis, so “big that two men could share it and still be well endowed ... gbam-gbam-gbam like a hammer,” comparing his violent sex style unfavorably with her secret lover Tunde’s sensual love making because “he used his like a forefinger; he bent and turned until it stroked all the right places” (148). Bolanle’s endurance of sexual tortures inflicted by Baba Segi is therefore not untypical. She recalls incidents of sexual battery that stoke the “memory of being raped” and the feelings of “no pleasure in the pleasing, no sweetness in the surrender” (49–50).

The co-wife who later becomes Iya Tope alleges a sexual mugging as a young wife. She recounts coming in as the second wife when the first wife “had Baba Segi four times a week and I had him thrice” but she “would have happily given up my nights as well” because there were “weeks I ached so much I could hardly sit” (93). Baba Segi, anxious to get her pregnant with penetrative bashings, upon discovering the fruitlessness of his efforts will afterwards pester her about “what was wrong with my womb,” with the verbal sexual assaults escalating into threats: “If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him” (93). The results of the wave of unspeakable violence unleashed by him, as should be

expected, are the nightmares in which the first wife's warnings to her to "Get pregnant quickly or he will soon start to force-feed you bitter concoctions from medicine men until your belly rumbles in your sleep" haunt her for "many weeks" and "her words kept me awake at night" (93).

It is on record that "marital rape and sexual punishment," in the apt words of Ayo A. Coly in her theoretically bracing study, *Postcolonial Hauntologies*, are very common and disturbing occurrences in Africa. Nigeria is no exception. These offenses can happen, as Coly observes, when "The husband authorizes, provides, and regulates female sexual pleasure" in such a manner that the female "has no agency ... Her sexual body only exists in as far as it is summoned by the structures of patriarchy."¹³ In Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* the chief perpetrator of sexual violence toward women, Baba Segi, takes this barbarism to another level altogether. The phenomenon of "female sexual pleasure" is not even a remote consideration in the mentality of this uncultured individual, the obsession of the thoroughgoing sexual brute being, again in Coly's vocabulary in the same context, only "female-sexuality-for-reproduction" (82).

Yet, the imagery of marriage as a contractual obligation presents matrimony in this novel as a self-interested transaction, making it seem unjustifiable for blame to go to Baba Segi for catering only to his own egocentric needs. Baba Segi is seeking primarily to enlarge his estate—measured purely by the number of his children, preferably male children—while his multiple wives are all looking for social security in this cynical, reciprocal design. These underlying motives for marriage might explain this man's crude approach in his sexual life in a context where all his wives themselves have not married for love and romantic love is not the cultural foundation of marriage.

Where blame appears to fall due, however, is in regard to what Baba Segi does with the children that his wives bring into this world through concubinage. He takes the low road and his high-handed taming of these children that he thinks are his own is not without a stifling element in their personal development. The children of his household, like their mothers, are not exempt from the ingrained custom of submissiveness to the patriarch. During audiences with him upon his return from work at the end of the day, a typical episode presents itself.

Baba Segi is royally received by his children, the first members of his family to be granted audiences with him. The spectacle itself is quite remarkable and informs readers greatly of the ethnic manners and culture of male dominance in the society. Here is a description of how he steps out of the car immediately upon entering the compound, conscious of how each member presents him/herself in a fully submissive pose:

Taju honked twice as he drove into the large compound. The entire household poured out of different rooms to welcome their benefactor. Baba Segi's three sons lay prostrate, their torsos curled upward like mats rearing their edges. The daughters knelt before him. From the eldest child to the youngest, he called them by their names: Segi and Akin, a daughter before a

son, from his first wife; Tope, Afolake and Motun, three girls born eleven months apart, from the second; and Femi and Kole, sons smugly birthed by Iya Femi, his third wife. Baba Segi looked lovingly into the faces of the older children and pinched the cheeks of the younger ones. He made each child feel extraordinary. (9)

From the names of the children in the passage and their customs of prostrating and kneeling in front of their father, as expressions of the high esteem in which they hold him, readers can tell that this is a Yoruba household though Adéléke Adéèkó, in his highly informative study, *Arts of Being Yoruba*, refers humorously to “ungraspable ways of being Yoruba.”¹⁴

In the fashion of the typical Yoruba man, Baba Segi finds time upon returning from work, as tired as he is, to dote on his children. In a rare affectionate moment in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, he is caring and nurturing, and he does not hide from either the children or their mothers what the purpose of his existence is: laboring primarily for the safeguarding and advancement of the welfare of these young ones of his. He therefore feels and acts like royalty, blundering around, scanning the compound and relishing the respect and awe he inspires in each member of his household, infused with a greater measure of confidence to be the family patriarch. He is mercurial in his carriage of himself before them, in proportion to the loftiness of the expectations of these dependents and of his own expectation of himself—his conception of the heavy burden (which he appears to carry lightly) of being the sole bread-winner for his one-income family, expressing a form of autocratic subjugation. These children, as the underlings under his all-powerful hegemonic powers, are clearly too young to understand the implications but that makes no difference. The short- and long-term effects of their thralldom cannot be ignored. The autocratic parenting may have the tendency of molding young people into age-respectful, obedient, law-abiding citizens, suppressing the more rebellious instincts. But it can also create dependency instead of developing the independent spirit. The issues at stake are not negotiation and bonding but power and control—all in the interest of maintaining an organization of authority based on seniority.

No doubt, there is some ambiguity to the types of expressions of extravagant, feudal parental authority in play in Baba Segi's conduct of his family affairs. While surrounded by hordes of children, all stepping forward to greet him by prostrating themselves or kneeling, he calls out each child by his or her name. His manner intimates an itch to give each child his or her due sense of immanent significance. He has something like a lordly air around him alright. But his affectionate displays in returning the greetings and salutations of the children simultaneously acknowledge both their importance as individual members of his family and their collective spectacular worshipful reverence. All of his characteristic Yoruba exhibition of parental control, however, stands in marked contrast to the egalitarian customs of Nigeria's other major ethnic groups.

In this respect, the egalitarian Igbo parenting style stands out by contrast. Among the Igbo people, for example, the Yoruba type of imperial tyrannizing

parental conduct is resisted with every passion in father–child interactions. The Yoruba type of parental sovereign power and child submissiveness are detested by the Igbo, who resent deferential behavior and are anxious to dissociate themselves from any form of conduct that could faintly suggest obsequiousness as a people with a democratic outlook. The heated snobbery of Okonkwo toward his own father Unoka and Okonkwo’s friend Obierika’s individualistic dealings with his own children in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* are typical of Igbo youth–adult relationships. Fathers and children among the Igbo people seem to act more like equals, repelling fatherly authoritarianism. Each Igbo person is, quite simply, his or her own god or goddess and socialized from childhood never to bow to any other human being—whether it be a parent or otherwise—except for the economic imperative of personal financial gain. The obeisance of hero Okonkwo in his bid to borrow yam seeds from the rich man Nwakibie exemplifies this in *Things Fall Apart*. Among the Yoruba, on the other hand, father–child vying, of the sort associated with Okonkwo and his father in Achebe’s novel, is totally alien and unknown, perhaps even an abomination, and age does not ever seem to be a factor in children’s permanent relationships of deference toward their fathers among the Yoruba people.¹⁵

Baba Segi’s next audience, held with his four wives, who appear to be lined up behind the scene of his rendezvous with the children and taking it all in, lifts the veil on his authoritarianism toward these adults as well. The scene makes bold, too, the secondary status these women occupy relative to the children within the Yoruba polygamous household. This subsidiary ranking is signified by the way that these women, too, take their turns as they emerge from the obscurity of their quarters of the compound to pay their husband obeisance in their order of seniority. The priority attention given to the children of the household at the golden moment of Baba Segi’s family reunion specifies the central place that child-bearing occupies as a natural order of events (23). By implication, it suggests the marginal position the wife who does not have children can expect to be consigned to within the polygamous setting.

In the context of the polygamous household, as seen in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, however, the importance of children does not end with the priority reception he accords to them. True, they are the first members of his family that the head of the household lavishes his profuse attention upon whenever he returns home after being separated from them for a prolonged time. The value attached to children is immense. It is such that it is customary for the first child to simultaneously supply both the mother and the father, the head of the family, with their identities, giving their lives meaning through the names by which they are publicly addressed. It is very instructive that, within the Yoruba cultural institution of polygamy, a man’s own given birth name, for example, is immediately supplanted upon his assuming fatherhood by a new status tag. Be it male or female, the first child’s name is tagged onto its father as a badge of honor, signaling the acquisition by him of a new, distinctive standing. Both the birth of a man’s first child and his re-christening go hand in hand as major life events crowning a significant milestone in a man’s coming of age and social

station that confer upon him the gravitas associated with the exulted roles of parenthood. The narcissistic patriarch in the novel, known simply as Baba Segi (i.e., father of Segi), does not object to this new name-tag which he is assigned but warmly embraces it. The name-tag act is a genial code and connotes the respected privilege of fatherhood, in the same manner that motherhood represents solidification of an elevated social footing for a birth mother in the culture, who henceforth becomes defined by her first child's name.

In the culture represented by the Baba Segi household, the practice of embedding names of wives acquires real-life implications. Wives' names conspicuously carry messages of unequal statuses, similar to the notions that inform the boastful sobriquet which supplies the title of Nkem Nwankwo's novel, *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours*.¹⁶ The prestige in the nomenclature of the first three wives plays out visibly and provocatively, mocking the fourth wife, the untitled Bolanle, in direct and indirect ways in the politics of co-wife feuding. For a wife like Bolanle, who has no children, titular absence constitutes an opening for her detractors to take a shot at her because it represents a yawning deficit in real and meaningful terms. Her three co-wives, respectively, bear complimentary names, Iya Segi (Mother of Segi); Iya Tope (Mother of Tope), and Iya Femi (Mother of Femi). These are the titles that each of these co-brides is addressed by repeatedly and on a daily basis, on every occasion she is talked to, talked about, called out, or referenced.

The insignificance carried by the name of the fourth wife, Bolanle, who has no children, by contrast, is stipulated beyond reasonable doubt. Bolanle simply has not earned the congratulatory epithet of a mother, and the mention of the status in each instance her name is invoked continuously states and insinuates distressingly that she is a wife/woman without honor/title. Any mention of Bolanle's undecorated name becomes automatically a performance of her dishonor, inscribing the issue of victimhood that motherhood inflicts on a wife who has not proven that she possesses reproductive capacity.¹⁷

In addition to his disappointment, therefore, Baba Segi's frustration and embarrassment over his newest wife Bolanle's inability to bear children of her own prompts him to embark upon an aggressive search for a cure. Her co-wives don't even give her time to get pregnant, showing their incivility and intolerance. Her own calm and initial apparent unresponsiveness to the concerns expressed about her condition are ironic because they upset the normal expectations of what someone in her shoes would do. Her husband's desperation, on the other hand, is evident in his willingness to do whatever it takes to "cure" her. He does not even rule out consultation with religious charlatans. It is clear to her surprise and against her will that he asks to take her to see "a prophet" that he believes "God has called ... to the mountaintop" so "he will lay hands on your belly and perform a miracle" (49). Childlessness is widely regarded as an unhidden ailment, as dishonorable as leprosy, and his wife's inability to get pregnant is thus taken not only as a grave insult to herself but an affront to her husband Baba Segi's own manhood.

But, if Baba Segi's troubles are many, fourth wife Bolanle's are even more daunting and cannot be imagined. She has agreed to marry an older man, out of

her own desperation and to the fury and chagrin of her family. In her own words, "That buffoon was prepared to take me as I was. He didn't ask me any questions ... I was lost and didn't want to do anything with my life. He was prepared to take me like that. All he wanted was for me to be his wife. Imagine how appealing that was for me!" (169). Taking the chance to step out to make a new beginning, optimistic that, following the loss of her status as a virtuous lady, leaving her soiled past behind her she can make a genuinely fresh start, also means that Bolanle will miss out on a great deal. For instance, it will now be out of the question for her to seek "high-flying jobs as bankers, businesswomen and lecturers, the life I should have made if I hadn't married Baba Segi" (158).

However, little could she have suspected the rocky start at her new household. She completely misses the symbolic meaning of the dismal wedding arrangement in which she is just carried off to Baba Segi's house by him and his driver Taju, to marry without fanfare. She also downplays, just as disastrously, the early signs of being unwelcome there: "the children" who "couldn't hide their disappointment" (22). Mother nature, too, grimly acts in sympathy with the ominous signs abroad; but Bolanle likewise misreads it. Against all the odds, she takes the solitary ray of sunlight which briefly enters the room and then dissipates as quickly as foreshadowing her bringing enlightenment to the household.

The harsh reality that hits Bolanle, of the resentment which her education will spark as an additional liability within an illiterate setting such as this, is the prologue to the discontent that engulfs her throughout her stay there. The word that Iya Tope puts in on her rival's behalf casts her as a scapegoat: "Bolanle does not deserve the treatment the other wives give her. They bark at her as if she were a child ... All day long, they are at it, yet she does as she is told and never complains" (99). The enormous vehemence of the co-wives' disconcerting antipathy to education is a picture-perfect portrayal of persecution, but Bolanle is no doormat. The policy of appeasement which she adopts does little to diffuse the animosities, yet Bolanle attempts to weather the storm with poise.

All the signals of hostility are there upon the new wife's introduction. Bolanle lowers herself "onto my knees and greeted" these matriarchs; but only the "one wearing dowdy clothes bothered to open her mouth to return the greeting," and then "she glanced quickly at the other wives," while "the large one rolled onto her toes and gave me a hair-to-shoe examination" (23). Rank ungraciousness soon arises. Bolanle is "perched on a stool," but the older wives "sat in large armchairs. The children shuffled around the room and whispered among themselves" (23). Bolanle then offers compliments to break the ice, telling "the wife with two-tone skin how gorgeous her skirt and blouse were," only to be answered rudely that "Uneducated women wear good things too" (23).

Bolanle herself is not blind to the sources of some of her co-wives' antipathies toward her. She acknowledges that: "Looking back, now that two years have passed, I realize how naïve I was to expect a warmer welcome. I was foolish to think I would just be an insignificant addition when, in reality, I was coming to take away from them" (24). She lists among the diminished rations her presence

has caused each of the co-wives the “2.33 nights with Baba Segi” reduced to “1.75. His affections, already thinly divided, now had to be spread among four instead of three” (24). All of these new equations precipitate the petty politics of strife which the co-wives execute with varying degrees of hostility, co-opting their children in these power struggles. And they direct all of the venom against the youngest wife. Even the one with the most charitable disposition among the matriarchs, Iya Tope, is guarded and reticent, ensuring she affords the youngest wife nothing outside the bounded confines of cordiality in their public relations.

Everyone has been hard on Bolanle, the new stranger who has seemingly gatecrashed the Baba Segi household party. But can there be anything harder on her than the immediate rejection of her educational ambitions for the homestead? The overly jealous Iya Segi and Iya Femi “shout, hiss and spit. They sweep the floor, all the time singing satirical songs to ridicule me,” Bolanle discloses (25). Yet, she holds no grudges against anyone; attributing the negative vibes to “the dark side of illiteracy. So deep-seated is their disdain for my university degree that they smear my books with palm oil and hide them under the kitchen cupboards. I have often found missing pages from my novels in the dustbin, the words scribbled over with charcoal” (25).

Iya Segi and Iya Femi’s antipathy to education and the visiting of their anger upon Bolanle is demoralizing enough. However, nothing can compare to the vehemence of the vitriol of these two co-wives than their mean-spirited attacks on her moves to educate the household. Bolanle takes a step, she says, with intent:

to teach the wives to read. Iya Tope was keen to learn but then I found Iya Femi tearing up sheets from the exercise books to line the kitchen cupboards. When I reminded her why I’d bought them, she said I could crawl into the cabinets and teach the insects if I still wanted them to serve that purpose. I have tried to help the children too. I told them to assemble in the dining room so I could read to them. Only Iya Tope’s daughters turned up the first day. The next morning, Iya Segi told me not to be in a hurry, that I should wait until I have my own children if I was so eager to become a teacher. (25)

The malicious punchline, demanding instant and perhaps indefinite cessation of Bolanle’s instruction of the children of the household, throws icy water upon her ambitions. The response is a measure of the hostility aroused by the collision of wills in the ongoing class struggle between the newcomer to the household and its older residents. The injunction by Iya Segi, the “mother-of-the-home,” conveys the sense of a feud in the making with tempers simmering. The new entrant, with a chip on her shoulder, is trying desperately to prove her good citizenship. But her idea of what constitutes collegiality is rejected outright by the designated authority figures. Bolanle’s efforts come up against a thick wall of entrenched class prejudice coalesced by the chief matriarch of the home against her in the guise of safeguarding a norm upholding each parent’s exclusive rights to socialize its children according to its own cultural preferences.

Similarly, there is the incident in which a sympathetic Bolanle wants to assist Iya Tope with “hair cream that is good for dandruff,” badly needed by her daughter. But her plan is foiled by the mother-of-the-home, who overhears it and fumes: “Iya Tope, why are you begging for hair cream? ... Are you not satisfied with what your husband gives you that you now have to scrounge? You should be ashamed of yourself ... I am the one you should come to when you are in need” (81). The threat she issues, that “I think Baba Segi should hear of this ingratitude,” pushes the strategy of Iya Segi’s selfish ministry as second-in-command of developing a system of patronage that makes all her rivals unequivocally dependent upon her (81). Iya Segi’s power grab knows no limits, and she exposes her controlling spirit in this unguarded moment—how she wants her rivals to “know their place in this house ... what they can do and cannot do. They must remember that I am the only one who can do business” (82).¹⁸

Iya Segi presents herself here as the mastermind in the day-to-day running of the Baba Segi household. She is saying that all roads must lead to her. She elaborates that she seeks not only to concentrate all power in herself but to take the glory for meeting her rivals’ needs, inducing their indebtedness and loyalty to herself and breeding in them debt-retirement insecurities. Flattery and corruption go hand in hand with this form of patronage, which requires reciprocity as a social process based on the one who has power bending the will of those dependent on it for access to resources to meet their needs—be they material, emotional, psychological, political, or spiritual. Its unwritten laws demand that the clientele in return follow not their own inclinations but the control freak’s; be sheepishly obedient, respectful, and loyal to this authority figure; and set their affections upon her as well as being in faithful service of and in harmony with this person. Since to act in any way seen to be against the patron is to lose one’s favor with the authority, the one effect which the benefactor seeks to create is a dependency syndrome that is controlling.¹⁹

Iya Segi’s patronage code therefore relies on a power-grab mentality, denying other people the discharge of their free will. The outbreak of contempt she casts upon others shows how dismissively she regards her rivals. She doesn’t believe “Iya Tope has a head for trade ... a head for reasoning” and thinks Iya Femi is someone who has given up on even trying, having sworn, “never to do another day’s work in her life” (82). The hard work that she herself put in to wrest influence from her husband, to accumulate and then practice her acquired force, presents power-mongering of extraordinary proportions. “I had to use all my wisdom to force Baba Segi’s hand,” she states, and she ties her leverage to “giving birth to Akin, my second child, a son for that matter ... when I made his head spin with worry” (82). Her manipulative strategy incorporates shrewdness in manufacturing discontent and disgruntlement, through which she appeals to her husband’s ego and forces him to concede power through the impression “that he may not be a perfect husband if his wife is saddened. Men are like that. They think they sit in the center and the world turns around them” (82). The irony is that the same tools that assist her empowerment will be used to strip

Iya Segi of all the sources of her independence when her husband discovers her unfaithfulness toward the end of the novel.

Iya Segi cunningly empowers herself by getting her husband to allow her to learn to drive and prioritizing financial independence so much that she obtained funding from him to start up a retail business and now owns “shops in most of the major markets—Mokola, Dugbe, Eleyele, Sango” (85). Iya Segi sees freedom as wrapped up in wealth, stating: “Do not say that I am greedy because I am not. It’s just that as my money grows, my path to freedom becomes clearer” (117). Her dream of absolute freedom is that “Baba Segi will breathe his last one day and my money will return to me. I will pile it on top of the money I have now and the heap will be as hefty as the hills of Idanre. Then, I will leave this city and return to my village” (117). Her ultimate goal is to “build a four-story building ... From the top balcony, I will watch hawkers come and go. I will not let Bolanle turn my future upside down” (117).

Most apparent in her consciousness is the matriarch’s anxiety over the shadow of influence of the educated co-wife. It accounts for the cold shoulder she gives the young wife’s educational initiative, for example. This rebuff to Bolanle, her instant sabotage by Iya Segi, who sets, controls, and presides over the house temperature, norms, and values, sees the established mother-of-the-home taking an authoritative and decisive step in ratifying the rule of the household’s hereditary cultural patterns and consigning the imported culture to a corner under the cover that the designed imported Western educational values are in conflict with the family’s interests.

Like the matriarch, the other co-wives too know that the one who shapes the minds of children gains the upper hand in controlling the household space. Terrifyingly, all the co-wives allow themselves to be used in putting up a fight to defend this asset, and the usurping Bolanle finds herself in the thick of it. Her rivals all feel intimidated and threatened by her and not only prohibit the education of their children through her initiative but put a great distance between themselves and her because they detest her university degree and regard her presence as an unwelcome intrusion into their space. They even co-opt their children as allies in the fight as their opponent looks on with astonishment at the extent to which mothers can whip up sentiments against their opponents.

The sight of children enlisted as co-fighters in the dirty politics of fellow-wife rivalries is one of the most troubling in the novel. The depth of Bolanle’s own dismay and puzzlement cannot be fathomed. She talks about her shock at the manner that “children follow the examples that their mothers set them”; how Iya Femi’s sons, for example, like their mother, “will not sit on a chair I have vacated” (26). Along the corridor, when she crosses paths with the children, “they turn to the wall and flatten themselves against it” (26). Bolanle is as generous as she can be to these children with gifts of candies. But “they still treat me as if I have a contagious disease. I can only wonder what their mother has filled their young ears with. Iya Tope’s girls are polite but distant” (26). Indeed, the competition becomes transformed by another layer through Iya Segi’s 15-year-old oldest daughter, who is “afraid that I have come to take her

place,” Bolanle states: “I see her anger when I offer to help the other children with homework” (26).

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives offers arresting perspectives on the pragmatic politics of people in positions of authority employing primitive family ties to manipulate the polygamous system to acquire and wield power. It also directs subtle diatribes at these personages' cynical subversion of the education of a household for their own personal interests. By making children merely links in polygamous household politics, these people place barriers not only to the personal advancement of innocent children but, ultimately, of their society. The impact of the age gap between Bolanle and Iya Segi is demonstrated in the 15-year-old daughter's initial behavior. Their uneasy relationship brings up the disturbing subject of the high price that educated females pay, with schooling rendering many of them ineligible to marry men within their own age range. Bolanle finds herself in a tangle not only from entering into a polygamous marriage but also from marrying a man who is nearly her father's age.

In all of the adversity that she faces, what is unmistakable is Bolanle's resolve to tough it out and grind through. It seems nothing can destroy her willpower. Not even the taunting comments and her public humiliation at the Baba Segi household's communal television watch party can break her spirit. It is undoubtedly one of the worst scenes of subjection in the novel. In this event, which gathers all the members of the family and coalesces the destructive tensions that build up over time within polygyny, the mechanism of co-wife petty jealousies and ambitions is dramatized in all its tangled web: temper tantrums, rage, social scorn, taunting, badgering, stalking, intimidation, and airs and graces. The invocations of attitudes pointing to the second-class citizenship of the wife who does not have children and so is the weakest link among these co-brides, deployed by the mothers among them to magnify her presumed inferiority, are the stock in trade of these kinds of circumstances.

Bolanle's childlessness is projected as a curse, reflecting the small-mindedness rife in the environment. Even the children of the household seem privy to the power-plays conveyed through the coded body language of the co-wives. The family watches the news in what ought to be a moment of relaxation but clearly isn't. The autocracy of the family patriarch, who does as he pleases and observes no ethical or hygienic boundaries, provokes a splendid enforced silence of his wives and children who must stand pat under his banner as his loyal subjects, precipitating a convergence of the most frightening forms of bullying.

In an episode marked with keen observation and great psychological penetration, the emphasis is on the compendium of all the typical power-plays in a polygamous household. The political maneuvers follow Baba Segi's reception with the children. They begin with his affectionate moment with first wife, Iya Segi, rudely interrupted by the jealousy of the third wife, “Iya Femi's bogus coughing” as she “could never stomach their display of old-fashioned affection. If any form of favoritism didn't involve her or her children, she was quick to register her disapproval” (10). They are taken to new levels when, for some incomprehensible and unjustified reasons, Baba Segi, in desperation “to return

to the center of attention” after eating his meal, “leaned onto one buttock and let out an explosive fart” (12).

Baba Segi’s passing of gas so loudly in public is an act of extreme vulgarity and a game changer. It seems that the act is made conspicuous by the manner in which he relishes the moment, and it definitely serves a double purpose. He doesn’t have to do this, but the act at once reinforces his established unchallenged authority within this household, showing how he can belittle the members at whim, especially his multiple wives. This act connotes that once he has these women in his cage, under his thumb, as it were, as his wives, Baba Segi couldn’t care less about appropriate behavior toward them. He no longer feels himself obligated to make a good impression on them. They are already in the bank. The decent and respectful thing is self-restraint. But Baba Segi chooses to allow his impulses free rein; not to inconvenience himself that way, exerting his discretion instead to be a nuisance with this publicly embarrassing farting act.

Instead of seizing the opportunity to spend quality time with his wives and children, Baba Segi opts to resort to indecorous behavior, intent upon exhibitionism: to demonstrate to everyone that he is the sole power figure in his household and brooks no dissent. Even the children of the household, hushed, under these inhospitable conditions that follow the release of the loud fart by their father, only “looked at each other and giggled” (12). The fart becomes a symbol at once of Baba Segi’s despotism and of the contempt in which he holds his multiple wives.

Indeed, Baba Segi’s co-wives themselves have provoked the low esteem in which he holds them. His contempt and distrust are the logical and merited returns from their dehumanizing, shameless, and petty jealousies, envy, and infighting. Within the household structure of authority, the titled wives are next in the pecking order. But these matriarchs know that not even they are exempt from the head-of-household’s implementation of arbitrary oligarchical authority. For example, all the wives are under the surveillance of the feudal boss of the family, who reserves the prerogative “to observe their every facial expression; how widely they smiled at comedy sketches, how many tears they shed when they were gripped by agonizing dramas” (12).

Baba Segi’s multiple wives’ situatedness as objects of his spectatorship and unreturned gaze bears witness to the disdain in which he holds them. Far from relating to them as equals, he perceives and treats them as nothing but toys. They are playthings that he manipulates exclusively for his own perverse, voyeuristic pleasure. His view and treatment of his wives denies them not only any intellectual or moral capacity but also the dignity of their basic personal human freedoms, forcing them through unspoken coercion to modulate their behaviors. So restricted are the women, “knowing they were being watched,” they stare fixedly “at the screen, never swiveling to look Baba Segi smack in the face” (12).

The women’s carriage of themselves before his fearful presence conveys the exclusive power which does not put their joint husband—their boss—in any position to feel any pressure whatsoever to say or do anything to uplift the

thoughts of his wives to dignified or romantic topics, to inspire and elevate the soul of each of them, so much so that Baba Segi instead acts as someone at liberty to do as he pleases. To the extent he does something so transgressively gross as overtly letting out a fart, he expects no words or acts of censure to be directed at him from either his children or any of the adult members of his household who are, instead, watching each other's every move minute by minute as they jostle for his favor, adding another layer of complexity to their level of servitude. It is in line with such servile conduct that the dutiful "Iya Segi, stone cold faced, inched toward him and asked if he needed some cold water to calm his stomach" and "Iya Tope stared unblinking at the TV while Iya Femi pinched her nostrils and turned her lips down at the corners" (12). All the co-wives are under Baba Segi's bondage.

There is no greater measure of being unequal than Baba Segi's co-wives cannot even dare to look their husband in the face. Rather, silent, concealed messages command that each co-wife must act in a manner which gives the least impression she is repelled by his repugnant and pugnacious conduct. No wife wants to fall fowl of Baba Segi's authority; each wife therefore does her utmost to ingratiate herself with him.

Yet even in the midst of the co-wives serving as collective objects of their joint husband's abuse, they still find the time to turn on each other. They cruelly single out for bullying the wife who does not have children, the weakest link among them, instead of being united by a spirit of sorority against the machine that is grinding them down. In their appalling power maneuvers, in particular, emphasis is on the subtle and intricate but occasionally crude ways that the lower-class status of a childless wife is marked. Bolanle, "who had been wishing away Baba Segi's visit that night, shifted a little closer to Iya Tope's seat," for instance, during the Baba Segi farting incidence, only to receive immediate censure for her action from two of her rivals (12).

The first reprimand of Bolanle comes from Iya Tope, who "saw her and moved to the center of her seat, as if to make room for her" (12). Then Iya Femi "sneered at the gesture from across the room" (12). Rather than accepting the childless wife, embracing her in a bond of sisterhood, showing camaraderie and tenderness, her rivals direct barely veiled mocking gestures at her. Here an innocent Bolanle, unable to contain her elemental human longing for decency in an environment of obvious and not unjustified discomfort, attempts to adjust her seat but is met with instantaneous reprisals.

The act of Bolanle's body touching Iya Tope is seen by the co-wife as reprehensible. It is as though the childless wife has breached an invisible iron curtain separating her from her rivals. Iya Tope's recoil and her quick move away are meant to suggest to the invader that a childless wife is an untouchable, a pariah, a *persona non grata*. Bolanle has long been the object of behind-the-scenes cackling and sniveling. Suddenly, she becomes a focal point of openly snide looks from her co-wives, then of outright verbal aggression.

The fateful incidence of the breaking news of the escalation of ritual murders in the country seen on the TV is strategic. The gory sight of aborted fetuses in

the photo used to illustrate the story assumes a key part in the plot structure of the novel. Bolanle's involuntary, anguished, and tearful reaction to the grisly images of prematurely terminated fetuses does not go unnoticed by her co-wives, who let it be known that they stand confused that a woman who has never nursed a pregnancy to full term herself would make a pretext of having an inkling about the serious, tangled moral and ethical trauma which could be expected to be sparked by feticide.

In this scene, the issue is not about mothers expressing genuine joys of motherhood—women rejoicing in their roles in bringing other human lives into existence and grieving over the tragedy of abortions. Rather, the ugly matter brought under the microscope by the narrative at this juncture is the nastiness of some women being all too willing to use their privileged status of motherhood to mercilessly taunt another woman not as privileged as themselves. Certainly, few would begrudge the amazing phenomenon of mother and children looking into each other's eyes and sensing that special bonding of mutual admiration, affection, and love that locks them together as a family unit.

The gang-up against her in the television episode bears a clear resemblance to the malicious sexual teasing of Bolanle spearheaded by Iya Segi the next morning following her night with Baba Segi, asking "You didn't expect to get that sort of thigh thumping, did you? ... Tell me, does your back ache?" (56). Then, when she declines the invitation to Breakfast from her co-brides, third wife Iya Tope follows up swiftly with an even more sexually obscene remark about how, "After a night with Baba Segi, the stomach is beaten into the chest by that baton that dangles between his legs" (57). The other three co-wives all have their allocated shifts with Baba Segi without being tormented, but when it gets to Bolanle's turn she is unfairly picked on for her date with him.

A survivor of repeated sexual violation by her own husband, Bolanle then faces the vindictive intrigues of her mates led by Iya Segi, which could crush a weaker individual instantly. But Bolanle is resilient, and she does not descend into the ravine of bitterness. Iya Segi connives with Iya Femi to kill every initiative of hers, no matter how sound it is. As if Iya Segi's discouragement of Iya Tope from being taught to read and write by Bolanle is not malevolent enough, she spearheads a plot to push the young co-wife out completely with an intensity of venom only envy is capable of driving.

Not even when the plot thickens to the extent that Baba Segi is made by the plotters to strip her of the armchair she is accused of not having earned, since it is customarily only given to a wife when she is pregnant, and Iya Segi has him also banish Bolanle's friends from the house, does she alter her disposition. It reflects her essential goodness and strength of character that Bolanle is unflustered by the persecution, maintaining her stand as a bastion of graciousness, equanimity, generosity, and kindness toward all the co-brides and their children. All the gathering, gossiping, and conspiring against her by her co-wives cannot break Bolanle's willpower.

The mirror held so steadily and conscientiously to the distinctness of new wife Bolanle's noble character provides an enlightening backdrop for all the major

events in the novel. In particular, the background information furnished by the participant eyewitness narrator Iya Tope makes Bolanle's framing strikingly paradoxical, magnifying the cruelty of the perpetrator Iya Segi and her co-collaborators Iya Femi and to a lesser extent the conflicted but compliant narrator herself. Here is an innocent young woman who has shown that she cannot hurt a fly, yet her companions want to harm her. Bolanle has nothing but goodwill toward all the members of the Baba Segi household, bringing light into an environment wallowing in total moral and intellectual darkness. However, those within refuse to receive the enlightenment. The insertion of an element of crime and mystery into her life, in the fashion of the sensation novels of Charles Dickens and his rivals Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, and Mary Braddon, will raise the stakes of her risks in the hostile environment even higher.²⁰

It's hard to think of anything which could prepare Bolanle for the level of opposition that she will face, the height of which is reached in the false evidence planted by her primary detractor Iya Segi to incriminate her in a plot purportedly to kill her own husband with a fetish object of some kind of black magic. But for his alertness and understated intelligence, Baba Segi himself would certainly have bought this characterization of his newest wife Bolanle, assigned her by her enemies, as evil incarnate. Indeed, the sad irony of Iya Segi's misreading of his mood, which encourages her to carry out the evil plot against her youngest rival, could easily go unnoticed. Iya Segi mistakes entirely the evidence borne by Baba Segi's visibly growing irritation with his new wife as indicative that he has rejected her but misses the mark, and the plan to attach Bolanle to the opprobrium associated with a plot by a woman to kill her own husband backfires.

Not only is the attempt to blackmail Bolanle understood by Baba Segi, contrary to the wishes of its originator and her accomplice, as confirming instead his low opinion of the actual offenders. It is taken by him as conforming to his feeling of the nature of women in general as a species ruled by expansive emotions—a propensity to selfish pettiness, envy, and malignity. He lets the conspirators know that he is more aware than they think of their underhand doings, with a stern admonishment “that their foolishness was not welcome in our home ... Is it not obvious to you that Bolanle has decided to choose the more virtuous path in life? You should take her example ... What woman wants to be known as a harlot?” (157–158).

Despite such a smacking from their husband, the degraded co-wives' resoluteness in pursuing their evil plot is remarkable. Iya Femi's persistence in relying upon distorted Christian beliefs in the framing of Bolanle, in concert with the actions of her friend Iya Segi, is an illustration of the depths she will plumb. Iya Femi's repertoire involves frequent allusions to the Bible, pointing to the acute danger which Christian charlatanism poses, not least the family as the bedrock of society. Iya Femi's stock in trade is to take the name of the Lord in vain, asserting “I reject failure in Jesus's name,” and to tirelessly misquote the Bible, claiming that God wants believers to be “as wise as serpents” while doing evil (74–75).²¹

While striking out on a mission to retaliate against her uncle and Grandma for denying her access to education, Iya Femi similarly justifies the rightness of such a path of conduct through a familiar pattern, a gross distortion of the Bible: "I won't rest until they are punished. In the Bible, God said, 'Vengeance is mine'. If God can delight in vengeance, how much more a poor soul like me who has been misused by the world? I must have revenge" (149). But her uses of the Bible is a perverted employment of God's instructions requiring believers to forgive those who wrong them, leaving judgment unto Him who is sinless.

Far from delighting in sentencing mankind, it hurts God to do so because He is love, the Bible teaching tells us. Thus, the Bible teaches that sin, including acts of unforgiveness, allies mankind and Satan, and unconfessed sins of people cannot go unpunished because God will not compromise His principle. Iya Femi's claims that she stands on the word of God in doing evil, and her taking matters into her own hands by visiting vengeance upon her uncle and his wife by setting her disinherited father's house on fire are misconstruals of the commandments of God.

If we follow the word of God closely and do not take it out of context, the incongruity between Iya Femi's conduct and the Bible stands out plainly. In a torrent of fulminations, she says of Bolanle that the "prophets" in her church "have seen that this rat has an evil spirit. I can't say God has not revealed it to me. He shows Himself to all who serve Him in spirit and truth" (75). She lets out a stream of invective, but discourteously calling a human being made in God's own image a "rat" is contrary to the spirit of Christ. Many false prophets have employed the trope of serving God "in spirit and truth" to defraud desperate churchgoers. Iya Femi is one of these gullible parishioners, and the prophets in her church are not the genuine article—as even she herself will admit when she complains that "The prophet stared at my breasts for so long that I had to tell him not to defile me. It wasn't until I got home that I realized how much his evil spirit has followed me" (187).

Nothwithsatnding, however much she attempts to absolve herself of blame, Iya Femi is all the more damned because of the circumstances surrounding her evil plot, which show her doing the unimaginable of actually repaying Bolanle's good with her own evil. Perplexingly, Iya Femi is contemplating so much ill-will toward her youngest counterpart that she wants to have her murdered on the very same day the innocent young woman, who has only good intentions toward her older compeer, is taking the trouble to get the evil planner's own son Kole a hefty birthday present in a "colorfully wrapped box" (177). That's why the plot of the novel is indicative of some sort of poetic justice when it turns out to be Iya Segi's own innocent daughter Segi who is killed by the snake poison she and Iya Femi intended for Bolanle.

Iya Femi's proclamations when she is plotting to kill Bolanle reference principles that are all too familiar distortions of the word of God. "You can count on me, Iya Segi," she pledges, while offering herself as a shield: "Evil doers should get what they deserve. The Bible says so ... The Lord is going to use me to conquer my enemy. The mantle of justice has fallen on me. Ha! I am blessed" (156).

Much is captured here about Iya Femi's self-deception and villainy. She cries wolf about persecution and fantasizes about justice breaking for her, when, in fact, she has suffered no unjustified or indeed any non-self-inflicted injury. Her cultivated tendency to accuse and condemn others follows a variety of patterns but it is always accompanied by a corresponding expression of self-righteousness, a soul contrary to the temper of confession Christ enjoins believers to observe. All her invocations of innocence therefore point not only to a big lie but convey a misuse of words, just as empty as the slogans mouthed by her which purport to convey Biblical principles but actually misrepresent them to serve nothing but her selfish evil motives.

Iya Femi should know that she falsifies God's word. Still, she prays: "God, cover me with your spirit. Cover me so my enemies will not laugh at my shame. Send your angels to shield me with their wings. Avenge those who want to persecute your daughter. Rain brimstone and fire on their heads!" (189). For an enabler in the murder of an innocent girl, like Iya Femi, to be the one calling for restitution for herself turns truth upside down. If anything, it is Iya Femi herself, the agent of injustice, that the wheels of justice should turn against, as they eventually do.

In granting believers great mercies, God empowers them to defeat Satan. So, the war is between Satan and mankind, as the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians:

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girth about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints. (Ephesians 6: 12–18, KJV)

But in Iya Femi's misrepresentations of the Bible by misquotation, which are infused with lies and distorted truths, in the archetypical patterns of the fake Christians, like the Pharisees, she sets up a straw human being as her enemy, the one ostensibly wronging her. It is exemplary of the pattern of counterfeit Christianity that she cites only those mangled snippets of Bible passages that are convenient to her, taking them out of context entirely. So, she omits all the elements that comprise the "whole armour of God" that believers are instructed to wear because these contradict the self-seeking impulse she seeks to gratify. Iya Femi has neither love nor charity, hiding under the banner of Christianity but professing no grace toward her neighbor. But true doers of the word have

imputed righteousness, peace, anti-violence, faith, unceasing prayer and supplication, and salvation, so they can deputize for their king. These are they who, as apostle Paul adds, have “the fruits of the spirit”: “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith ... Meekness, temperance ... And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with affections and lusts” (Galatians 5: 22–24, KJV). They live the sanctified life, being lowly in heart, not prideful, and get to know the word of God deeply, do it, and become co-laborers with Christ in spreading the good tidings. They are empowered to model their lives after the Lord Jesus Christ’s, and, following in His footsteps, “to preach the gospel to the poor ... to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4: 18–19, KJV).

But Iya Femi is deficient in tenderness and compassion. She appears to be more trained in the school of domestic bigotry within the polygamous family than in knowledge of the character of Christ that the Bible teaches. That is why Iya Femi is so self-centered, spiteful, and exclusive that she looks upon her educated rival Bolanle with contempt, calling her a “rat” and by so doing outwardly despising the college education of her enemy that she actually envies inwardly. Iya Femi takes a certain perverse, sadistic satisfaction from being a scourge that “showed” her arch-enemy Bolanle “the sting of hot peppers,” boasting that “If she comes to this world again, she will run if she hears the name Iya Femi” (75).

The character traits that Iya Femi displays are the attributes of Satan and as a sadist she is in a conundrum that many people giving the appearance of being Christians are caught up in. She mouths the faith of Jesus Christ but does not live it out. She acts more like the king of darkness. This is apparent in a moment of crisis when Baba Segi’s daughter Segi, who ate the poisoned food that her own mother had intended for Bolanle, is in her death throes while surrounded by agitated family members. True empathy is foreign to her constitution, so not even at a time like this will egocentric Iya Femi’s obsession be anything but upon herself.

So, while a young girl fights for her life, all that is on Iya Femi’s mind is her own comfort, which riles up her envy at attention being lavished upon anyone but herself. Her countenance and her musings give readers a glimpse into her passion: “Her eyelids were heavy with sleep and resentment. Her children didn’t get this much attention when they had a fever. Why did the entire household have to be disturbed on account of Segi’s vomiting? She ate far too much anyway” (180). Notwithstanding these unkind thoughts, the hypocritical Iya Femi still finds it fashionable to join the bandwagon of the chorus of false accusations which her crestfallen friend is launching against Bolanle, whom she charges with her daughter poisoning. She then follows up with the only form of encouragement she can offer the down-hearted mother: the deception of giving the false hope that she will “go to the prophets in my church. They will fast and pray for three days. I am not a prophet but God does not fail me. We will not lose a child in this household” (183–184).

Of course, that is inevitably what occurs, underscoring the vacuousness of any of the assurances of Iya Femi. All her self-righteous and avowedly spiritual declarations bear the authentication marks of the worthless threat that she issues to her opponent Bolanle: “Sooner than you think, we will be rid of you” (182). The flabbergasted Iya Tope finally speaks her mind, fuming at the evil scheming of her rival. “If you had God in you, you’d be praying for the child who barely clings to life,” she charges Iya Femi. “But no, you sit here wondering how to remain in the house that you have used your hands to burn! How many times have you visited Segi to ask her where she aches? How many times have you inquired how she hears, now that her right ear is deaf? Never! You prefer to hide than to do a good deed that may wipe away your sins” (238).

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, author Shoneyin emerges as a gripping storyteller able to hook up all ingredients of her text’s materials, situating within the center of the picture of her main subject of polygyny ancillary concerns of society’s mistreatment of its other vulnerable members. The oppressions of the weak, not only the poor but the rich by armed burglars, rank alongside the disrespect shown to the most unprotected of all in society: the dead, also a subject raised farsightedly by Teju Cole in his *Open City*.²²

Besides the society’s neglect of its widows and orphans, people are attacked in their homes, just as the dead are attacked in their graves, and the system of jungle justice leaves its poor pitilessly imperiled. The insecurity of life for the underprivileged is prominently illustrated by the murder of Baba Segi’s driver Taju’s senior brother Faruku, a bus driver lynched by a mob shortly after surviving a bus crash in which all his passengers perished. A group of “men in the gray Volvo” shows up at his parent’s home to fish him out of hiding. The lynch mob “threw four worn tires over his head, sprinkled his hair with gasoline and set him alight,” denying him the presumption of innocence until proven guilty in a court of law (251). Faruku becomes a victim of vigilante justice, but those that carry out the miscarriage of justice get away with their dastardly and cruel crime because there is no accountability in this country.

The analogue to the injustice visited on the poor like Faruku is the threat posed by the constant burglarizing of the homes of the rich, endemic in the society. Bolanle bears witness to the horror of one such incident. She is hiding in her boyfriend Segun’s parents’ home when it is viciously attacked in an armed robbery. The attack ends up claiming the life of the home owner. The armed bandits “left at four A.M. with thousands of dollars in cash and trinkets they’d found in another safe cleverly tucked behind the picture of Segun’s grandmother” (208). Yet, not even the fact that their operation is so successful makes the robbers spare Segun’s father’s life in the cruel rampage, respect for human life apparently not something one can identify with in this society.

Ironically, even the dead, like Segun’s father, cannot be guaranteed rest in their graves. The care of the lifeless intersects with their prior struggles, power, and the question of citizenship, as seen in the previous discussion of Cole’s *Open City*. Unlike society’s other unprotected members, such as children, the poor, females, and particularly widows and orphans, the dead are the most defenseless

group because they cannot even speak up for themselves and therefore lack self-representation in matters that might affect them. As such, how the dead's successors in any society relate to them is one of the most reliable barometers for measuring their humanity or the lack thereof. How those left over handle their dead incorporates but is not limited to burial and public commemoration. Survivors' contacts with their expired or non-active relatives also, crucially, must include a basic tenet: private and public protection of all sites or cities of the dead from desecration.

In Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, society's dishonor of its institutions of burying the dead is a symbol of things generally out of order: not only the absence of hygiene but its misplaced priorities, the culture of mismanagement, the wanton state of security, and the unsanitary conditions of public affairs of the nation. In the town's cemetery, readers learn:

Corpses were forced into unsavory unions. Reckless men were laid to rest on chaste widows; children on top of elderly men; girls on top of women who were too young to be their mothers. Nature in its omniscience would not accept these copulations: the shallow graves were ravaged by dogs and what the dogs rejected, the heavy rains returned to the residential area on the other side of the road. (211)

Interment of remains ought to be a permanent gesture of honor paid by those still standing to the dead, with burial places instancing the departed's confinement and separation from the demarcated spaces for the living. But the actions of this society permit the transit of buried human waste that is not permanently disposed into forced and unwholesome interactions with the living. The strange occurrences of buried remains (human flesh and skeletons) getting exhumed, to cross distances they should not after dogs have had field days gorging themselves fully, serve as dire warnings that many lines of acceptable conduct have been crossed. The once-sacrosanct boundaries separating the two realms are rampantly breached through the uprooting of graves, occasioning the desensitizing of the souls of those still kicking and their disregard for any morality.

It is apposite to close with an observation that the practice of one man being married to multiple wives, the primary concern of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, is by no means a new subject in Nigerian or African literature. Chinua Achebe treats it with panache in his first-generation novel *Things Fall Apart*, and to a lesser extent also in *Arrow of God*.²³ In Okonkwo's household, for instance, the focus is on the public role of multiple wives in fostering communal work, its economic benefits for a farming community where it multiplies human labor, and the enlargement it brings to the man's estate, all perceived from a patriarchal perspective.

Similarly, first-generation French-language author Sembene Ousmane's novella *Xala* examines the subject from the male frame of reference, introducing an ironic twist whereby the male oppressor, the husband of multiple wives, becomes

the victim of the machinations of his multiple wives who maliciously cast on him the deadly spell of impotence in order to bring their husband to untold ridicule.²⁴ In Isidore Okpewho's look at the practice of multiple wives in his novel *The Victims*, the focus is centrally on the emotional and psychological problems and the root causes of the jealousies that spark co-bride rivalries and other inconveniences such as barrenness, the competition for the man's attention among the wives, and the petty thefts rife among the children of polygamous households.²⁵

It would take Senegalese French-language woman writer Mariama Bâ, in her novella, *Une Si Longue Lettre*, translated into English as *So Long a Letter* (1981), to address the subject of polygamy from a woman's standpoint with glances into the afterlife of marriage including the tribulations of widowhood.²⁶ There, she pivots attention toward the favoritism and the oppressive nastiness of in-laws inherent in the institution charting the ordeals of protagonist and narrator Ramatoulaye which are amplified when her husband Modou Fall marries a new wife, Binetou, and relegates the older wife in his affections shortly before his unexpected demise. Bâ is by no means silent on the absence of the passionate love dimension among the inequities of polygamy; however, her stress is dually on the emotional toll of the material privations endured by the spurned co-wife.

What is genuinely new is the more broad-ranging interest that Lola Shoneyin shows in her novel *The Secret Wives of Baba Segi*, as astonishingly animating an endeavor as any author has undertaken. Her story switches the focus of attention entirely to a sustained exploration of another side of the nature of the beast: the moral decadence hidden in the underbelly of polygyny; behind the overt politics of co-wife rivalry hitherto missing in portrayals of the trials of women who are trapped in this marital arrangement lurk dark, sinister, and morally reprehensible secrets. With its interest not only in the in-fighting among co-wives and the forces that range illiterate against educated co-brides, but, most astonishingly, the widespread sexual immoralities and betrayals it hides that make even prostitution appear saintly in comparison, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is a stunning and truly eye-opening work.

Notes

- 1 See George Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 79.
- 2 Lola Shoneyin, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (New York: William Morrow/Harper Collins, 2010), p. 280. All subsequent page references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parentheses.
- 3 This valorization of virginity has a parallel in medieval Greek culture as elaborated in the philosophy of Plato. For details, see Francoise Meltzer's insightful study, *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), especially Chapter Two, "The Discourse of Virginity: A Flight Before Light" (pp. 53–77) in which, among other things, she discusses the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato equating virginity with "virtue." For continuities of this ethos through Georgian and Victorian society in England, see Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Victorian Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary*

- Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), in which, she observes how “stereotypes, in fact, rigidly confined real women to prescribed roles; as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a widow, as a virgin or a whore, every woman was defined by relationship—explicitly to a man, implicitly to sexuality itself” (x). In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1989), Ifi Amadiume confirms the high value the Igbos so attached to sexual morality, traditionally, the “significance accorded to maidenhood centered on guarding the virginity of the young daughters and preparing them for their future roles as wives and mothers” (70).
- 4 See the chapter 5 discussion in this book of Chika Unigwe, *On Black Sisters Street* (New York: Random House, 2009).
 - 5 Chinua Achebe, “Vengeful Creditor,” in *Girls at War and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 50–69.
 - 6 See, for example, David Parkin and David Nyamwaya, ed. *Transformations of African Marriage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).
 - 7 It is noteworthy that Baba Segi here expresses disgust out of a conception of female celibacy or purity as a property value without reference to outside facts, not unlike the notion of female chastity that prevailed throughout the eighteenth into the early part of the nineteenth century in England, elaborated notably in Mary Poovey’s meticulously documented study *The Proper Lady and the Victorian Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 5–30.
 - 8 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 295.
 - 9 Umma Aliyu Musa, *Emotions in Muslim Hausa Women’s Fiction: More than Just Romance* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 88.
 - 10 See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.
 - 11 Irene Assiba D’Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 87.
 - 12 See Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).
 - 13 Ayo A. Coby, *Postcolonial Hauntologies: African Women’s Discourses of the Female Body* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), pp. 87–88.
 - 14 Adéléké Adéḡkó, *Arts of Being Yoruba: Divination, Allegory, Tragedy, Proverbs, Panegyric* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), p. xi.
 - 15 See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).
 - 16 See Nkem Nwankwo, *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1975).
 - 17 The practice of wife-naming among the Igede people of Benue State, for example, presents a marked difference. The Igede circumvents the social embarrassment of childlessness entirely by naming wives either after their villages of origin, such as Oli-Ibilla (the One-From-Ibilla), Oli-Ikachi (the One-From-Ikachi), and Ol-Ega (the One-From-Ega), or after the husbands’ best friends: Ah-Agi (Wife-of-Agi), Ah-Ona (Wife-of-Ona), Ah-Onda (Wife-of-Onda), and so on.
 - 18 See Barbara M. Cooper’s *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in a Hausa Society in Niger* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006), p. 11, which quotes a document identifying a similar custom of the “head wife” in the polygamous household among the Hausa of Niger.
 - 19 Client–patron relationship is exhaustively detailed in Sandra Barnes’ *Patrons and Power: Creating a Political Community in Metropolitan Lagos* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).
 - 20 See, for example, Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1880s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

- 21 The misquoted passage is Matthew 10: 16, containing Jesus' sermon in which he counseled his disciples being sent on evangelical work to demonstrate the power of God by doing good healing the sick and afflicted and spreading the gospel without entering into controversy arguing, as Ellen White correctly explains it, "as to whether Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah," *The Desire of Ages* (Nampa Idaho: Pacific Press, 2005), p. 350.
- 22 Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2012). See the discussion in chapter four in this study.
- 23 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958) and *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964).
- 24 Sembene Ousmane, *Xala*, tr. by Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1976).
- 25 Isidore Okpewho, *The Victims* (London: Longman, 1970).
- 26 Mariama, Bâ, *Uni Si Longue Lettre*, tr. by Modupe Bode-Thomas as *So Long a Letter* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1981).

7 Anecdote, Allegory, and the Pictorial Frame II: The Short Story as Forum for Documentary Realism (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*)

This chapter considers Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's radiant book of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck*¹ as a text which circles back to many of the interlocking cardinal subjects and styles of Nigeria's third-generation literature. The collection furthers the understanding of Nigeria's status as a failed nation state by demonstrating the complete breakdown of social norms. This disorder is reflected in the general state of insecurity in a country plagued by armed robbery, sectarian violence, senseless murder, and petty theft. Sexual licentiousness, widespread entrenchment of bribery, classism, and even wholesale corruption of the polity (the citizenry, the civil service, the military, the executive branch, and law enforcement) are also endemic.

This social unrest is the impetus driving many of the citizens to emigrate. But the stories also inform readers that life in exile is attended by its own difficulties, pushing the backs of many Nigerian immigrants against the wall. Underlying the turbulence is the bitter memory of the Nigeria-Biafra War that was foisted on much of the population. Adichie's reliance on anecdote, pictorial frame, and the allegorical structure for her exploration of these issues thus causes her stories to vibrate with aesthetic and thematic traits that link them specifically to the kaleidoscopic concerns of her compatriot and fellow short-story stylist Maria Ajima, especially in her collection *The Web*, examined earlier in Chapter 2 of this book.²

Like Ajima, Adichie, too, finds in the short-story form the appropriate platform for illustrating the concrete spin-offs of the malaise bedeviling the country, the genesis of which crises her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*,³ accurately traces to the military intervention in politics in Nigeria. The involvement of the armed forces in the administration of the country triggered the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967–1970, ushering in a period of not only political repression, a movement toward fascism, social instability, and economic collapse but moral decadence, leading to the mass exodus of citizens into exile mostly in America and Europe. Yet migration brings little relief to those fleeing their homeland, coming instead with its own preeminently different sets of problems connected to racial discrimination, isolation, and massive disappointment for many. This is the notion encoded in the title of the collection, which captures the condition

of people suffering such stress and discomfort that the individual feels as if under a choke hold, like a strangulating object being hung around the neck as the air is sucked out of one's lungs. Literally and symbolically, the person is in a state of asphyxiation, suffocating, as in the predicament of the 22-year-old American visa lottery winner Akunna, protagonist of the story which gives this volume its name, caught between two cultures, confused and dangling without a firm foothold to rest on. Many other characters in the various stories share a similar feeling of alienation.

Like Ajima, Adichie, too, in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, proves herself expert in the weaving of yarns; that she is foremost a very competent storyteller is made obvious by the richly and finely evoked but shocking facts of everyday life which she observes and casts the spotlight upon. This achievement in verisimilitude is unmistakable in the complex, multi-pronged opening story of the collection, entitled "Cell One." This starts off as a poignant portrait of the scourge of petty theft and burglary tormenting residents of the campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It then turns into a very revealing ethical tale with potentially wider implications for society at large. Mainly, these lessons concern how the destiny of a country is actually fashioned in the preparation of its future leaders. This enchanting focus on the socialization of a community's young ones slipping out of control is effortless in straddling two major topics of the third-generation literature as it deals with the moral depravity of the age.

The early section details the serial break-ins into the home of the narrator's parents, drawing on the power of concrete examples. It begins with a robbery by the narrator's "neighbor Osita who climbed in through the dining room window and stole our TV, our VCR, and the *Purple Rain* and *Thriller* videotapes my father had brought back from America" (3). Like Maria Ajima's sardonically titled story "What Men Can Do" from *The Web*, in which women show that they can outdo the men in acts of daredevilry and duplicity, executing the crime of highway robbery typically associated with men of the underworld, the second raid is an inside job by none other than the narrator's cowardly "brother Nnamabia who faked a break-in and stole" his own mother's jewelry (3). Although she does not condone stealing, out of frustration and disappointment with his conduct the narrator accuses this brother of hers of lacking the courage to do what his peers are doing, her brother's comical inability to venture outside his own home into his neighbors' houses to steal, becoming a target of ironic humor and lampooning.

The trail left behind by the chicken-hearted 17-year-old Nnamabia immediately rouses suspicion. He is so artless in carrying out the deed that his plan to put one over on everybody hits a terrible snag. It certainly doesn't turn out to be as smart as he hopes. He attends church with his sister, takes leave of her there, goes back home to steal his mother's jewelry, then returns to reunite with his sister and, when church is over, drives back home together with her, only to announce promptly upon getting to the living room, "We've been robbed!" (4). The difficulty Nnamabia has is in successfully hiding the "theatrical quality to the way the drawers were flung open, as if it had been done by somebody who

wanted to make an impression on the discoverers” (4). Even his sister, the story’s third-person participant narrator, is not so naïve as to be fooled. She puts one and one together immediately:

Nnamabia had done it, I knew. My father knew, too. He pointed out that the window louvers had been slipped out from the inside, rather than outside (Nnamabia was really much smarter than that; perhaps he had been in a hurry to get back to church before Mass ended), and that the robber knew exactly where my mother’s jewelry was—the left corner of her metal trunk. (4)

Notably, one implication of Nnamabia’s placement at Mass is that he disguises his crime by pretending to be a devout, church-attending Christian. Yet he proceeds, even as the service is going on, to contemplate something so untoward. Another insinuation one can make is that Nnamabia has this pilfering of his mother’s property all planned out; his misdemeanor is not spontaneous but rather premeditated.

“Cell One” demonstrates the factors that have preconditioned the delinquency of young people like Nnamabia and Osita. The combined effects of the diet of Westerns and other American action movies on which they are fed, and, above all, their lousy parenting depriving them of proper training are indisputable. Far from being evil by nature, for example, Nnamabia’s humiliating confession to his mom expresses a redeeming act. So, “the season of thefts on our serene Nsukka campus” by boys like Osita and Nnamabia “who had grown up watching *Sesame Street*, reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast, attending the university staff primary school in smartly polished brown sandals ... now cutting through the mosquito netting of their neighbors’ windows, sliding out glass louvers, and climbing in to steal TVs and VCRs” is dominated by the grave matter of dereliction of parental duty.

The narrative ensures that the irony of teachers neglecting the parental responsibility of teaching their own children proper ethical conduct at home is not lost on readers. Everyone “knew the thieves” because “Nsukka campus was such a small place—the houses sitting side by side on tree-lined streets, separated only by low hedges—that we could not but know who was stealing” (5). But the starry-eyed and self-delusional university professor parents of these thieves look the other way, so when they meet “at the staff club or at church or at faculty meeting,” they persistently “moan about riffraff from town coming onto their campus to steal” (5). Yet, the narrator informs readers:

The thieving boys were the popular ones. They drove their parents’ cars in the evening, their seats pushed back and their arms stretched out to reach the steering wheel. Osita, the neighbor who had stolen our TV only weeks before the Nnamabia incident, was lithe and handsome in a brooding sort of way and walked with the grace of a cat. His shirts were always sharply ironed. (5–6)

The brutal description of Nnamabia's pampering shocks readers at the scale of dereliction of parental duties that has made the campus sleeks like him and Osita what they are: spoiled brats. Nnamabia's long journey to lawlessness has its milestones strewn with parental backing, goading, and cheering. The itinerary must include the several lies told and excuses made on his behalf by his irresponsible parents. Nnamabia's mother is particularly notorious for her defensiveness:

When, at eleven, Nnamabia broke the window of his classroom with a stone, my mother gave him the money to replace it and did not tell my father. When he lost library books in class two, she told his form-mistress that our houseboy had stolen them. When, in class three, he left early every day to attend catechism and it turned out he never once went and so could not receive Holy Communion, she told the other parents that he had malaria on the examination day. When he took the key of my father's car and pressed it into a piece of soap that my father found before Nnamabia could take it to a locksmith, she made vague sounds about how he was just experimenting and it didn't mean a thing. When he stole the exam questions from the study and sold them to my father's students, she shouted at him but then told my father that Nnamabia was sixteen, after all, and really should be given more pocket money. (6–7)

Instead of letting the young ones know they will not stand for it, there is a cover-up by parents like Nnamabia's, who spare the rod and spoil their child. Nnamabia's mother, for example, swiftly goes to buy replacement jewelry for the item he pawned, setting up an installment payment plan for it. Most suggestive for readers are his parents' mellowing attitudes toward the criminality of their child. The decadent culture of the self-deluded academic parents overall shows they are more absorbed with their own pet illusions than they are with confronting the bitter reality of their child's growing delinquency.

In "Cell One," the narrator marshals a host of details from her familiarity with the irresponsible parenting attitudes manifested by her own father and mother as well as their neighbors in the university community at Nsukka, orchestrating the activities of the young miscreants. The scenes of these ungovernable children being conditioned to internalize the values of an ivory tower culture that doesn't hold disorderliness accountable are uncanny. Their parents' failure to demarcate the boundaries of acceptable behavior foments the further decline of a sense of personal responsibility in these children. Helplessly, the readers witness the hoodlums' progress from the perfected art of petty theft, burglarizing the homes of their neighbors, upping the ante to become cult gang members, then swept off on the fervor of the popularity of cult membership mushrooming across the campus, finally turning themselves into armed robbers and attaining the summit of criminality as murderers.

The incident in which Nnamabia and a number of suspected cult members are misidentified, arrested, and detained by the police for breaking a curfew

imposed in the aftermath of the cult murders on campus crystallizes many of the moral problems presented in the story. One of these ethical dilemmas coalesces around the wrongful arrest and detention of many innocent people in the authorities' fervor to be seen to be doing something to address a major threat, to which we will return shortly. But first we must take a quick glance at the inhumane conditions that invariably obtain in the police cells into which both guilty and innocent detainees are thrown and which they must endure once held there. These cells are not only "so crowded" Nnamabia "often stood pressed against the cracked wall" but infested: "kwalikwata lived inside the cracks and their bites were vicious"—so much so "when he yelped his cell mates called him Milk and Banana Boy, University Boy, Yeye Fine Boy" (12).

Within a week in the cell, "bumps" are "spreading all over" Nnamabia's forehead (12). The food rations are appalling: each inmate "got two mouthfuls" of "the plates of garri and watery soup that were pushed into the cell everyday" (12). The place is so unsanitary, he tells his family, "I had to shit in a waterproof bag today, standing up. The toilet was too full. They flush it only on Saturdays" (13). Random and vicious muggings of detainees are routine policing practices. "Inside the sprawling station compound," the narrator reports, "two policemen were flogging somebody who was lying on the ground under the umbrella tree ... the boy who lay on the ground, writhing and shouting with each lash of the policeman's koboko" (17). The notoriety of Nigerian police cells as death chambers is such that it causes Nnamabia restless nights, and his "nightmares about Cell One," which supplies the title for the story, are not entirely unjustified: "Two policemen had carried out a swollen dead man" and "stopped by Nnamabia's cell to make sure the corpse was seen by all" (12).

The intimidatory actions by the police, threatening inmates with the dead body of another captive, send explicit messages about the entrenched corruption of the police, to which we will return in a moment. But first we must understand that the role of misguided parents is intrinsically tied to and facilitating of this police corruption. They clean up the mess created by their children, thereby taking away from these young people the opportunity to grow into responsible citizens equipped to take personal accountability for their own actions.

It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that parents reneging on their duties to discipline their children push these young people into the hands of law enforcement. Criminal activities by young people proliferate because those who bring them up pay only lip service to the type of peace expected of a disciplined and well-ordered organized society:

It was the season of cults on our serene Nsukka campus. It was the time when signboards all over the university read, in bold letters, SAY NO TO CULTS. The Black Axe, the Buccaneers, and the Pirates were the best known. They may once have been benign fraternities, but they had evolved and were now called "cults"; eighteen-year-olds who had mastered the swagger of American rap videos were undergoing secret and strange initiations that sometimes left one or two of them dead on Odim Hill.

Guns and tortured loyalties and axes had become common: a boy would leer at a girl who turned out to be the girlfriend of the Capone of the Black Axe, and that boy, as he walked to a kiosk to buy a cigarette later, would be stabbed in the thigh, and he would turn out to be a member of the Buccaneers, and so his fellow Buccaneers would go to a beer parlor and shoot the nearest Black Axe boy in the shoulder, and then the next day a Buccaneer member would be shot dead in the refectory, his body falling against aluminum bowls of soup, and that evening a Black Axe boy would be hacked to death in his room in a lecturer's Boys' Quarters, his CD player splattered with blood ... So the police were called in. They sped across campus in their rickety Peugeot 505, rusty guns poking out of the car windows, and glowered at the students. (7–8)

This is the background to the campus curfew that Nnamabia and several of his mates violate, ending up in police detention following a car-jacking by four cult gang members who use a professor's hijacked car to carry out a raid that kills students coming out of a lecture. An account by Nnamabia of his detention experience confirms the story of how law enforcement officers exploit the state of insecurity prevalent on the campus for their own personal aggrandizement.

The police are so corrupt and love money so much, as Nnamabia tells his family members visiting him in detention, that "Once you come in, you have to give them some money. If you don't, you're in trouble" (11). Nnamabia, realizing the people in uniform are so inordinately obsessed with money they could smoke it out of their captives, no matter where it is hidden in their clothes, says "he had slipped his money into his anus shortly after the arrest at the bar" to avoid its detection because "He knew the policemen would take it if he didn't hide it and he would need it to buy his peace in the cell" (11). He details giving the police money in exchange for privileges. Bribing the police boss, for example, eases the cell hardship a little, relieving him of some punishments; when "the men asked all of us newcomers to hold our ears and frog-jump to their singing, he let me go after ten minutes. The others had to do it for almost thirty minutes" (11).

Parents, like Nnamabia's own mother, who accept the giving of bribes as a legitimate means to facilitate their aspirations, make it harder for young people like her son to know any better. The narrator reveals,

My mother bribed the two policemen at the desk with money and with *jollof* rice and meat, all tied up in a black waterproof bag, and they allowed Nnamabia to come out of his cell and sit on a bench with us under an umbrella tree. (10)

"Cell One" gives an eye-popping glimpse into the rot hidden inside police detention camps, exposing a culture of arbitrariness, brutality, and violence that the system promotes as well as sustains itself by. The authorities make a great effort, for example, to create public impression that "Cell One," what they call a

“high-security holding place for criminal elements in society,” embodies its seriousness in dealing with the cults racking the community (16). But, beyond this façade, in case after case one innocent person after another is unjustifiably confined, with many made scapegoats in the mission to eradicate the bad guys. The narrator reports that “The cult problem was serious. Big men in Abuja were following events. Everybody wanted to appear to be doing something” (14).

The arrest and detention of Nnamabia and “some cult boys at a bar,” along with the bar attendant, is an illustration (9). They are first apprehended under the primary cover of violating a curfew but then all the detainees get lumped together; without distinction they are wrongly perceived as the bad guys and collectively subjected to the same regime of torture. It is not, however, until another innocent person, a 70-year-old man, is unfairly taken into custody and placed in detention in his cell, that Nnamabia gains clarity on the capricious way the police use their power, the practice of the force punishing people for crimes they did not commit. Although he is innocent, the 70-year-old is held because “His son was wanted for armed robbery, and when the police could not find the son, they decided to lock him up instead” (15).

It is the bullying of this old man by the police that aggravates Nnamabia the most. He notices that the man “had no money and could not buy bathing water”; “the other men made fun of him or accused him of hiding his son” though he “has not seen his son in four months”; but “the chief ignored him,” and “he looked frightened and so terribly small” (15). The policemen

splashed detergent water on the floor and the walls of the cell in the name of cleaning as they usually did and that old man, who could not afford water, who had not bathed in a week ... hurried into the cell and yanked his shirt off and rubbed his frail back against the detergent-wet floor. (16)

Instead of commiserating with the old man or tendering him a compassionate apology, however, the policemen ridicule him and subject him to other forms of public humiliation.

The policemen started to laugh ... and they asked him to take all his clothes off and parade in the corridor outside the cell, and as he did they laughed louder and asked whether his son the thief knew that papa’s penis was so shriveled. (16)

Police intimidation of inmates is legendary. When Nnamabia, for instance, ferociously distressed by the disrespect shown the old man, becomes vocal about police inconsistency and brutality, his action provokes a strong pushback by the institution.

In his effort to put the facts about the old man’s innocence in front of the authorities, Nnamabia finds out the hard way the fate of those who try to stand up for the weak by speaking truth to police power. His protests against the unjust detention and humiliation of the 70-year-old is punished by his relocation to

“Cell One.” His panic-stricken parents, too, receive their greatest shock learning that “he misbehaved yesterday and they took him to Cell One and then there was a transfer of all the people in Cell One to another site” (19). By the time his father realizes he could have handled his son differently (“This is what I should have done when he broke into the house,” he reflects) it is too late; Nnamabia is already a hardened criminal (11).

The foregoing, in part, provides the background to the grooming of the white-collar robbers that deplete government coffers, causing untold suffering to workers, both active and retired, across the country. The story of such agony reported in the piece entitled “Ghosts” is not atypical. In it, the mistreatment of retired university personnel is attributed to the dishonesty of the education minister who “has stolen pension money” and “the vice chancellor who had deposited the money in high-interest personal accounts,” forcefully reminding readers that the odds are stacked against the innocent workers (57–58). Science and superstition, observed fact and myth, collide in the story. A retired university mathematics professor and widower has not been paid his pension allowance for three years.

On the way to the university to inquire about the problem, he meets a man he believed to have been dead. But the man he mistakes for an apparition, Professor Ikenna Okoro, thought to have been killed by Nigerian federal troops when he defied orders to evacuate the Nsukka campus during the Nigeria-Biafra War, does not bring the mathematician much luck; the Bursary brings him no good news because of corruption in high official circles holding up the money.

This story paints a dreary picture of “a country that has not learned to say thank you, about the students in the hostels not paying ... on time for mending their shoes ... carpentry was not going well, children were ill, more money-lender troubles” and workers nursing “resentment, as they well should” (58–59). The use of the omniscient third-person narrator, as an observer, analyst, interpreter, and reporter of events, is augmented by lively dialogue. Direct exchanges among characters are animated, presenting not only rollicking exchanges of ideas and propitious moments of visceral and spectacular humor but also raising touchy subjects like the crippling effects of aging, family betrayal, memory’s tricks, and even erectile dysfunction being tested by a wife who “tickles my testicles, her fingers running over them,” knowing fully well her husband’s “prostate medication has deadened things down there, and she does this only to tease me, to laugh her gentle jeering laugh” (72).

The sicknesses gripping the country that form the main subjects of third-generation literature are brought up in this story’s most eloquent conversations, between the two cognitively agile academics, mathematics Professor James Nwoye and social scientist Professor Ikenna Okoro. Quite in keeping with their characters as representing the voices of wisdom that grows with age, Nwoye’s command of proverbs, for example, is stellar. At one time he states, “my people say that a famous animal does not always fill the hunter’s basket” (61). This saying deploys a pithy expression in conveying the essence of a respected former colleague, Professor Ikenna Okoro, a diminutive figure yet an intellectual heavyweight who towers above all his contemporaries (61).

The two academics catch up during a reunion, and they summon up everything one might want to know about perhaps the saddest moment in Nigerian history—their thoughts on the Nigeria-Biafra War. Exile assumes prominence, too, especially the dispersal of Igbo scholars around the world and their experiences, particularly in Europe and America. But dealing with unimaginable loss crops up as well. Professor Okoro's misfortune that motivated his escape to Sweden, from where he joined the war effort going on around Europe, exemplifies unusual gallantry. "My whole family was in Orlu when they bombed it. Nobody left, so there was no reason for me to come back" (63). He put aside the excruciating pain of the total annihilation of his family, and "organized the Biafran rallies all over the European capitals ... You heard about the big one at Trafalgar Square?" (64).

Although "the war took Zik," his daughter, Professor Nwoye survives the conflict but finds returning to Nsukka campus to live with the ruins of his academic documents amid the destruction of other property impossible to bear.

In fact, Ebere and I came back to Nsukka right after the war ended in 1970, but only for a few days. It was too much for us. Our books were in a charred pile in the front garden ... The lumps of calcified feces in the bathtub were strewn with the pages of my *Mathematical Annals*, used as toilet paper, crusted with smears blurring the formulas I had studied and taught ... So we left for America and did not come back until 1976. (63–64)

Whenever the sobering subject of the Nigerian civil war rears its ugly head, the tragic death of the towering literary figure Christopher Okigbo inevitably pops up, and the two academics do not omit to pay their due tribute. In their collaboration, they wax rhythmically melodic through the multiple chiasmus, in homage to Nigeria's priceless lost treasure, approximating the tenor of his lyric and dramatic poetry:

Chris Okigbo died, not so? ... Okigbo died, our genius, our star, the man whose poetry moved us all, even those of us in the sciences who did not always understand it ... Yes, the war took Okigbo ... We lost a colossus in the making ... Chris Okigbo, who could have worked at one of the directorates like the rest of us university people but instead took up a gun to defend Nsukka. (65)

The Nigerian federal troops implemented scorched-earth war policies, leveling town after town in their path, leaving behind nothing but ruins: "the blown-out roofs, the houses riddled with holes" as well as dead and wounded soldiers: one whose "blood dripped onto the backseat and, because the upholstery had a tear, soaked deep into the stuffing, mingled with the very insides of our car" (65). The agonizing subject of the human toll of the war does not go unbroached by the two eggheads.

The discussion of life after widowhood treats the harrowing pain on a personal level. The empty-nested Nwoye shares a recollection regarding surreal events after the loss of his wife Ebere, his inability to get over his denial.

When I heard the door downstairs close and open and close again ... The evening winds always did that. But there was no rustle of leaves outside my bedroom window, no *swish-swish* of the neem and cashew trees. There was no wind outside. Yet the door downstairs was opening and closing ... I heard the feet on the stairs, in much the same pattern as Ebere walked, heavier on each third step. I lay still in the darkness of our room. Then I felt my bedcover pulled back, the gentle massaging hands on my arm and legs and chest, the soothing creaminess of lotion, and a pleasant drowsiness overcame me ... I woke up, as I still do after her visits, with my skin supple and thick with the scent of Nivea. (67)

It is evident that the widower is having a hard time accepting the fact that his wife is no longer with him among the living. His account helps readers feel the anguish of the loss. But it also furnishes an understanding of the thin line that exists between dream and reality, imagination and fact, and it hints at memory's role in the human cognition of events. He refers to possible ghost appearance, but the drama is really the effect of memory's tricks being played by aging. The widower's determination to hold on to the past as he hangs on so tightly to his cherished memories of intimacy with his sadly departed wife, enunciates the romance of thought. Through his story author Adichie gets an opportunity to bring up for discussion the sensitive subject of our human mortality, which the mystery of aging with the attendant selective memory lapse that is induced by cognitive decline indicates.

For people on the secessionist side there is always the thought of "what might have been," and speculation is rife in the story regarding what the potential outcome of the Nigeria-Biafra War could have been. The conversations of the two intellectuals urge a reconsideration. For example,

what would have happened if we had won the war back in 1967? Perhaps we would not be looking for those opportunities [green pastures abroad, in America and Europe], and I would not need to worry about our grandson who does not speak Igbo, who, the last time he visited [from the USA with his mom] did not understand why he was expected to say "Good afternoon" to strangers, because in his world one has to justify simple courtesies. (67)

The question of alienation of future generations, the offspring of exiled Nigerians, remains unresolved, open-ended, like all the other indeterminate subjects raised in the conversation, not least among them the question of falling teaching and research standards among the "greenhorns" obsessed with and diverted by "university politics, politics, politics, while students buy grades with money or their bodies," and the deceit and corruption instituted by people like the autocratic chief university administrator who

ran this university like his father's chicken coop. Money disappeared and then we would see new cars stamped with the names of foreign foundations that did not exist. He dictated who would be promoted and who would be stagnated. In short, the man acted like a solo university council. (68–69)

Lecturers fraudulently “changing their official dates of birth” by bribing somebody to add five years because “Nobody wants to retire”; “fake drugs” in circulation as well as “selling expired medicine ... the latest plague of our country”; all represent aspects of this society's diseased body (69–70).

The articulate Professor Nwoye observes correctly that, in general, survivors of the Nigerian civil war “hardly talked about the war” (73). It is as though there is “a tacit agreement among all of the survivors of Biafra,” as if

what mattered were not that we had crouched in muddy bunkers during air raids after which we buried corpses with bits of pink on their charred skin, not that we had eaten cassava peels and watched our children's bellies swell from malnutrition, but that we had survived. (73)

Truly, considering that the horror of war—any war—is such an unspeakable subject that is avoided like plague by those who witness and outlive it, we owe Professors Nwoye and Okoro our debts of gratitude. They deserve accolades not only for the preservation of vital memories about the war. They merit praise for their courage to revisit the horror, taking the readers on a precious guided tour through the murky experience of the Biafran war. Through their authorial empowerment, much-needed information is made available about the difficulty of going through bombardments, losing loved ones, coping with the grief and the loneliness, enduring displacement, alienation, the aftermaths of the war such as post-traumatic stress disorder, the burdens of aging and memory, facing disappointment, the indignity of corruption, and the disequilibrium unleashed by one of the most challenging periods in Nigerian history.

Of course, surviving war is one thing; life after it has ended is another thing entirely. And to say that the quality of life for Nigerians subsequently has been challenging is an understatement. The sufferings of exile have imprinted themselves firmly in the imagination of many Nigerians. Horrific conditions in their home country push many to consider fleeing abroad. America is where the greatest majority would like to go. The story, “The American Embassy,” recounting visa horror stories, dramatizes how so many had simply had enough of the hardships of the Abacha regime (February 1994 to June 8, 1998) and were desperate to leave the country. “Buttoned-up men and women exchanged newspapers and denunciations of General Abacha's government, while young people in jeans, bristling with *savoir faire*, shared tips on ways to answer questions for the American resident visa,” readers learn (130).

Under the military dictatorship of Abacha, besides the clampdown on institutions like the press and education, the repression unleashed on intellectuals, and the high-handedness of the military in its treatment of the general civilian

population, human rights abuses were so rampant the surreal scene “across the street” from the American embassy is not atypical (129). This episode captures the general state of insecurity under the military regime of General Abacha that so cowed the public into docility while people’s civil rights were trampled upon, as a “small crowd” gathers to watch a soldier “flogging a bespectacled man with a long whip that curled in the air before it landed on the man’s face, or his neck” (129).

Readers are informed that such beatings of civilians by the military are not infrequent or atypical in the country, so much so that “people have become used to pleading with soldiers” (129). It seems the sole purpose of this exercise of brute power is the perverse satisfaction the soldier derives from it, “the glower on his face. The glower of a grown man who could flog another grown man if he wanted to, when he wanted to. His swagger was as flamboyant as that of the men who four nights ago broke her back door open and barged in” (131).

This story demonstrates that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for an average Nigerian seeking an American visa to secure papers to come to the United States. Effectively, what the extraordinary demand for an American visa in Nigeria has done is open up the citizens to exploitation of unimaginable scale and proportion. One complainant puts it mildly, stating of the visa fee that “Americans were collecting the money for their own use” (138). But the mistreatment of Nigerian visa seekers at the American embassy goes beyond monetary extortion. Hundreds of Nigerians stand in long lines, in extreme heat, waiting for hours on end, only to be told by embassy officials when they finally open the gate: “First fifty on the line, come in and fill out the forms. All the rest, come back another day. The embassy can attend to only fifty today” (138–139). There is complete disregard for the welfare or comfort of the visitors.

A haughty embassy spokesperson is not shy to tout the celebrated claim that the “United States offers a new life to victims of political persecution” (140). However, his boast is belied by the fact that not even the protagonist, the wife of a persecuted journalist who is on the run, and an obvious victim of state-sponsored terrorism, is approved for an asylum visa. At her interview, she is interrogated and treated with no sympathy whatsoever by a skeptical official who is insensitive to her hesitancy to exploit her personal tragedy, the death of her son, Ugonna, killed when the gun wielded by agents raiding her home in search of her husband “went off” (132). Like the Yoruba housewives defined by their children in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, this protagonist, too, has her identity wrapped around her son, so that at his death she loses more than a child: she is deprived of her identity as well, deepening her bereavement. But the embassy’s representative will not share her grief, his failure to extend the journalist’s wife even a small measure of empathy an act of barbarism.

The callousness of this embassy bureaucrat is made even worse by the demand for graphic descriptions of the terror, distress, trauma, and helplessness that overcame the interviewee during her encounter with the “three men in black trousers,” armed to the teeth and presumed to be secret service, that raided her home (131).

I am sorry about your son ... the visa interviewer said ... But I need some evidence that you know it was the government. There is fighting going on between ethnic groups, there are private assassinations. I need some evidence that you will be in danger if you stay on in Nigeria. (140)

But the American embassy's requirement to hear the shocking details of her son's death, and her husband's ordeal, is inexcusable because the story is already public knowledge with no shortage of documentation about the case. There is wide publicity in the daily papers of the victim's persecution as "the first journalist to publicly call the coup plot a sham, to write a story accusing General Abacha of inventing a coup so that he could kill and jail his opponents" (135). For his troubles, he is being aggressively hunted down by soldiers sent "to arrest him," forcing him to escape with his life to the neighboring Benin Republic. From there he hopes to leave for the United States, following a plan that his "visa to America, the one he got when he went for a training course in Atlanta, was still valid, and he would apply for asylum when he arrived in New York" (138).

This is the state of terror that evidently has many Nigerians living on edge, emblemized in the mortification of the story's protagonist, Ugonna's mother, whom readers meet in the visa queue at the American embassy just two days after she "buried her child in a grave near a vegetable patch in their ancestral hometown of Umannachi, surrounded by well-wishers" (131). She is afraid for her life and anxious to get out quickly to join her husband, who, readers learn, was smuggled out of Nigeria the previous day; he is escaping persecution for "a story" he "wrote in a newspaper" that earned him the label of "troublemaker" (132).

Citizens who speak the truth do not only come under physical harm; their information is suppressed, and the threats to the institutions and individuals associated with them are never lifted. For instance, the workplace of protagonist's husband, readers learn, is menaced by soldiers who came "to the newspaper office and carted away large numbers of that edition in a black truth truck" and when "photocopies got and circulated throughout Lagos" a "neighbor" who picked up "a copy posted on the wall of a bridge" had her "husband detained for two weeks," his rough treatment in custody "leaving a scar the shape of an L" on his forehead (135).

The repression wreaked by the military is one of the origins of the general discontent setting in motion the mass exodus of Nigerians into exile. So crowded is the embassy with visa seekers, retail shops have set up wares everywhere for them, turning the gate of the American embassy in Lagos into a mini-market where people can rent "white plastic chairs that cost one hundred naira per hour" as well as buy "sweets and mangoes and oranges" and other provisions (130). There are also "blind beggars led by children, singing blessings in English, Yoruba, pidgin, Igbo, Hausa when somebody put money in their plates," introducing an element of resort even to spiritual resources to facilitate visa applications (130). A "makeshift photo studio" is also in place for those in need of passport photos, with a bold sign: "EXCELLENT ONE-HOUR PHOTOS, CORRECT AMERICAN VISA SPECIFICATIONS" (130).

Many Nigerians longing to get away from their homeland are desperate enough to enlist the power of the supernatural in their endeavor as though it were a talismanic charm. Conspicuously, “a special church service called the American Visa Miracle Ministry” has even been established (133). And milling around the gate of the American embassy are “Rangy men in grimy long tunics who fingered prayer beads and quoted the Koran ... a blind couple led by their daughter, blue medals of the Blessed Virgin Mary hanging around their necks” (137). There are services for visa applicants of different religious persuasions. People are seeking visas for all kinds of reasons, and once in the queue their nervousness is palpable, and ad hoc unsolicited instructional sessions among the prospective interviewees, often spiced up with anecdotal tidbits, are also not in short supply.

One candidate seeking a tourist visa volunteers the following piece of advice to the other suitors: “Just make sure that you look the interviewer straight in the eye as you answer the questions. Even if you make a mistake, don’t correct yourself, because they will assume you are lying. I have many friends they have refused, for small-small reasons. Me, I am applying for a visitor’s visa. My brother lives in Texas and I want to go for a holiday” (134).

Other petitioners exploit family misfortunes, like the protagonist, who receives instructions appropriately tailored to her case. The volunteer tells her:

Don’t falter as you answer the questions ... Tell them all about Ugonna, what he was like, but don’t overdo it, because every day people lie to them to get asylum visa, about dead relatives that were never even born. Make Ugonna real. Cry, but don’t cry too much. (134)

It is an old song, and its tone is in line with the guidelines proffered to Nigerian prostitutes like Sisi to clear the way for their own asylum in Europe in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street*.⁴

There is a commonly repeated refrain about people’s awareness of geopolitical elements, concerning the racial discrimination implicated in the visa process. Whether people from Nigeria are seeking to go to America or Europe they know that racial profiling of the applicants always seems to come into the equation. These Nigerian visa contenders are all in agreement regarding their belief about the general unfairness of the process but feel helpless to change it. They identify and acknowledge the economic consideration that factors into the American visa awards. Their complaints are loud: “They don’t give our people immigrant visas anymore, unless the person is rich by American standards. But I hear people from European countries have no problems getting visas. Are you applying for an immigrant visa or a visitor’s?” (134). The exemption of African elites from the visa denials applied to their underprivileged compatriots is telling. The relative facility in the treatment of those who have money to spend abroad indicates that empires’ exploitative tendencies may have taken new forms, but, for all of the avowed humanitarian passions said to drive the West’s ventures in Africa, profit still remains its chief motivation.

Adichie's stories show readers Nigerians, rich and poor, wrestling with overwhelming pressures at home that push them to line up in droves at the gates of foreign embassies. The story "The American Embassy" presents a scathing multi-pronged diatribe at the socio-political situations that foment immigration in Nigeria and the mentality of expatriation holding the citizens captive, their longing to emigrate. And it is the strongest rebuke made in Nigerian fiction of the unprofessionalism of officials at an American institution, in this case the American embassy in Nigeria, since J. P. Clark published *America, Their America*.⁵ Clark's travel account stresses the paternalism and racial arrogance of American personnel, and Adichie's tale exposes with uncanny realistic force their inhumane response to the hardships of Nigerian people, and even the undue financial advantage taken of some of the most vulnerable.

Many Nigerians who manage to get over the visa hump arrive in America to encounter a different set of problems. Multi-ethnic marriage is one of these difficulties, and the story "Tomorrow is Too Far" highlights the complexities of the matrimony of an Igbo man and an African-American woman. The problems of cross-cultural understanding and the complications tied to them transcend the couple, though the cultural incompatibilities which dissolve the union are serious enough in themselves. Even their children see the break-up coming. The narrator, "the clear-eyed child," can read between the lines of her mother's defensive statements, saying: "Maybe it was because of the way she said the divorce was not about Nonso—as though Nonso was the only one capable of being a reason, as though you were not in the running" (193–194).

The narrator's hypothetical mode of narration, as in the volume's title-bearing story "The Thing Around Your Neck," on which more will be said later, reifies the swirl of extreme pain, anger, bitterness, and even shame and embarrassment that she feels. The suppositional device of self-distancing expresses her emotional tangle, her desire to wish away the traumatizing experience of being caught up in the mess reported. She uses this style to convey her wish the things told about had never happened to her; that she never witnessed them, and they never involved her.

In "Tomorrow Is Too Far," the female narrator is intentionally nameless. She thus raises the old question of what is in a name. The scholar J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada answers this question nicely. "The question, 'What's in a name,'" he says,

treated rhetorically in Western culture, would embarrass an Igbo person—modern or traditional. The Igbo always make an unconscious effort to know the meaning of a name they hear a person call himself. Again, they believe that a name can determine one's fortunes or behavior.⁶

In other words, a name is bound up with its owner's identity.

From the illumination provided above about the importance of names in Igbo culture, one can see why being without a name, as happens with the narrator of "Tomorrow Is Too Far," is not unremarkable. It carries a powerful statement.

It is a daughter's outcry against an institutionalized system of male dominance that she feels strips females bare of their identities. The culture that reduces females into objects who feel like they live in the shadow of their brothers is dehumanizing for a significant portion of its population. Within the context of the story, the narrator's namelessness conveys a compelling message. It underlines her anonymity, signifying the taking away of her personhood. It is as though, in the world of her family, the narrator literally doesn't exist: she is a non-entity. A name is the most basic identifying indicator a person possesses; in the Western world, even animals like pets have names. That is why the absence of a name in a human being is extraordinary. The entity involved cannot be reduced to a lower denominator. The contrast between the lowly status of the narrator and her significantly acknowledged important brother Nonso could not be starker. But is she not wallowing in cross-cultural misunderstanding? An attempt will be made to address this question. Through her narrative, the narrator certainly contributes to a perpetuation of cultural misapprehension.

This is the sense in which the narrator's story is allegorical, an every-woman's story's that says one thing but hides a deeper meaning. Her story cannot be taken at face value. She basically tells of things that happen to all in a situation similar to hers, all who see one culture through the lens of another. She is an American in Africa, and her emphasis in the tale is thus on the broad outlines rather than the specificity of the occurrences—since in her view the society seems to deny her personal recognition as a human being. She sees herself as standing in for and standing up for all the girls living under the gun of patriarchy and the patrilineage orders that she is convinced take away rights of succession and inheritance from daughters and marginalize them economically, socially, and politically.

The unsettling complications which involve the narrator's parents, and are reported through her eyes as the more traumatized of their two children—thus derive their significance from being illustrative of dealing with fraught episodes in marriage across cultural boundaries as distinct from those to be expected from issues in marriages within the same cultural boundaries. Just as both of these children find themselves caught in the crossfire, as it were, and are severely hurt (though one is visibly more so than the other), it makes sense to expect all children of couples in similar contexts to go through the same or similar misapprehensions.

This allegorical framework informs the bare outlines of the events surrounding the visit to Nigeria of the couple's offspring. Beyond this summer trip, little else about their lives in America is known. They are like silhouettes. What happens to them, and the symbolic implications, matter more than who they are individually. The two young people represent types; they are not so much drawn for their individuality or singularity as to underline their representative nature. They are archetypal figures. First, they go to Nigeria together on a summer trip, to spend time with their paternal grandmother. There is nothing special about such a trip; lots of children travel from one country to another. But only one of the two children returns alive to America, as the other's body is brought

back in a box to be buried in Virginia. Now that is a big deal, a tragic episode difficult for any family to deal with. Then, the surviving one goes back to her fatherland immediately upon her grandmother's death there, 18 years after her first visit which she had carried out in the company of her now deceased brother. All the events in the intervening years are, however, unknown to readers—as is to be expected in a short story of allegorical import.

One of the ironies in this story that is distinctively life-like is that it is Dozie, the apparently spurned grandson in his maternal household, who not only survives but thrives, though the narrator wonders what the effects of a culture that marginalizes women and their children in their father's family line could be on a seemingly victimized son like him. "You wonder what, if anything, he felt about being the wrong grandson, the one who did not bear the Nnabuisi name," she says (192). But the narrator doesn't indicate awareness that in his own father's house Dozie has succession and inheritance rights. Indeed, as shown by protagonist Okonkwo's bitter seven years of exile in his own mother's village, Mbanta, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, an Igbo man's maternal home is a place he retreats to only in times of trouble, and from which he must return immediately upon the cessation of the trouble to his real home with his father's people.⁷ For this reason, in "Tomorrow Is Too Far" the narrator's nephew Dozie is only visiting at Grandma's and should know that he cannot be defined by how he is treated there.

But could it be the case that this crucial cultural information is unknown to the young narrator, or is it just an inconvenient fact? And is the narrator unaware that Igbo people are not yet afflicted by the hyper self-consciousness about personal recognition that Americans generally exhibit? In other words, does she not know that the values stressed in her own upbringing in the United States are not exactly the same as those of Igbo people? The narrator doesn't seem old enough to know these things, and the lapse in her knowledge can be interpreted as part of the cross-cultural misunderstanding that dooms her parents' marriage and complicates her own life as well as her brother Nonso's. Her deepest reflections in this story, which are on the stress of patriarchy and the delineation of the torture of feeling invisible as a female in a culture that is both patriarchal and patrilineal, seem to issue from a similar perspective.

Most important of all, the young narrator alleges being treated with ignominy, and dwells on the favoritism enjoyed by her brother, which is so hard for her to take she hopes that "something had to happen to Nonso, so that you could survive. Even at ten you knew that some people can take up so much space by simply being, that by existing, some people can stifle others" (195). Her murder of her brother is thus premeditated. But her envy is so heightened, even after his tragic death in the fall from the avocado tree that she goads him to climb, she wants to bury her memory of him forever. She

did not want to have any of his books with his handwriting that your mother said was neater than typewritten sentences. You did not want his photographs of pigeons in the park that your father said showed so much

promise for a child. You did not want his paintings, which were mere copies of your father's only in different colors. Or his clothes. Or his stamp collection. (193)

Apart from being the parents' pet child, the narrator discovers that privileges are extended to Nonso at the expense of both herself, his sister, and their cousin Dozie, who is even older than his favored cousin. Their grandmother says she has a partiality for him because "Nonso was her son's only son, the one who would carry on the Nnabuisi name, while Dozie was only a nwadiana, her daughter's son" (188). The grandmother therefore feels it incumbent upon her to induct Nonso, the heir-apparent of the family name, into the traditions of his inheritance. Thus, she "let only your brother Nonso climb the trees to shake a loaded bunch, although you were a better climber than he was," relegating her, as female, to the role of gatherer as "Fruits would rain down, avocados and cashews and guavas, and you and your cousin Dozie would fill old buckets with them" (187). This gender prejudice is a source of the narrator's embittered relationship with her brother. Her intense sibling rivalry is provoked by Grandmama's indulgence: "Eat a little more, she would say often. Who do you think I made it for?" (195). And the narrator is not insensitive to the gender differentiation in their treatment by even their own mother at bedtime.

When she went into Nonso's room to say good night, she always came out laughing that laugh. Most times, you pressed your palms to your ears to keep the sound out, and kept your palms pressed to your ears when she came into your room to say Good night, darling, sleep well. She never left your room with that laugh. (190)

feeding the myth of some diabolical traditions, the narrator tells a blatant lie to prove the threat to the tradition comes from their grandmother, the one who should and does put up such a defiant effort to defend it. She misinforms her mother

that Grandmama had asked Nonso to climb to the highest branch of the avocado tree to show her how much of a man he was. Then she frightened him—it was a joke, you assured your mother—by telling him that there was a snake, the *echi eteka*, on the branch close to him. She asked him not to move. Of course he moved and slipped off the branch, and when he landed ... Grandmama stood there and stared at him and started to shout at him about how he was the only son, how he betrayed the lineage by dying, how the ancestors would be displeased. (194)

This mixture of twisted facts and myths does little to dispel the fog of cross-cultural misunderstanding in Nonso's mother's apprehension of events, heightening the revulsion she feels toward Grandmama, and toward Igbo and Nigerian cultures in general. But it isn't too far removed from facts the narrator

has observed, an encounter that whipped up the jealousy that guided her plot to hurt her brother. That summer, for example, the sister and narrator, cast aside, had watched from the sidelines as their grandmother taught “Nonso how to pluck the coconuts” (187). “The coconut trees were hard to climb, so limb-free and tall, and Grandmama gave Nonso a long stick and showed him how to nudge the padded pods down” (187–188). And when Grandmama “cracked the coconuts against a stone, carefully, so the watery milk stayed in the lower piece” for “Everybody” to get “a sip of the wind-cooled milk, even the children from down the street,” she also “presided over the sipping ritual to make sure Nonso went first” (188).

Throughout the story it is evident that the narrator feels squeezed into invisibility by the presence of her brother, so much so that, tired of living unnoticed, she plots to eliminate him. She all but seals her brother’s fate when she tricks him into a tree-climbing competition with her on condition that he should go first. “Grandmama was inside cooking and Dozie was standing silently close to you, your shoulders touching, when you suggested Nonso climb to the top of the avocado tree. It was easy to get him to; you only had to remind him that you were the better climber” (195). Once “he was nearly at the top,” the sister sends him into panic with a warning that the deadly snake is nearby: “A snake! It’s the *echi eteka!* A snake!” (196). It’s a prank, but once uttered it is irreversible because “in those few seconds, Nonso looked down at you and let go, his foot slipping, his arms freeing themselves” (196). He falls on a rock, cracking his skull and dying instantly. But the actual details about Nonso’s death and the person responsible for provoking it are never divulged to her mother, who continues to believe that a certain primitive ritual sacrifice conducted by his evil grandmother is to blame—permanently clouding cross-cultural understanding of Africa by the African-American communities.

Not only does the narrator’s sense of herself encode victimhood, but she obviously oversimplifies Igbo customs. At the end of the tale, all she is left with is intense guilt. She admits to herself that she murdered her own brother, but she bottles up this admission of culpability so it is not expiated. She therefore only views herself as a survivor, which is not the same thing as recognizing the agency in oneself. Her lamentations over her own predicament strikingly demonstrate what it means for a young Nigerian-American female to be exposed to Nigerian-Igbo culture at its base for the first time. The subjection to cultural shock of a patrilineal and patriarchal order seems overwhelming to someone like the narrator who is new to such an experience. The connotation of what she portrays and mourns here as her catastrophe finds the intersection of cross-cultural misunderstandings and a wounded female subjectivity. Her story takes a cheerless view of the immigrant experience, of marriage across cultures, and their ramifications for the offspring of those involved in these desperate undertakings.

It is the objective of the story “The Arrangers of Marriage” to show that things are no better when, by contrast, a Nigerian immigrant decides to look back home for a wife. A home-based Nigerian woman who takes the route of marriage to a compatriot but a total stranger already living in America is the

subject. She comes face to face with bitter frustration, and author Adichie's feminism shines through in the way everything is seen and presented from this new wife's perspective in this story. An Igbo woman, Chinaza Agatha Okafor, gets entangled in an arranged marriage that takes her to the United States, and becomes the focal point for a pointed and elaborate survey of American cultural habits. Through her eyes, American customs are portrayed anthropologically. In a reversal of the tradition of Western travelers in Africa observing and reporting the "quaint" customs of "primitive" peoples, instead the story presents an African who is new to America musing in puzzlement over the strange everyday customs of America that she observes and is made to participate in.

Chinaza begins by reporting her colossal disappointment owing to the divergence between her imagination of America and reality on the ground, how the place is and the image of it represented to her, and the cultural self-disinheritance that her new husband believes the immigrant life entails and that in his view she has to purposefully undertake. The mother of an Igbo man resident in America, a financially struggling physician named Ofodile, "was looking for a wife for him" as she was "very concerned that he would marry an American. He hadn't been home in eleven years." She gives the protagonist his photo (169–170).

Aunty Ada and Uncle Ike, who raise Chinaza, deny her a chance to further her education in order to be married to him. She is not allowed "to take the JAMB exam again and try for university" after serving them well "while going to secondary school" by hawking and selling "more bread in Aunty Ada's bakery than all the other bakeries in Enugu" (170). But they still feel that finding the protagonist "an *ezigbo di* ... A doctor in America ... is like we won a lottery for you!" (170).

Chinaza agrees to marry Ofodile not knowing this is his second marriage, and the "American woman" he "married to get a green card" is lurking in the wings preparing to make "trouble" (182). She will discover the reasons he gives for marrying her are based on the illusion that she is a virgin and also "light-skinned," as he "had to think about my children's looks" because "Light-skinned blacks fare better in America." The marriage is foredoomed from the start (184). It is only a matter of time before she leaves him when she gets her papers.

Chinaza's first shock comes as she arrives at his Brooklyn apartment in New York in a taxi and is led by her

new husband ... into the brownstone, up a flight of brooding stairs, down an airless hallway with frayed carpeting, and stopped at a door. The number is 2B, unevenly fashioned from yellowish metal plastered on it ... We're here ... he said ... He had used the word 'house' when he told me about our home. (167)

She "had imagined a smooth driveway snaking between cucumber-colored lawns, a door leading into a hallway, walls with sedate paintings. A house like

those of the white newly-weds in the American films that NTA showed on Saturday nights” (176).

In truth, “He turned on the light in the living room, where a beige couch sat alone in the middle, slanted, as though dropped there by accident. The room was hot; old, musty smells hung in the air” (167). Readers also learn that “One of the dining table legs was shorter than the rest, and so the table rocked, like a seesaw, when he leaned on it” (172). The neighborhood is “a noisy street that smelled of fish left out too long before refrigeration” (173). “His car rattled as he drove, as though there were many parts that had come loose—a sound similar to shaking a tin full of nails” (175). It appears, Chinaza Agatha Okafor comes to find out belatedly, the man she has married is not as rich as he had been claimed to be.

Stylistically, the tale that lies behind this story, “The Arrangers of Marriage,” has several versions. In African folklore, all the renditions tend to confirm one standard conclusion: the folly of girls who allow pride to get the better of them by rejecting all suitors from their localities and opting instead to go with strangers who arrive as suitors, immaculately dressed, only for appearances to be thoroughly deceiving. All the variants tend to express the imminent destruction of a fantasy world. In the variation with the worst scenario, the handsome and rich-looking man that the girl chooses as the husband who takes her home is actually merely a skull, coming to seek marriage disguised with body parts borrowed along the way that he is obligated to return to their owners on the way home from his successful trip. He would, therefore, ask the girl to walk in front of him and never look back until they get to their destination. They finally reach his home in a region to which no one taken ever returns. She realizes too late that she has married a monster. In some versions of the tale she is held hostage forever, denied a way to make good her escape.

Adichie, of course, situates her work firmly in the written mode, and adopts the first-person narrative viewpoint that is an essential feature of modern storytelling. The first-person participant narrator is not typically employed in the folktale versions because the victim never returns to tell her story, and the events that happen to her are only observed by a third-person omniscient narrator. Adichie thus clearly prioritizes the emotional element seldom encountered in the oral tradition. In her story, instead of the usual clinical, adult narrator’s didactic diagnoses of the consequences of pride presented in folklore, the modern short-story author lets the full drama of the crises play out before the reader.

The modern storytelling form is defined in part by its extensive excursions into the minds of characters, through innovations such as emphasis on the drama of human consciousness via the media of dialogue or conversation, internal monologue, detailed description, and the complexity of narrative angles. This is seen in the protagonist’s reaction in “The Arrangers of Marriage” to her predicament after being shown around her disappointing new home.

“Okay,” I said. I felt light-headed. The ten-hour flight from Lagos to New York and the interminable wait while the American customs officer raked through my suitcase had left me woozy, stuffed my head full of cotton wool.

The officer had examined my foodstuffs as if they were spiders, her gloved fingers poking at the waterproof bags of ground egusi and dried onugbuh leaves and uziza seeds, until she seized my uziza seeds. She feared I would grow them on American soil. It didn't matter that the seeds had been sun-dried for weeks and were as hard as a bicycle helmet. (168)

Chinaza's outburst in Igbo, "Ike Agwum," while "placing my handbag down on the bedroom floor," translates into English as "I am afraid" (168). But it is bedtime with her new husband that will petrify her even more. The discomfort begins with hearing "my new husband's snoring. It started like a deep rumble in his throat, then ended on a high pitch, a sound like a lewd whistle. They did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage. No mention of offensive snoring, no mention of houses that turned out to be furniture-challenged flats" (168).

More uncannily, the indecorous and impolite effort of her new husband to be intimate with the protagonist feels more like a sexual assault. Absent any foreplay or even any participation on her part,

My husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine. His chest flattened my breasts ... Good morning ... I said, opening sleep-crusted eyes. He grunted, a sound that might have been a response to my greeting or part of the ritual he was performing. He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist ... Wait ... I said, so that I could take my nightdress off, so it wouldn't seem so hasty. But he crushed his mouth down on mine. Another thing the arrangers of marriage failed to mention—mouths that told the stories of sleep, that felt clammy like chewing gum, that smelled like the rubbish dumps at the Ogbete Market. (169)

As if this is not disgusting enough, readers learn that during this not entirely consensual sex scene, the protagonist's new husband's

breathing rasped as he moved, as if his nostrils were too narrow for the air that had to be let out. When he finally stopped thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs. I did not move until he climbed off me to go into the bathroom. I pulled my nightdress down, straightened it over my hips. (169)

From these proceedings one can surmise that the protagonist's husband sees her as just a sexual object or punchbag, to exploit whenever his libidinal urges are aroused, rather than a cooperative or participating partner for whose feelings he has any concern.

That is why, seemingly relieved by the sexual act he has performed on the protagonist, the "new husband" returns from the bathroom in a more cheerful mood to say "Good morning, baby," and as payment in kind for her sexual services grants her use of the phone to call her family in Nigeria, handing her

the receiver with instructions to be frugal with the minutes: “We have to call your uncle and aunt to let them know we arrived safely. Just a few minutes; it costs almost a dollar a minute to Nigeria” (169).

The motif of cultural relativism, an element Adichie has borrowed from the work of her idol Chinua Achebe, is developed around the habits of Americans Chanaza observes for the first time and reacts to, making comparisons with Igbo ways of life along the way. In America, Chinaza Agatha Okafor has a lot of cultural adjustments to make. She is introduced to microwave cooking, use of public transportation like buses by pressing a button at her bus stop instead of shouting to the conductor as is done in Nigeria, grocery shopping, and raising her head while walking around to “get used to things faster” (173). She begins to learn cultural phrasings in American English, as opposed to the British English equivalents familiar to her, and to dress half-clad like their neighbor “who lived in 2D” and looks like “an ashawo, because of the see-through top she wore so that her bra, a mismatched shade, glared through,” confirming her seeming prostitute status by her “lipstick, a shimmery orange, and the eye-shadow—similar to the shade of the lipstick—that clung to her heavy lids” (180).

Chinaza’s response to the practice of eating out in fast-food joints like the “food court” brings out another area of culture shock (176). She deplores the absence of privacy, nauseated by the spectacle of “A sea of people sitting around circular tables, hunched over paper plates of greasy food” (176). Chinaza finds this habit so puzzling, and contrasts it with the food etiquette of the Igbo people, citing the example of her uncle Ike who “would be horrified at the thought of eating here” because “he was a titled man and did not even eat at weddings unless he was served in a private room. There was something humiliatingly public, something lacking in dignity, about this place, this open space of too many tables and too much food” (176).

Correspondingly, assimilation into the culture of the host entails self-abnegation of the immigrant. The language question is the most consequential in this exercise of the immigrant’s self-renunciation. Chinaza is instructed by her new husband: “You have to speak English at home, too, baby. So you can get used to it” (178). A language that goes unspoken is of course on its way to being lost, becoming extinct. Not speaking one’s language is the fastest route to losing touch with one’s culture as well. Another is to lose touch with the foods of one’s original homeland. Not surprisingly, Chinaza’s longing to remain connected to the culture of her home compels her to adjust accordingly. As she reports of her communication with her new husband, “We spoke only English now; he did not know that I spoke Igbo to myself while I cooked, that I had taught Nia to say ‘I’m hungry’ and ‘See you tomorrow’ in Igbo” (182).

The self-imposed pressure to adjust to what the immigrant thinks is mainstream “American food” is simultaneously another reflection of the invisible hand of the host culture conditioning the immigrant to abandon the culture of the place of origin in favor of the adopted land. Chinaza cooks a delicious Igbo meal of rice and her new husband enjoys it so much as to be “even smacking his lips like Uncle Ike sometimes did to show Auntie Ada how pleased he was with

her cooking,” but “the next day, he came back with *Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook*,” voicing his fear about being “known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food” (179). A visitor to their home, Shirley, coming to get help to repair her air-conditioning, is attracted by the aroma of the cooking. “It smells really good,” she says, adding, “The problem with us here is we have no culture, no culture at all” (179). Shirley even vouches for the superiority of this Igbo dish to anything currently on the menu in the country. Here therefore is an opportunity for the Igbo people to have their own quota contributed to the account of the world’s ethnic dishes.

But, instead, Chinaza’s new husband betrays nothing short of an inferiority complex. In his over-eagerness to do what he believes will be pleasing to his hosts, he expresses his hope that his new wife will “soon master how to cook American food” (179). By his insistence, he unwittingly suppresses the cultural circulation of a major Igbo dish, also subjecting his new wife to further cultural alienation from her roots. In no time, she actually begins to place “his French fries and fried chicken before him” (182). Anxiety about self-identification with one’s culture is definitely not helpful either to one’s attachment to that native culture or to its promotion worldwide. The subject which Adichie introduces here is African migrants in America failing to capitalize upon an opportunity to do what other immigrants like Italians and Mexicans do, which is to push their victuals to serve as the proud ambassadors of their nations. The participation of these two migrant communities in the flavors of modernity is legendary. If Italians, for example, had thought so poorly of their native edibles as to deliberately avoid exposing them to the international community, pizza would never have moved beyond the status of a local Italian delicacy. Neither would tacos, for instance, be among the most popular ethnic foods in America if Mexicans had not summoned the courage to donate their dishes to the American menu.

Nevertheless, Adichie’s story also undertakes to expose the entrenched racism that conditions African migrants to accept and normalize the demeaning things they do to please their hosts in order to be accommodated in the new culture. Name changes are the most disconcerting among these, and what really horrify Chinaza the most. It’s not clear why her husband believes it’s the only way he can advance himself; why he thinks it is particularly important that Americans can pronounce his name well—as if anyone really cares about others in a self-centered, egocentric country like the United States. She herself has her name changed by him to “Agatha Bell” (173). But the name change is particularly inexplicable to her on seeing people like their neighbor Nia, “a black American” who had “chosen an African name, while my husband made me change mine to an English one” (180). One is reminded of the colonial mentality of Ghanaians who baptize themselves with similar English names in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.⁸

Chinaza learns in the same way that her new husband has taken a new identity for himself: “I’m not called Ofodile here ... I go by Dave,” her new husband tells her: “Americans have a hard time with Udenwa, so I changed it”

(172). She cannot hide her bafflement: “Bell!” she questioned, “I had heard about a Waturuocha that changed to Waturu in America, a Chikelugo that took the more American-friendly Chikel, but from Udenwa to Bell? That’s not even close to Udenwa,” she states (172). Her new husband explains to her the rationale behind these acts of mimicry and cultural assimilation: “If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You have to use your English name here” (172).

In addition to this identity swap, Chinaza discovers to her surprise that money is very tight. The immigrant life is aspirational, based on hoping for things that may or may not materialize. Social mobility is a dream that remains in view. The issue of limiting minutes of international calls to Nigeria because of the cost is not an isolated case. Buying groceries, her new husband asks her to be frugal by picking the cheaper store brands. He tells her he is awaiting promotion to buy real quality groceries: “When I become Attending, we will stop buying store brands, but for now we have to; these things may seem cheap but they add up” (174). As an intern, his pay is “like three dollars an hour,” he says (174). He is also aspiring to move up and upgrade his housing:

Also when I become an Attending, we will not live in a neighborhood like this ... See how they have bars so you can’t take the shopping carts out? In the good neighborhoods, they don’t have them. You can take your shopping cart all the way to your car. (175)

However, he makes a misjudgment with his demeaning comments about Hispanics; he “gestured, dismissively, toward a woman and her two children, who were speaking Spanish,” asserting “They will never move forward unless they adapt to America. They will always be doomed to supermarkets like this” (175). What Ofodile doesn’t realize is that only by maintaining their ways of life, including their language, have the Hispanic population in America imposed their language, the Spanish language, on their adopted home, to the extent that Spanish is now the second official language of communication in the United States. The authority of Spanish as a medium of converse in the United States is such that it is taught through the grade school system up to college, rendering a lesson about native language use that African migrants could profitably emulate.

The repetitions, recapitulations, and theatrics that confer dynamism on the live oral performance event must give way to the relative stiffness and rigidity of the cold print, so in “The Arrangers of Marriage” Adichie makes recourse to supplementary storytelling techniques. She enlivens her delivery with psychological penetration, unveiling the inner being and consciousness of her characters. She also prioritizes touching observations of the quotidian, the force of the telling image, all activated through the innocent eyes of a Johnny-just-come viewpoint.

Affluent Nigerians who take their pregnant wives out of the country for on “birth tourism” vacations are the focal point of the gossipy story “Imitation.” They want to give birth to their babies in America so that the children can have

United States citizenship. But they often end up in an even worse situation. The challenges that attend life away from one's home country tend to catch up with them as well, and in a special way. The story displays the inauthenticity of the values governing the lifestyles of these relatively economically well-to-do Nigerians, males and females alike. In the years following the end of the ill-fated Biafran independence war, "Imitation" indicates, immigration has become a ruling passion in Nigeria.

The pattern of life that the privileged in the country have adopted is unquestionably apocryphal, as illustrated in the examples of a rich businessman, government contractor, and notorious playboy, known as Obiora, and his wife, Nkem. The portrait of this couple resembles the device of the objective correlative, popularized by T. S. Eliot in his poetry. The substitution of imitations for the originals, of copies or fakes for the genuine, finds concrete analogy in the story in the counterfeit African art objects the nouveau riche social climbers like Obiora and his cohorts obsessively adorn their houses with. Replica Benin carvings, in particular, are represented as trivial pastiche objects in transit around the world, practically replacing these people in their houses as the owners themselves refuse take the substantive action of actually staying there to make them genuine homes.

Thoughtful meditations and incisive comments by Nkem and Obiora himself on African art help juxtapose the circulation of these forgeries with the history of British colonialism and the thefts and appropriations of the original Benin carvings taken from Nigeria that are now on display in museums in the rich Western nations. Through the symbolism pairing the prototypical and the lookalike works of art, the story establishes the intersection of the public and the private, suggesting how it is unreasonable to expect people untrustworthy in their private lives to be faithful in the domain of public duty.

Obiora and Nkem boast membership of two exclusive clubs. Though they have been inducted into "the Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have their Babies league" and "the rich Nigerian Men Who Owned Houses in America league," infidelity has rendered their marriage inauthentic (26). Obiora "first came to America" with his pregnant wife Nkem so she could deliver her baby as an American citizen; so they rented a house that they later bought "in a lovely suburb near Philadelphia" (24). But Obiora soon abandons Nkem and the child and returns to settle down like a single man in Nigeria. He now shuttles only irregularly between Lagos and Philadelphia. His absence exposes his wife to the curiosity of her affluent white neighbors, who snigger that there is something odd in a black couple living separately (24).

The most unseemly element in this story, however, is supplied by a snitch who really pushes the envelope with what is customarily considered to be an undisclosable secret. Against her better judgment, she talks about inconvenient facts that the listener doesn't really want to know. Deep down in her heart, of course, Nkem knows all too well and has a difficult time facing the bitter truth about her husband's unfaithfulness. Her informant is a gossipy woman named Ijemamaka. She is a friend and compatriot of Nkem's living in the United States.

But on a visit to their Nigerian homeland, she acts very impolitely, and discloses rather incautiously in a telephone conversation details about her friend's husband's hot girlfriend.

Ijemamaka's portrait of Nkem's rival, stressing the salacious, is intended to stir up jealousy. She paints a picture of a seductive female, irresistible to her friend's husband. The mistress is

really young. Twenty-one or so ... Her hair is short and curly—you know, those small tight curls. Not a relaxer. A texturizer, I think. I hear young people like texturizers now ... I know men and their ways, but I heard she has moved into your house. This is what happens when you marry a rich man. (22)

And the gossip achieves its desired effect, the seriousness of marital betrayal reflected in Nkem's reaction. She is ravaged by indecorous thoughts about this rumored competitor she does not even know.

Her mind wanders to the bedroom in Nigeria, hers and Obiora's, that still feels like a hotel room every Christmas. Does this girl clutch her pillow in sleep? Do this girl's moans bounce off the vanity mirror? Does this girl walk to the bathroom on tiptoe as she herself had done as a single girl when her married boyfriend brought her to his house for a wife-away weekend? ... Nkem feels a fierce possessiveness now, imagining this girl locked in Obiora's arms, on the bed. (31–32)

The stress is so heavy the barriers of class, the partitions, are broken down, and Nkem unburdens her heart to Amaechi, her housemaid, about the rumors of her husband's unfaithfulness reaching her, admitting to the American influences forcing "egalitarianism" on her to treat the housemaid as her "friend" and "equal" (29).

But it is Amaechi's response in itself that is more noteworthy. Not only does the housemaid think the disclosure of the allegation by her employer's friend is in bad faith, but she expresses surprise that the subject should be mentioned to her at all. Amaechi says they both know infidelity among married men is undisputed and not really a big deal, too obvious to require noticing as it is the natural order of things. "You will forgive him, madam," she says, adding: "Men are like that" (34). Amaechi expresses her belief that

Oga Obiora is a good man, madam, and he loves you, he does not use you to play football ... Many women would be jealous, maybe your friend Ijemamaka is jealous. Maybe she is not a true friend. There are things she should not tell you. There are things that are good if you don't know. (35)

Here, an important matter concerning the spirit of the country is brought into view in the story: the totally rotten condition of widespread lasciviousness.

Sexual immorality has reached such unprecedented heights that it has come to be expected, and all revolves around the habitual deplorable things women do to other women, and men do to other men. Single girls do to married women terrible things like carrying on casual affairs with their husbands. In the same way, married men recklessly make mistresses of girls who will be future wives of other men, all little caring at the time that what goes around comes around. But in the future other single girls will do the same thing to the single girls who are fornicating now, when they themselves become married women, and married men can expect that the same things they do to single girls are already done to their wives, repeating a circle of women and men betraying one another that goes on in perpetuity.

The story raises the intertwined matter of crippling economic inequity, particularly the money problems of underprivileged young women which pushes them into such immoral behavior. So many Nigerian women can identify with being forced in their teenage years by monetary exigencies into having allowed themselves, like Nkem did, to be passed from one rich older man to another. In Nigerian parlance, being “a side chick” isn’t an uncommon phenomenon:

She dated married men before Obiora—what single girl in Lagos hadn’t? Ikenna, a businessman, had paid her father’s hospital bills after the hernia surgery. Tunji, a retired army general, had fixed the roof of her parents’ home and bought them the first real sofas they had ever owned. She would have considered being his fourth wife—he was a Muslim and could have proposed—so that he would help her with her younger siblings’ education. She was the *ada*, after all, and it shamed her, even more than it frustrated her, that she could not do any of the things expected of the First Daughter, that her parents still struggled on the parched farm, that her siblings still hawked loaves of bread at the motor park. But Tunji did not propose. There were other men after him, men who never proposed because she had gone to secretarial school, not a university. Because despite her perfect face she still mixed up her English tenses; because she was still, essentially, a Bush Girl. (31)

Nkem’s premarital experience as serial secret lover of many married men is offered in this evocative scene as revealing a pattern of desperation that poverty engenders among girls from disadvantaged backgrounds like her own. The compromising situation pressures young females to do whatever is needed, even if it is morally wrong, to support their families. But it is in the psychological aftermath of the conduct that moral lessons are drawn, pointing up the price of loose living for these girls. For many women, premarital promiscuity proves to be a kiss of death later in marriage. With the low self-esteem inflicted on her, when Obiora asks to marry the wayward Nkem she cannot help but to take the offer as a favor he is doing her. But what happens after marriage? He soon abandons her in America with their two young children, literally converting her into a single mother. Nkem can offer no resistance to Obiora’s return to live a playboy lifestyle for most of the time in Nigeria. Mustering the moral courage or nerve to

mount vigorous opposition to a husband's neglect of her and their two young children is an undertaking only a virtuous woman can mount.

What the broken-hearted Nkem is going through communicates a strong impression that a virtuous life confers self-assurance and honor upon womanhood, while the absence of propriety undermines a girl's self-confidence as well as the esteem in which she is held by those informed about this hole in her personality (forgive the pun). The bouts of anxiety that her largely absentee husband's impending visit to their home in the United States incites in Nkem bears traces of her insecurity. After his prolonged stay in Nigeria, Nkem is frantic in her preparations to receive Obiora, and there are echoes of the apprehensiveness of Alfred Prufrock, the wimpy protagonist of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock," in the depth of her feelings of unworthiness as she awaits his arrival.⁹

Eliot's Prufrock is caught in a lyric and dramatic moment in front of a mirror in his apartment. His affliction is squeamish self-consciousness. That's why he sizes himself up so unkindly. Prufrock is utterly self-denigrating. He becomes so unsure he is good-looking enough to venture out to present himself before women in high cultural circles that he recoils timidly from the bright lights, afraid he will be laughed at. Likewise, in a merging of internal and outer scenes, Nkem's crisis of confidence erupts:

Nkem sighs, runs her hand through her hair. It feels too thick, too old. She has planned to get a relaxer touch-up tomorrow, have her hair set in a flip that would rest around her neck the way Obiora likes. And she has planned, on Friday, to wax her pubic hair into a thin line, the way Obiora likes. She walks out into the hallway, up the wide stairs, then back downstairs and into the kitchen ... Nkem walks back upstairs and into the bathroom ... She stares at her face in the mirror; her right eye looks smaller than the left. "Mermaid eyes," Obiora calls them. He thinks that mermaids, not angels, are the most beautiful creatures. Her face has always made people talk—how perfectly oval it is, how flawless her dark skin—but Obiora's calling her eyes mermaid eyes used to make her beautiful, as though the compliment gave her another set of eyes.

She picks up the scissors, the one she uses to cut Adanna's ribbons into neater bits, and raises it to her head. She pulls up clumps of hair and cuts close to the scalp, leaving her hair about the length of her thumbnail, just enough to tighten into curls with a texturizer. She watches the hair float down, like brown cotton wisps falling on the white sink. She cuts more. Tufts of hair float down, like scorched wings of moth. She wades in further. More hair falls ... She smells the Pink Oil Moisturizer she smoothed on this morning and thinks about the Nigerian woman she met once—Ifeyinwa or Ifeoma, she cannot remember now—at a wedding in Delaware whose husband lived in Nigeria, too, and who had short hair, although hers was natural, no relaxer or texturizer. (27–28)

Nkem here expresses the predicament of every abandoned Nigerian wife. In her agony, she drifts into self-destructive self-loathing. Her preoccupation with physical looks as a measure of the value she places on herself is thus in harmony with Eliot's conception of the lot of the modern personality embodied in the character of Prufrock. In her particular situation, Nkem's pained efforts to mimic the looks of the girls her absentee husband is rumored to be dating are pathetic. She conveys the desperation of an anguished, frustrated romantic ego. Absent a vital support network, Nkem endures untold spousal neglect alone and harbors a devastating suspicion that cannot be remedied. She is forced by her torment to slip into nostalgic longing for happier days when she felt beautiful. By contrast, her painful present remains dominated by feelings of being ugly and unworthy and abandoned by a man who continues to break the oath he has taken to love his wife until death do them part.

Obiora's declaration to his wife that he loves her long hair marks not a seismic shift in his relationship with her but an act of desperation, an unsuccessful attempt to recover what cannot be recovered: trust. "Anything will look good with your lovely face, darling," he states, "but I liked your long hair better. You should grow it back" (40). The reasons Obiora gives for demanding the restoration of his wife's long hair are so self-centered, they brush aside her feelings. Although this story ends on a seemingly positive note with a re-affirmation of the dignity of traditional marriage, the terror and anguish displayed by Nkem's symbolic haircut, and her resolve to actualize the dictum that no one can "cram a year's worth of marriage into two months in the summer and three weeks in December," raise questions about this couple's future.

Obiora does yield to Nkem's proposal that she and their children will be "moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos" (41). Through her return to Nigeria, Nkem's notion of marriage, which has become degraded by the long separation from her husband, will face a major new challenge. A conflict looms ahead for the lifestyle of a single man that he has become so habituated to practicing. Nkem's action in the bathtub becomes symbolic of her anticipated plans to bring about a change of her husband's lifestyle. She is looking forward to bringing about a metamorphosis in him as "She turns him around and continues to soap his back" (42). But it is going to be a continuing laundering project, Nkem expecting Obiora round the clock to clean up his act to make it right. That's going to sap any wife's energy; it seems that Nkem has set herself a mission impossible.

In "On Monday of Last Week," also about the exile experience, the roles are reversed and it is the wife that is left behind in Nigeria while the husband ventures abroad, to the United States. But the outcome is no different: agonizing disappointment. Irony runs through this story as a major undercurrent. It takes six years for the husband, Tobeche, an Igbo man living in the United States, to get his green card and have his wife and college sweetheart Kamara, left behind in Nigeria, join him there. Meanwhile Kamara pines away at her beloved's absence—only when finally reunited with him to discover their bond is irretrievably broken. There is now a huge gulf between the couple and the

gaps are growing by the day. Those years of separation have turned the relationship into a shadow of itself. Theirs has become a union deprived of its vital meaning.

In Kamara and Tobeche's story, the influence of Christopher Okigbo's poem "Love Apart" is palpable.¹⁰ But Adichie relaunches the motif of dissipated affections between a couple and inverts the perspective. She shows that in this case it is for the woman, the wife, not the man/husband, as in Okigbo, that things are particularly hard. In Okigbo, the man who bears and expresses the grief of a lost love is lonely and anguished. Okigbo's subject is the decay of a romantic ideal. But Adichie's feminism complicates things with the addition of disappointment on top of the dream of material things. The economic frustrations truly compound Kamara's woes.

Adichie's story's articulation of Kamara's plight defines it in relation to the dashed hopes of many Nigerian female aspirants. The national scope attaches an allegorical quality to the narrative in terms of making it a cautionary tale. Emigration to America remains the dream of a lot of people across Nigeria. But the reality in America shatters all the delusions of grandeur Nigerians at home harbor about going abroad. Upon getting to the dreamland, Tobeche, a graduate of the University of Nigeria, works as a manager of a Burger King store. The only work his wife Kamara, the holder of a master's degree, can find is in the domestic service industry as the housemaid of a rich Jewish-American business tycoon and his African-American artist wife.

They begin the marital journey as a couple passionately, romantically involved, an inseparable pair. But these freshly married people don't even get chance to experience a full honeymoon. Readers learn that the fire of aspiration lights up: a powerful dream of America. It takes hold of their imaginations, and a decision of emigration intrudes into the relationship, cutting the pair apart:

The wedding, which took place shortly after they completed their National Youth Service, was hurried because an uncle, a pastor, had just offered to help Tobeche get an American visa by including his name in a group going for a conference of the Evangelical Faith Mission. America was about hard work, they both knew, and one would make it if one was prepared to work hard. Tobeche would get to America and find a job and work for two years and get a green card and send for her. (83)

The harsh reality sets in: "two years passed, then four," and Kamara "was in Enugu teaching in a secondary school," while in America "Tobeche was driving a taxi in Philadelphia for a Nigerian man who cheated all his drivers because none of them had papers" (83). In "On Monday of Last Week," immigration sets up this young couple to be pulled poles apart. It is a build-up to disaster. The move up from cab driver status to a managerial position at a fast-food restaurant is Tobeche's highest professional upgrade. But the decidedly awkward American influence upon him over the six-year span makes him barely recognizable to Kamara. Readers view all events from her perspective.

Kamara's feminism is self-evident. Through her, readers understand how immigration affects not only African males but also their women. There is also a noticeable physical change Kamara cannot overlook, and some of the issues she perceives are not necessarily those a male might notice or be concerned about. But Kamara takes it all in:

... she came out at Arrivals and there he was, lighter-skinned, chubby, laughing. It had been six years. They clung to each other ... He took off his shoes when they got to the apartment and she looked at his toes, dark against the milk-colored linoleum of the kitchen floor, and noticed that they had sprouted hair. She did not remember his toes with hair. She stared at him as he spoke, his Igbo interspersed with English that had an ungainly American accent: "Amah go" for "I will go." He had not spoken like that on the phone. Or had he, and she had not noticed? (84)

The terrible changes in Tobeche are apparent not only in his physical looks. The excessive weight he has put on because of the unhealthy American food is undeniable. His speech, the affected accent, his dress, and his mannerisms, all come under inspection. All are indicative of the high price of securing his sense of belonging in the immigrant's adopted society. These acts of simulation by Tobeche all confirm that the luxury of being oneself is unavailable to the immigrant. The newcomer must merge into the host culture through the cruel process of acculturation. But the culture of imitation always remains a fabrication, being, as Homi Bhabha famously noticed too, an inauthentic life.¹¹

The character of Tobeche's imitative acts leaves much to be desired. What he assumes to be conformity to the host culture appears to Kamara exaggerated and awkward because it is a response based largely on a misperception gleaned from television sitcoms and shows like *Court TV*. These account for the reasons the cultural gaps between him and his wife have calcified. Events such as the two waking up "the next morning with onions heavy on their breath" and "their silences" that "were awkward" are clearly expressive of the wedge that has come between them in a relationship that in the past "had been filled with effortless ease" (85).

On the home front, the most consequential challenge that has arisen is one of intimacy. They have trouble connecting in the most private activities. Husband and wife are now like strangers and the confidential moment they share is shorn of everything approximating the tenderness the wife Kamara expects and is accustomed to feeling when she is around her husband. The six years of separation hit Kamara with real force. She tries to convince herself that "things would get better" and "they had been apart a long time, after all" (85). The disconnect shows the most in bed, where

she felt nothing except for the rubbery friction of skin against skin and she clearly remembered the way it used to be between them, he silent and gentle and firm, she loud and grasping and writhing. Now, she wondered if

it was even the same Tobechei, this person who seemed so eager, so theatrical. (85)

Tobechei's crudity and churlishness, the mechanical inflections of his conduct during moments of intimacy with his wife, capture the dramatic transformation wrought on him by the violence of American culture. The arid, impersonal, routinized, and dehumanized function he has been reduced into performing by the cruel demands of the fast-food industry has taken a toll on him. He becomes a victim of some sort of dissociation disorder created by the pressures of urban living.

Kamara's husband has also picked up the boorish language of the American blue-collar workforce with its inherent misogyny. Now, "most worrying of all," Tobechei "had begun to talk in that false accent that made her want to slap his face. *I wanna fuck you, I'm gonna fuck you*" (85). The drastic adjustment problems that Kamara faces drive her into a state of restlessness, and she begins to search for peace anywhere she can find it. In the process, she begins binge eating, which in turn creates weight problems for her. A severe ideological hurdle also surfaces. Apart from the feelings of loss of a familiar cultural environment that she bemoans in occasional telephone conversations with her friend Chinwe back home in Nigeria, Kamara has grown apart from her husband on the matter of having children.

Kamara wants desperately to get pregnant right away, but Tobechei desires a postponement of family and introduces her to contraceptives. Kamara finds diversion in her work as a housemaid, cleaning the home of the Jewish-American corporate executive Neil and his African-American wife Tracy and looking after Josh, the couple's pampered only child. But the exploitation not only of her labor but also of her anatomy by the family is suggestive that her dream of immigration and aspirations to high-class status are far from happening, registered in her submission to artist Tracy's request to "take your clothes off for me" to "paint you" (89).

The focus in the collection's title story "The Thing Around Your Neck" is on discomfort that borders on shame. A 22-year-old single Nigerian woman immigrant, named Akunna, gets herself entangled in an inter-racial relationship. The embarrassment is reflected in the hypothetical style of the second-person narrator of this story, who charts the ordeals that follow the protagonist's arrival in America on a visa lottery. The sense of awkwardness is implied through a mode of self-distancing, similar to the narrative viewpoint of "Tomorrow Is Too Far."

In "The Thing Around Your Neck," the suppositional perspective tries to establish an arm's-length distance because no one would really like to be associated with these events. The shameful episodes begin with the protagonist's escape from sexual harassment by her host in the United States, a fellow Nigerian referred to as her "uncle" but who turns out to be not even a distant relative. The narrator constructs her story in a speculative tone. But the details of her experience ultimately nullify the tentative with the specific. The style

cancels out the contingent with the particularities of the case of a named person. It is a technique similar to the “mixture of the imagined” and “the recorded” that Rowland Smith in his essay “Rewriting the Frontier” identifies as the forte of the Canadian short-story stylist Alice Munro.¹²

With this device, which Adichie deploys effectively, she conveys an impression that the predicament reported, while discrete, is not an outlier or limited to one immigrant from Nigeria. In this way she kills two birds with one stone. Protagonist Akunna’s employment as a waitress in a restaurant sets her up for exploitation. She is paid two dollars less per hour than any of her employer’s other workers. But the pay does enable her to secure a modicum of economic independence. This job also provides the platform for her meeting with her white American boyfriend, clearing a way to her distressful confrontation with a spectrum of attitudes of the American public—white, Chinese, and black racists alike—ranging from paternalism to condescension and the outright hostility of racial intolerance.

The immigrant question here takes a decided turn as the scales fall from the eyes of the migrant and her fantasy is transformed into embarrassment, despair, and disappointment. Through Akunna’s impressions of America, in a technique of image and counterimage, the story paints a complex picture of the country that is not in harmony with the ideas widespread in Nigeria about the world’s number one superpower. One of the negative depictions has Americans assuming people in Africa live in trees, and Akunna does more than return the gaze by exposing the rank ignorance that feeds such images.

Americans view Africa not only as a country but as a jungle.

They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you’d seen a car before you came to America. They gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the braids. (116)

Americans lump all black people together; without distinction mistaking “every black person with a foreign accent” as “Jamaican” (119). Akunna recovers images of the real America.

Other realities on the ground are seeing “the poor fat people” in Hartford, Connecticut, the indiscipline of children through lack of disciplined parenting, overeating habits, and idiosyncrasies like how “rich Americans were thin and poor Americans were fat and that many did not have a big house and a car” (119).

Akunna discovers that the condescension of professors at American colleges and the racial bigotry prevalent in the country are not unlike classism in Nigeria. She remembers her father’s humiliation by a rich man in Lagos when his “rickety Peugeot 504” hit his luxury car and

her father started to cry and beg even before he got out of the car and laid himself flat on the road, causing much blowing of horns. Sorry sir, sorry sir, he chanted. If you sell me and my family, you cannot buy even one tire on your car. Sorry sir. (122)

Readers learn that “The big man seated at the back did not come out, but his driver did, examining the damage” and seeing the “father’s sprawled form from the corner of his eye as though pleading was like pornography, a performance he was ashamed to admit he enjoyed” (122). His father, though “let ... go,” is thoroughly humbled in front of his children and the image remains a perennial reminder to Akunna of her low economic and social pedigree.

Akunna’s unfulfilled hopes and plans to send money and gifts back home to family members and friends shakes up her confidence, made worse by her growing sense of invisibility and anonymity. She laments her inability to “afford enough perfumes and clothes and handbags and shoes to go around and still pay your rent on what you earned at the waitressing job” (119). She feels the stings of lack of public recognition deeply. “Nobody knew where you were,” she mentions, “because you told no one. Sometimes you felt invisible and tried to walk through your room wall into the hallway, and when you bumped into the wall, it left bruises on your arms” (119).

However, it is the fear of people expressing subliminal anxiety over miscegenation triggered by dating across racial lines in America which bothers Akunna the most. She opens up a rare perspective on this emotionally charged topic in American social life:

You knew by people’s reactions that you were abnormal—the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones too nice. The old white men and women who muttered and glared at him, the black men who shook their heads at you, the black women whose pitying eyes bemoaned your lack of self-esteem, your self-loathing. Or the black women who smiled swift solidarity smiles; the black men who tried too hard to forgive you, saying a too-obvious hi to him; the white men and women who said “What a good-looking pair” too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own open-mindedness to themselves. (125)

In this image Akunna, an Igbo and black woman from Nigeria, sparking social chaos with her affair with a white man in America, finds herself pressed between a rock and a hard place. People cannot stop pointing her and her white boyfriend out as different from others, the norm. Instead of seeing two human beings in love a huge swathe of the American public still frowns upon inter-racial dating. Eyebrows are involuntarily raised at the sight of this couple as love across the racial line remains a prime target of sneers, ridicule, and fierce antagonism.

In “The Thing Around Your Neck,” the emigration of the protagonist Akunna is fueled by dreams of riches propagated in the America of the Nigerian imaginary. America is projected there as a land of fabulous wealth, long cars, but also violence typified by the ubiquity and proliferation of guns.

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don’t buy a gun like those Americans. (115)

In America, however, Akunna receives a real education about social contradictions: inequality, racial bias, unequal opportunities, the struggles of people in the country in the midst of the extreme wealth of a few. Her story explores not only the immigrant's encounter with the economic hardship of a lot of Americans but the exploitation of immigrants, the isolation and alienation of singles among them weighted with disorientation, and the morbidly disturbing effects of racial prejudice in America.

Nonetheless, the origins of all the troubles of Nigerians around the world and undoubtedly their solutions are all to be found in their own country. That's why the despair that pervades the inhuman situation in Nigeria still makes immigration a daring step that cannot lose its appeal. For instance, the story "A Private Experience," set in Kano, Northern Nigeria, by playing up the absurdity of religious intolerance lifts the veil on the extremely worrisome endemic sectarian violence rocking the land. A riot breaks out because "a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian" and

the men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market, asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy book. (46)

The ethnic-cum-religious mayhem that ensues pits the Muslim Hausa against the Christian Igbo peoples. Alas, due to an unintentional act being misconstrued as religious sacrilege punishable by mob lynching without due process of law, many people lose their lives. On the streets can be seen "bodies, many burned, lying lengthwise along the sides," some of the corpses "naked, stiff, facedown" (53).

The highlight of the story is the sharp contrast developed between the herd instinct of religious frenzy and the humanity peoples of different religious persuasions and backgrounds show toward each other in their private one-on-one relationships. In this moment of social upheaval, an illiterate Muslim Hausa woman trader and a female Christian Igbo university medical student named Chika are running away from danger. With the assistance of the Christian Igbo woman, the Muslim Hausa woman is able to get inside an abandoned store and the two hide for safety together. The story flashes before the reader the two showing an awareness of their common humanity. In their hiding place the Muslim Hausa woman returns the favor, displaying an unexpected charitable disposition. She tenderly "unties her green wrapper and spreads it on the dusty floor" and asks the Christian Igbo woman to "Come and sit ... We are waiting here long time" (46). The meaning of the compassionate gesture of the Muslim Hausa woman and the self-sacrifice she is prepared to make for the comfort of a total stranger are not lost on the Christian Igbo woman, who thinks the act of giving is all the greater because the wrapper is "probably one of the two the woman owns" (46).

They talk, and the conversation reveals that the women have a lot in common. Besides identifying as women with identical biological functions, both are human and share similar aspirations, dreams, and fears. Each woman has been separated from a loved one during the disturbances. The Hausa woman is a mother, and she is in fear for her daughter Halima's life and for her shop being destroyed, just as Chika is worrying about the fate of her sister Nnedi in the chaos of the uprising. Thus, two unfamiliar women, brought together by the same misfortune, find out they are so alike.

The story is told from the vantage point of Chika, an enlightened university-educated woman. A visit from the South, specifically Eastern Nigeria, up North, to the hotbed of ethno-religious conflicts in the country, has placed Chika and Nnedi at the center of the storm where they can view up close the hell that breaks loose when the vehemence of partisanship gets out of control. This story is a parable of the terror that the volatile religious and ethnic Nigerian experience creates for all parties caught up in it. It is also a demonstration of the amicability that is a hidden possibility when the walls of division are broken down. This is fiction, of course and the lessons of history it teaches are not often heeded by society. Thus, repetitions of the past have not let up.

Andreas Morris has reported, for, example, that "for the last several years, Nigeria is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian."¹³ The reporter adds:

Persecution in Nigeria is brutally violent, with many Christians living under the constant threat of attack from the radical Islamic group Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militants, and criminals who kidnap and murder with few consequences. The nation ranks seventh on Open Doors USA's 2022 World Watch List, with the organization calling the persecution in Nigeria "brutally violent."

In the same report, readers learn that Islamic Jihadists killed 3,500 Christians and attacked 300 churches in 200 days. One of the most recent episodes of religious intolerance in Nigeria is the gruesome murder of a 25-year-old Nigerian Christian student, Deborah Emmanuel, by her classmates at the Shehu Shagari College of Education at Sokoto over a "blasphemous" WhatsApp message, whose body was then set on fire. This dangerous situation is the huge log around the necks, burdening the citizens of Nigeria, that is depicted by Adichie in her stories. The appalling atmosphere in the country must be arrested before the people can reasonably be counted upon to stop hankering after immigration. For all those scattered around the world to find an inducement to return to rebuild their country, sanity must prevail there.

In her collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie's grip on the short-story form is evidently very firm. It is apparent that she has one foot in the modern short-story tradition with its brevity, economy, and unity of mood, and another in the didacticism and the enchantment and fantasy of the Igbo oral tradition. She avails herself beautifully of the resources of both. She has utilized

the two modes from top to bottom in offering a glaring picture of the trying circumstances that have pushed the citizens of Nigeria to their wits' end since the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967–1970. The decades of the 1980s and beyond have emerged as by far the most difficult in the country. Adichie's short stories apprehend these undemocratic atmospheres vigilantly.

Her allusions in the style of her stories to the techniques of modernist Western authors like T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway, among others, enliven her narrative techniques. Eliot's extended symbolism and the objective correlative as well as Hemingway's rolling and cumulative sentence rhythms particularly stand out in their effectiveness in stories like "Imitation" and the opening passages of "Tomorrow Is Too Far." But for the largest part the author finds herself falling back, again and again, on the works of her Nigerian predecessors. As demonstrated, the imprints of Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo take the lion's share.

In Adichie's preponderant, immediately visible uses of Achebe in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, she goes beyond mere echoes. Like Achebe, she strips her writing bare of the redundancy of ornamentation. She wields the cudgel against the pompous method. She instead employs the efficiency of sparse, uninflated but vigorous and active styles of communication, trimming verbosity. She not only bludgeons away gratuitous explanations, but exercises selectivity in keenly observed occurrences. The structure of her plot details is also adroit; no fact is introduced save to advance the progression of events at the appropriate moment.

When Adichie alludes to major character names selected from the Achebe canon, a name like Obierika, from *Things Fall Apart*, is intentionally featured prominently as the hero of her story "The Headstrong Historian." The function of this well-known name is to doubly evoke not only a commonly recognized authority in Nigerian literature but also perhaps the most beloved character in all his oeuvre. In this story, Adichie takes Obierika's name on her own terms and breathes new life into it through a technique of appropriation and role reversal. First, the author collapses and grafts to her version of Obierika all the sterling attributes of balance and wisdom associated with the personality of his namesake in Achebe's novel. Then, by a strategy of selectivity, she gives her character Obierika the status of his friend Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart* so that the reincarnated figure in her story takes on the title-agglomerating personage of his namesake's friend, while at the same time spurning the brawler's polygynous lifestyle and impulsiveness. Adichie also has transferred to her protagonist Obierika the legendary athletic prowess of the most popular tragic hero in African literature. A striking feature of her story becomes the rewriting of the romance plot involving this famed character and the married woman so seduced by his skills during a wrestling match against Amalinze the cat that she decides to run away from her own husband to marry the famous gladiator. For Adichie, rather than in any way presenting an impediment to the forward-looking step, the occasional backward glance actually adds to the perspective of the storyteller, serving as a means of carrying forward tradition in a meaningful way.

Notes

- 1 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (New York: Knopf, 2009). All page references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parenthesis.
- 2 Maria Ajima, *The Web* (Makurdi: Onaivi, 1989).
- 3 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2003).
- 4 See Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* (New York: Random House, 2009) discussed in chapter five of this book.
- 5 John Pepper Clark, *America, Their America* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964).
- 6 J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, "Aliases among the Anambra-Igbo: The Proverbial Dimension," *Names* 39. 2 (June, 1991): 81–94, pp. 82–84.
- 7 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).
- 8 See Ode Ogede, *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 48.
- 9 T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock," in *The Wasteland and Other Poems*.
- 10 Christopher Okigbo, "Love Apart," in Donatus Nwoga, ed. *West African Verse* (London: Longman, 1967), p. 54.
- 11 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 12 See Rowland Smith, "Rewriting the Frontier: Wilderness and Social Code in the Fiction of Alice Munro," in Jacqueline Bardolph, ed. *Telling Stories* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 81.
- 13 Andreas Morris, "25-Year-Old Nigerian Christian Student Killed, Body Burned By Classmates Over 'Blasphemous' WhatsApp Message," CBSNews.com, May 14, 2022.

8 Signing Off/Out: The Politics of Language, Nigerian Literature, Now and in the Future

Reading the third-generation Nigerian literature one is struck by a poignant paradox. It is a supreme irony that so many fine works have been thrown into prominence through the inspiration of a few unusually concentrated moments of oppression on the African continent. A major dilemma has persisted in Nigeria since independence, and it has given rise to a sustained body of creative writing.¹ The Nigeria-Biafra civil war of 1967–1970, which the military intervention in politics precipitated, was quickly snuffed out with the defeat of the secessionists. But the profound destructive legacies of the war continue to linger on. Not only did the involvement of the military in politics fail to de-escalate the economic downturn of the country. In fact, in the wake of the IMF-imposed Structural Adjustment Program pursued under successive military regimes, the economic train of the country came fully off the rails. Many people began to fear for their lives and their futures in this time of danger and economic uncertainty. The anxiety recurrently sparked wave after wave of mass exodus of professionals, most notably to Europe and the United States of America. These birth pangs of a nation in the making, or more properly speaking in the unmaking, have given third-generation Nigerian literature its subject matters, shaping it into a testimonial literature, an art of witnessing, investigation, analysis, and interrogation while also giving it a form of expression: exilic angst-driven narrative. Both on the African continent and elsewhere the fact that crises create fodder for literature definitely contributes to an impression that creative expression is a parasitic activity.

Whether they are based at home, and give accounts of local events, live or have traveled abroad, and write of their journeys, all these authors tell of things they know all too deeply, their verdicts on the ugly things they observe with passion and demonstrating the same sense of non-belonging in the place inhabited. Amid the ghosts of the country's previous generations of writings, particularly the shadows of the first-generation literature represented by Achebe and Soyinka and, to a lesser extent, the second generation, hovering over them, the third-generation writers are handed fresh topics that launch them into the endeavor while also reviving and reinvigorating their inherited idioms. But many have proven themselves to be not merely satisfied to remaining simply as doppelgangers, not so much out of a nervous desire to attain newness as to offer

faithful representation by means of fervent in-depth explorations, exegeses, and analyses of the social order of the day. The novelty of many of the works of the new authors then owes not so much to their successful exorcism of the phantoms of their predecessors. Through the exercise of so much muscle, many of the authors have succeeded in fashioning experimental forms and by so doing established their own fresh trails.

In his book *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*, a study brimful of thoughtful and provocative ideas, Richard Poirier perceptively observes:

The notion that to bring forth a new passion or a new idea involves verbal struggle against established forms is given a somewhat ironic confirmation by the fact that the notion is itself one of the most persistent conventions of literature. Stylistic revolution is not the exclusive product of any particular historical situation, or the exclusive property of any national literature. If it seems to belong to American writing at the time of Cooper and Emerson, it also belongs to the America of Hamlin Garland and later of Hemingway. If it belonged to English and American poetry when Pound wrote "Make It New," to English poetry when Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote the preface to the second edition of the *The Lyrical Ballads*, it also belonged to Samuel Daniel, some two hundred years earlier, when he announced the fitness of English for rhymed verse. When Gertrude Stein laid down the law that "A rose is a rose is a rose" she was being repetitious with an intention already described. She probably did not intend also to be almost directly repetitious of Emerson.²

Poirier's comments hint at the flavor of an established convention, and they align with the case put forward in this book. The creative act carries an enduring elemental quality which defies geography, time, space, and location; this can be quite easily illustrated with Nigerian literature. If we substitute "any national literature," "Cooper and Emerson," "Hamlin Garland and ... Hemingway," "English and American poetry," "Wordsworth and Coleridge," and "Samuel Daniel," with "any generation," "Achebe and Soyinka," "Okigbo and Okara," "Ekwensi and Nwapa," "Rotimi and Soyinka," "Okpewho and Iyayi," "Osofisan and Nwueme," "Balogun and Nwankwo," or "Adichie, Ajima, Dibe, and Unigwe," Poirier's pronouncement can apply with equal validity to Nigerian literature generally and the third-generation genre in particular.

There is no question that the vast and considerable accomplishments of each generation of Nigerian writers could simply not have existed or taken their current forms without the groundbreaking work of their forebears. The authors who either literally laid the foundations of the country's literature or extended the body of its works one way or another have made important contributions. But, as this study has shown, the imitation of predecessors has been transmuted innovatively in the works of the new, and the third-generation literature has a character of its own with distinct markers of talent. The old masters have been

served with exceptional subtlety by their disciples, who have carried the banner of the superseded predecessors forward by combing through the subjects of their own day and writing movingly on them.

For their public displays of thoroughness, creativity, and courage, therefore, readers owe the third-generation authors immense debts of gratitude. Each one of the authors taken on by this study shuns the easy route of predictability, demonstrating inspiring creativity by employing exceptional gifts in bringing to the attention of the public happenings that otherwise might be hidden from view. When one closely examines the third-generation literature specifically, its contribution is immense in terms of important thematic preoccupation, distinctive characterization, vivid descriptive style, startling imagery and symbolism, for example, all conveyed through the formats of established aesthetic forms.

Nevertheless, if the point of a closing statement is to look ahead, a note of caution relates to any absolute conclusions one might be tempted to make just yet from the available evidence. Unquestionably, the plentiful scholarly interest which the genre and the general evolution of its key elements have received certainly does not reflect a merely fleeting expression of admiration for this body of writing.

One does get the impression that the attention the works have garnered is a reliable indication of the high esteem in which they are genuinely held; still, a definitive measure of this emerging body of writing is premature at this time. Any judgments are only tentative at even their very best; no assessments are final. So, even if the literary establishment pushes forward, in its haste to anoint a successor to Chinua Achebe, perhaps we will do well not to yield to the impulse to rush to such conclusions prematurely.

Primarily, a fuller inventory has to be taken of the entire field first. For this reason, it might be wise if everyone just takes a deep breath and we all slow down just a little bit yet, for it's all still so early, "morning yet on creation day," to borrow the immortal titular words of the great Achebe.³ In a nutshell, while it is true that only time will tell whether the motley crew of texts of this genre available to this generation will have staying power, as good as the writers are, more fine writers and works are still cropping up in Nigeria and one should hesitate to say the final word just yet.

That is why, looking ahead, for a very young literature like this it makes sense to speak up now about an area that presents some anxiety. This menace concerns the irony that, of the challenges Nigerian writers would likely be increasingly beset with, the problem of finding appropriate subject matter can confidently be ruled out. As long as there is lived reality, there will be no shortage of issues for the writers to grapple with. The immanence of literary infrastructure, too, guarantees the eternal availability of formal patterns for each new generation of writers that comes along to take on and resuscitate. Curiously, the real test will be one of basic expression: how the writers of the future can negotiate the falling standards in English. Whether or not they can take exception to the sloppiness that has overtaken the use of the English language in America and Europe will be critical.

With the ascendancy of many progressive movements that are debasing the traditional rules of grammar, the threats that the prevalence of non-standard grammar pose to meaningful communication should not be underestimated. It remains to be seen if Nigerian writers, in the rage for social equity in the world in progress, as part of the movement toward a new world order, can superimpose their wills on the hegemony of the rogue English so dedicated to the overthrow of the high grammatical standards handed down to them by their forebears.

Will the up-and-coming Nigerian writers strive intentionally to borrow a leaf from the first-generation authors by working within the confines of the conventional rules of English grammar passed down to them? Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper-Clark Bekederemo, and Christopher Okigbo, all carried out and housed their experiments with form within the regulations that govern standard English morphology. Can their third-generation successors muster the courage not to follow the crowd? The majority might outnumber them but that doesn't make what's wrong right. It may not be popular to abjure the temptations presented by the deviant grammatical habits gaining currency in America and Europe. But Nigerian writers must resist the blare of 24-hour cable news programs and popular culture eroding the certitudes of formal English semantics. No day passes that one turns on the cable news and doesn't hear such nonsensical bastard usages as "buy into" (for "buy")—found in sentences like "If Peter will buy into the coach's ideas" in lieu of "If Peter will buy the coach's ideas"—and misconstructions like "There is twenty people on the field" for "There are twenty people on the field," "There is many areas for improvement" for "There are many areas for improvement," and "The more information coming out, there is more questions" for "The more information coming out, there are more questions." Just like the American fast-food industry doesn't provide the most-healthy diet, American popular culture in general is filled with corrosive fare. And the emergence of Google and social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter providing every Dick and Harry with venues of public self-expression has not helped matters.

Will Nigerian writers hereafter be able to get their acts together regarding the language situation or will they succumb to the hipness of linguistic absurdity now passed by popular cultural platforms as normality in America and Europe and disseminated worldwide? Can they disavow this decay, or will they succumb to slavish imitativeness? Will they put themselves into the bondage of critically slothful popular grammatical fashions? Will they recognize that American popular culture, in particular, cannot set the trend for Nigerian writers? Will they be able to see American popular culture for what it is: a culture of rabid devotion to surfaces, the glittering, the herd instinct, and sloppy thinking as well as short attention spans—superficiality squared?

Will Nigerian writers understand that the notion of American exceptionalism is a sham as the country increasingly becomes an outlaw nation? Some may even argue, and with justification, that notwithstanding its military superpower status, America now has all the characteristics of a third-world nation. They may point to a consumer import-dependent economy, out-of-control political party wranglings,

rising extremism, death threats to political opponents, explosive election disputes and attempts by a candidate to steal election results that so far have gone unpunished, murders, an unprecedented rise in gun violence, police brutality that qualifies as state-sponsored terrorism against a minority ethnic group, and rampant and widespread prolonged consumer goods shortages. With the addition of other problems of first-world countries at all-time highs, such as opioid crises and hallucinogens and marijuana use, and the unprecedented hike in conspiracy theories and hate groups, America's decline has been gradual and steady, yet even so no one could have anticipated the events of the last few years.

When this author moved to the United States 27 years ago, the movement toward an import-dependent economy was already in progress. The first thing he noticed, to elaborate on one of the examples mentioned above, was the ubiquity of made-in-China consumer products. But these were limited to things like women's shoes and handbags, children's clothes, winter clothes (shoes and jackets for both men and women as well as children), imitation precious stones, bracelets, and other jewelry, as well as kitchen utensils such as porcelain, table knives, spoons, and forks, and school supplies, all non-essentials. Little did this writer suspect that, fast forward to today, America's imports from China would expand beyond non-essential consumer goods. In the wake of the decline of industrial manufacturing in the United States owing to an inexplicable outsourcing trend, the Rust Belt of the country known for industrial production (Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Northern New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin) was left in the cold as many of the factories closed their shops. America's reliance on Chinese and Mexican imports has thus expanded dramatically. Car and heavy-duty machinery parts, hospital medical supplies, drugs, and household products such as flat-screen television sets, washing machines and dryers, microwave equipment, cellphones, printers, building materials, computers and computer chips, all now depend upon transportation from China in fleets of cargo ships capable of clogging port after port and causing massive shortages in retail stores across a country enduring months of stressed supply chain crises. Domestic manufacturing may have started to see a rebound in the United States, but the damage is already done; America's self-undermining conducts in other spheres may be permanently irreversible. Should a country that in recent times has refused to put its own house in order therefore be trusted to provide the world with cultural leadership in the area of language use? Many will think it should not.

One can perceive the nature of the reprehensible rise in attacks on intellectual work in the wake of the disdain for all things academic in America all around. In history, this is not a new phenomenon. R. W. Chambers has asked: "How did it come, that just when learning and civilization seemed to be dying out on the continent of Western Europe, they flourished among the Celts of Ireland and the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes of England—tribes who had never before known Roman discipline or Greek learning?"⁴ Professor Chambers is talking about the historical cycle in which the provinces of empire see rejuvenation concurrent with the decaying of metropolises.

It seems that history has come full circle. In America today not only is there poor funding for education, but teachers are paid low wages and disrespected willfully by all and sundry. Most of all, the lack of respect for learning is reflected in the public's differential treatment of people in education and those in the disciplines the country truly idolizes. The symptoms of contempt are found everywhere for mental acumen that manifests itself in areas other than those related to popular entertainment or recreational activities such as sports, painting, dance, and music. Is it not a wonder, for example, why certain honors have not been conferred on talented individuals equally; why significant discrimination exists across disciplines? Why are not literary celebrities elevated to the types of heights of esteem enjoyed by celebrities in popular culture with clothing labels and T-shirt merchandising? Surely there is a hidden message behind this snub of academia as it is considered to possess neither comparable economic nor political pertinence or entertainment value—the only language that seems to matter to America today.⁵

The headwinds blowing against standard grammatical usage today in America are many and strong. If the pernicious trend should go on unchecked, the decline in English language use can be potentially as catastrophic as the impacts of climate change on our planet. Like other intellectuals, English language professors who ought to be gatekeepers of the standards are among the most marginalized groups in America. They have become impotent, to use the eye-popping graphic image of A. D. Nuttall, in his exuberantly unsettling book *Dead from the Waist Down*, which traces the fall in the authority of scholars and scholarship through the ages, from the apogee of their prestige in the sixteenth century, when they were “seen as magical,” to the nineteenth, and down to our time when they are toothless.⁶

In America today, English language teachers, including college professors, mostly are on the fringe of culture, inclined toward toeing the line in accordance with the public's condescending attitudes to them. They thus allow the antipathy of the public to push them into corners in which they are downgraded to being merely in the convoy of what is made trendy by pace-setting popular culture. The symptoms of the disrespect shown toward brainpower play out right in front of them in the forces pressing for alteration of the conventional grammatical rules. But their instigations are pushed by yardsticks that are not primarily linguistic, having more to do with upheavals bred by the politics of pluralism. That's why recognizing that a devotion to standard grammatical expression is not incompatible with bias-free communication will assist future and current Nigerian writers in cracking down on the upswing of flirtation with linguistic transgressions now rising like a tide, swamping America and Europe and taking everyone in its sweep.

The danger of joining the bandwagon of trending advisors is real. But while it is up to everyone to decide what type of writer he or she will be, if one is able to offer suggestions directly to anyone one cannot reasonably pass up such an opportunity. This author's would be to gently encourage upcoming Nigerian writers to roll with the punches. Some stoicism is mandatory if they are to turn

the tide against the pressures mounting to make them slavish imitators of what is becoming à la mode in America and Europe. They shouldn't want to cave in! Nigeria should not lose its standard English language identity to the thrall of fashions elsewhere. Nothing can be quite as impressively dignifying and exhilarating as witnessing the grand spectacle of Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka walking through the streets of Nigerian cities being mobbed by adoring crowds of his own compatriots who riotously throng about him.

Such profession of admiration is a measure not only of Soyinka's personal charm and influence but of the respect in which ordinary people still hold the intellectual endeavor within Nigeria. That is a sharp contrast to America, for example, where Nobel laureates live anonymously, as isolated as all the ordinary citizens, some residing in cramped apartments, riding the trains and trams, doing their groceries, unacknowledged or unsung, exercising no influence whatsoever upon the public beyond their own narrow disciplines. Nigeria has not surrendered its innocent enthrallment to intellectual power to the enchantment with superficiality and still retains a proclivity to respect its intelligentsia. Nigeria should not easily give up its entrenchment in a culture that valorizes mental ability.

Would the image of Nigerian writers standing shoulder to shoulder as the stout defenders of a standard English language provoke charges of their being the proverbial outsiders who weep louder than the bereaved? Absolutely not. To begin with, adopting the English language involves both a particular appropriation of the rules of its grammar and ownership of them. The eminent Achebe once made an intelligently pragmatic decision about his chosen medium of communication, the English language. In his essay "The African Writer and the English Language," Achebe observed: "Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal which included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire."⁷ He goes on in the same context to make a declaration, after weighing the pros and cons of using an international language like English as a vehicle for his writing: "for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it" (102). Use it Achebe certainly did; and what marvelous work he has done with the English language, making it amenable to convey without distortion his African experience, thought patterns, idioms, values, and ways of life, all throughout maintaining the standard rules of its grammar.

One hopes that Nigerian writers in the years to come will continue to recognize and retain the good heritage they have. One aspect of this has been a competitive education. This author can still recall how very difficult it was during his early years for applicants to gain entry into any of Nigeria's then top universities (University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University, University of Ife—now Obafemi Awolowo University—University of Lagos, and University of Nigeria, Nsukka). The admission standards were extremely high, so much so that only the country's best brains could secure admissions into its top

universities, and many of the students who couldn't leave the country for overseas university education and easily gained entry to the top colleges and universities worldwide (Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania in America, and Cambridge, Oxford, Kent, London, Leeds, Sussex, and others in the United Kingdom), for example. The English language is another of their inheritances and all Nigerian writers in subsequent ages who claim this expression as their own have every right and every reason to take their cue from Chinua Achebe and his first-generation peers such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, and John Pepper Clark-Bedekeremo in standing up for traditional values. In safeguarding their turf, they, too, can justifiably take the derision of grammatical correctness now popular in America and Europe as a slap on the face. One is not talking here of changing standards in language that are not unusual. It makes sense to strive for a balance between what is allowable and what is definitely incorrect as the goalposts are always moving. It will not amount to more than nitpicking, for example, to do anything other than to indicate one's preference with constructions such as "to try and find out" and "to try to find out" because nowadays, in relatively informal contexts, "try and," which has been in common use in spoken English for decades, is becoming acceptable in the written context too.

It's not untypical for many to argue that some of the most egregious errors of grammar and usage that we commonly condemn as falling standards in English can be found in works dating back centuries, several of them by leading authors such as Shakespeare or Dickens. Of course, writers and scholars have been worried about falling standards for centuries. In the seventeenth century Jonathan Swift complained that language was decaying so quickly that soon it would not be possible to discuss the nuances of philosophical thought. In a public letter he sent to Robert Harley, leader of the government, "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue," for example, Swift sounded off that "Our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; and, the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar."⁸ In the same petition, he went on to compare the English language unfavorably to those of Italy, Spain, and France. Yet, not only has the English language managed to continue to capture the nuances Swift feared it was in danger of losing but it has come up with many more philosophical concepts which it remains remaining eminently capable of conveying, the argument goes. So, in the view of such people it's more a case of the language evolving and adapting, changing rather than necessarily decaying. But one is not referring here to calls for new forms of standardization, as did Swift, demanding reformation of the language by removing Latin and other foreign terminology. Neither is one bringing up here writers' conscious uses of non-standard English grammar to reflect the thought patterns and expressive capacities of characters in their works, as has been typically done in writings by writers from Shakespeare and Dickens as well as many others down to our time.

One is talking, instead, of grammatical structures we always knew were wrong that America and Europe are now calling right. In the face of so much undue pressure to be politically correct, the standard rules of grammar pertaining to subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, and singular-plural identifications are under severe assault. The question is: Should Nigerian writers go with the flow? They should not. Rather, in the view of this author Nigerian writers have got to stick to the standard rules of grammar without being caught up in the all too often bitter debates over sexism, sexuality, and gender discriminations in such a way as to open themselves to being perceived as homophobic or anti-pluralism.

As politically active as the movement to normalize the dissident cultures has been to carve a space for pluralism, it has not been able to develop any coherent, alternative, authentic language of its own. It has preferred, instead, the arbitrary poaching, interception, and cannibalization upon the existing expression by breaking the rules of English grammar, for example, turning them upside down, in the same manner that it exploits other conventional behavior patterns by turning them on their heads, inverted, as it were. Consequently, the world now has on its hands one of the most crass and capricious forms of political interference in a matter like grammar that ought to be scientific, predictable, and apolitical.

Of the dreadful deformities, linguistic decay appears to be the least baleful, but this is only in appearance because the deterioration is symbolic of a deeper malaise pointing to a general state of being divested of any form of accountability in the country. In truth, this linguistic brigandage is an alarming oddity, and Nigerian writers make obeisance of it to their own peril; the mantle of tradition is so important they should maintain it, while those of them who have lost it should reclaim it. In the bastardization of language overtaking society, the English language is certainly at the receiving end, taking the brunt of the degradation. As noted earlier in the discussions of Cole's *Open City* and Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, the third-generation literature of Nigeria bears ample testimony to this increasing violence being done to conventional rules of grammar. It is expressed mainly in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* through pronoun reference gaffes such as "Everyone chooses their path in life," defiantly matching a singular indefinite noun ("everyone") with a plural pronoun ("their") instead of "Everyone chooses his or her path" or "All people choose their paths"; "No one brings their daughter up to be raped," here mistakenly qualifying the singular noun "no one" with a plural pronoun "their"—where the correct usage should be "No one brings up his or her daughter to be raped" or "No parents bring up their daughter to be raped" (162, 168).

Similar misconstructions are found in "If he ever missed a visitor while he was out, he would ask us to describe them," here a singular noun, "a visitor," being mismatched with a plural pronoun "them" instead of a singular noun "him/her"; "I looked at everyone's lips and noted how their voices had suddenly become crisp" and "everyone shut their windows," both of which obstinately pair the singular noun "everyone" with the plural pronoun "their" instead of the singular

“his/her”; as well as “So you are saying none of Mr. Alao’s children are his?” and “It was revealed in the hospital today that none of my children are my children,” for “So you are saying none of Mr. Alao’s children is his?” and “It was revealed in the hospital today that none of my children is my child” (195, 201, 202, 245, 265). With pronoun reference errors such as these in common usage, in which no differentiations are made between singular and plural nouns and pronouns, the English language is now morphing into something else and no one can know what it may look like in a few years.

What is good for the goose is also good for the gander, says a common idiom; and so, critics of the literature, those considered to be knowledgeable enough to disseminate opinions on the works, too, ought to be held to an equivalent standard. A numbing sloppiness, like that exemplified by one study of Ojaide’s verse, cannot be conducive to the promotion of a robust critical tradition that can viably support creative literature.⁹ A reviewer of that outstandingly bumbling “critical” study does not mince words. He deplors such a practice, in which “a regional tendency to verbosity, bombast, and incoherence,” as seen in the character of Bomba Billy in “one of the plays published in Onitsha, *Veronica My Daughter*, a forerunner of Lakunle” in Soyinka’s play *The Lion and the Jewel*, “has now emerged in what is proffered as ‘a critical appraisal’ of the poetry of Tanure Ojaide.”¹⁰ This book, replete with a profusion of errors, demonstrates that even one of its kind is too many. Not only is it dominated by grammatical blunders—sentence fragments, comma splices, misplaced modifiers, fused sentences, and verbosity. Some of the major flaws have to do with other writing problems: non sequiturs, ad infinitum, poorly developed arguments, incoherence, redundancy, commonplace observations, and inchoate and haphazardly documented supporting data. One could not agree more with the reviewer of that Ojaide study, the eminent Soyinka scholar James Gibbs, who isn’t just expressing the usual aversion academics harbor toward elaborate and ornamental modes of writing. He is here registering genuine anxiety about errors in communication and triviality of argumentation that are gravely threatening both to the institution of literary interpretation and to the scholarly endeavor in general.

It is certainly one thing for creative writers to employ linguistic absurdity to dramatize characters’ levels of learning for purposes of comic relief, as Soyinka has done in his play. But it is another matter entirely for scholarship to adopt such grammatical errors willy-nilly or consistently. The wisdom of rigor in research and publishing in African literature as a whole and Nigerian literature specifically cannot be stressed strongly enough. As Professor Gibbs cogently puts it, if the younger generations of scholars are to have genuine models, never should Nigerian literature, or any literature for that matter, be as desultorily served as this book has treated Tanure Ojaide’s verse. That is why it is so disappointing to see so many up-and-coming Nigerian scholars so liberally but uncritically employing that “study” of Ojaide’s verse in their own publications.

Following that critically defective model, the emerging group of critics of Nigerian literature, casting itself adrift, unmoored to any form of aesthetic

contemplation, is not doing the field justice either. This group totally occludes the place of style, issues of evaluative criteria, and the critic's role in upholding them. It is enthusiastically tagging along with a profoundly unsound study without knowing the author's motives, and not even bothering to evaluate the quality of his scholarship. This group's effort to equalize all printed matter entirely defeats a fundamental purpose of quoting, which, as Ruth Finnegan cogently puts it, is to carry forward "something worthy of repetition."¹¹

Other than ostensibly to lend authority to the researcher's argument or presentation, another reason that scholars use quotations is surely to draw attention to something outstanding in a negative way—something so terrible the reader really has to see it for him/herself. But fairness in demonstrating a presumed weakness is not one of the attributes the group of young Nigerian intellectuals displays. Rather, this group is so partisan it tends to believe everything it hears without putting it to the test. This group is also so determined to discredit, if not wipe out the critical temper entirely, it is willing to demonize any evaluative criticism of its idol. It doesn't even spare research published in what had been until recently the continent's longest-running journal in the field, *African Literature Today*, considered by many under the tenure of its founding editor Eldred Jones the gold standard for criticism of African writing. Sound judgments reached there through meticulous research have been described by the emerging critics as "hasty," while the precise usefulness of such a purely subjective dismissal of a wholesome business of interpretation remains so highly questionable.

This group seems hard to recognize that issues of evaluation are already implied in the choice of terms used in its dismissive criticism, as they are in the very selection of texts scholars make the focus of critical enterprise. The presentation of purveyors of amply documented candid judgments by this group as enemies of the creative enterprise can only lead to a tame "critical" tradition. In the prevailing custom of the emerging fourth-generation scholars, who separate themselves from their predecessors in an increasingly "anything goes" culture, it is becoming fashionable to deny and overlook the literariness of texts. Under the governing ethics of politeness and the resulting stuntedness of the discriminating intelligence, perverting the tradition of rigor inherited from the founding fathers of Nigerian literary criticism¹² and their second- and third-generation descendants is seemingly becoming modish.¹³

This group, ignoring the example of its predecessors and pushing back on conventional critical practice, is saying that the evaluative treatise that applies to all writers across the board is no longer deserving of a place at the table. Yet, the group maintains such a stand even as it simultaneously carries out a form of evaluation by condemning any criticism of the works of its favorite authors that it blindly admires. Thus, absent aesthetic consideration as the wellspring of its viewpoint, the group offers no evidence to back up its claims, which therefore do not rise above the level of unsupported and shallow opinions. So lost is it in admiration of the authors it idolizes, this group fails to understand that, if literary study is, as Rene Wellek and Austin Warren say, "a species of knowledge and learning,"¹⁴ then analytic appraisal should be an intrinsic part of it to enable it to

serve as a reliable traveling guide for those embarking upon their maiden journeys in the reading process. Critical appreciation will stimulate others looking for help in developing a hierarchy of values and the appropriate attitudes toward reading but it cannot do that without what James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian call “respect for evidence.”¹⁵

On the other hand, if the interpretive venture loses its discriminating intelligence, it impoverishes itself irreversibly. It risks, for instance, mislaying its privileged sense of taste, allowing it to waste away and become redundant. Inevitably, literary interpretation conducted without a winnowing tool capable of establishing merit-based ranking will be an unreliable attendant to those readers who are its primary target audience. If the business of critique is not to so downgrade and to allow itself to be driven into irrelevance, like salt that loses its flavor, it should not be dismissive of the model of reading that R. E. Pritchard gives the nod to, in reviewing C. S. Lewis’s *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, pointing out as its hallmark the “confidence of taste, with valuable emphasis on the fundamental importance of literary quality.”¹⁶

More than ever before, those new to reading Nigerian literature need chaperones that are the genuine article. Informed guidance is particularly urgent in these days which are dominated by a public confusion of roles. So many individuals, organizations, cliques, and groups nowadays have developed the tendency to assume unmerited expertise on almost everything. Under these peculiar circumstances, in which people are becoming persistently profuse with advice on subjects which they actually know nothing about, critique should not give up its advantage by skirting the critical temper so that burgeoning readers, in Martha Banta’s felicitous phrasing, can have the wherewithal to “gain effective standards of judgment.”¹⁷ Those aspiring to undertake literary analysis and commentary on Nigerian literature should find a way to reassert evaluation’s prominence. Let us hope therefore that, within the provenance of commentary on, review, exegesis, interpretation, and analysis of Nigerian literature, there should always be room for fair appraisal. A meritocratic ranking of texts, authors, literary techniques, generations, and eras, should prevail. By the same token, it should not be too much to ask for unbiased assessment of the readers, the evaluators themselves, of every stripe, and their models of appreciation, interpretation, analysis, commentary, exegesis, and review.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, an informative study by Chinyere Nwahunanya, *A Harvest From from Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature* (Oweri: Springfield Publishers, 1996).
- 2 See Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966). Rep. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 38.
- 3 See Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1975).

- 4 R. W. Chambers, *Man's Unconquerable Mind: Studies of English Authors from Bede to A. E. Housman and W. P. Ker* (New York: Haskell House, 1967), p. 30.
- 5 See, for confirmation, the chapter of Will Bunch's book entitled "From Resentment of College to America's Rejection of Knowledge," in *After the Ivory Tower Falls: How College Broke the American dream and Blew Up Politics—and How to Fix It* (New York: William Morrow/Harper Collins, 2022), pp. 215–242.
- 6 A. D. Nuttall, *Dead from the Waist Down: Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. ix.
- 7 Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, pp. 91–103 (p. 96).
- 8 Jonathan Swift, "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue," London, 1712.
- 9 One unfortunate example is Tayo Olafioye's *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Critical Appraisal* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2000).
- 10 See James Gibbs, "Review of Tayo Olafioye's *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Critical Appraisal*," *World Literature Today* 76. 1 (Winter, 2002): 128. The critic has this to add: "From information on the back cover of the book, it seems that Olafioye is a professor of English at the University of California at San Diego. Unusually but significantly, the publishers have not supplemented this information by any endorsement of his book. Appallingly written, it deserves none.
 On the evidence of this volume, Olafioye is not equipped to write any sort of critical appraisal, at least not in English. On a basic level *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide* fails to conform to acceptable academic standards: Olafioye does not provide evidence that he has undertaken adequate background reading, and shows only a fleeting acquaintance with the ways in which critical material is presented ... There are only a few occasions when Olafioye 'deviates into sense,' but plowing through his turgid, error-strewn prose, the reader is occasionally rewarded by a 'howler' so blatant as to be collectable ... This is a sad and worrying volume. Malthouse must look into the process by which the title slipped onto their list of Critical Books, and strenuous effort should be made to keep it out of the hands of impressionable students. Underneath Olafioye's avalanche of ill-chosen words is Tanure Ojaide's verse: it deserves better than a Bomber Billy of a critic" (128).
- 11 Ruth Finnegan, *Why Do We Quote?: The Culture and History of Quotation* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), p. 64.
- 12 In no particular order, they include Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, Abiola Irele, Femi Ojo-Ade, Emmanuel Obiechina, Donatus Nwoga, Dan Izevbaye, Ayo Bamgbose, Sunday Anozie, M. J. C. Echeruo, Oyekan Owomoyela, Ben Obumelu, Charles Nnolim, Chinweizu, Onwucheka Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike, G. G. Darah, Ropo Sekoni, Samuel Omo Asein, Imeh Ikiddeh, Steve Ogude, Kolawole Ogungbesan, Chidi Amuta, F. Odun Balogun, Oladele Taiwo, Ayo Mamudu, Ernest Emenyonu, Romanus Egudu, Obi Maduakor, Chidi Maduka, Juliet Okonkwo, Molaro Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Isidore Okpewho, Niyi Osundare, Oyin Ogunba, Virginia U. Ola, Albert Ashaolu, E. C. Nwezeh, Chidi Ikonne, and Biodun Jeyifo, among others.
- 13 Prominent among these are Uzoma Ezonwane, Unionwan Edebiri, Chimalum Nwankwo, Isaac Ellimimian, Nelson Chidi Okonkwo, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Adeeko Adeleke, Harry Garuba, Catherine Acholonu, Tejumola Olaniyan, Grace Okafor, Damian Opata, Onookome Okome, J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agabada, Moradewun Adejunmobi, Charles Bodunde, Chinyere Nwahunanya, and Obododimma Oha. By no means does this listing make any pretext to be exhaustive in its mention of Nigerian literary critics; it does, however, only want to give a few examples, and the author would like forthwith to issue a pre-emptive apology to anyone who might feel slighted by not finding his or her name on this rather short roster.

- 14 Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* new rev. ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984), p. 15.
- 15 James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, eds. *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 1.
- 16 R. E. Pritchard, "Tudor and Elizabethan," in Hawkins-Day, ed. *A Reader's Guide to Literature in English* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1996), pp. 91–92 (p. 91).
- 17 Martha Banta, *One True Theory and the Quest for an American Aesthetic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 22.

Bibliography

- Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. New York: Farrar, 2005.
- Abani, Chris. "Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self." In Michael Hanne, ed. *Creativity and Exile*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2004. 21–30.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958.
- Achebe, Chinua. *No Longer at Ease*. London: Heinemann, 1960.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann, 1964.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Girls at War and Other Stories*. London: Heinemann, 1972.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1975.
- Adéèkó, Adéléke. *Arts of Being Yoruba: Divination, Allegory, Tragedy, Proverb, Pangeyric*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017.
- Adesanmi, Pius and Chris Dunton, ed. *English in Africa 32. 1 New Nigerian Writing* (May 2005).
- Adesanmi, Pius and Chris Dunton. *Research in African Literatures 39. 2 Nigeria's Third-Generation Novel: Preliminary Theoretical Engagements* (2008).
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. "Heavy Traffic." *Saiwa*, 1(1984): 3.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. "From the Only Speech that was not Delivered at the Rally." *Saiwa*, 1 (1984): 4–6.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. "Now That the Weather Man is Gone Crazy." *Saiwa*, 1 (1984): 2.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. New York: Knopf, 2013.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. New York: Knopf, 2009.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Knopf, 2006.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2003.
- Aiyejina, Funso. *A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems*. Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1988.
- Aiyejina, Funso. "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition." In Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present* Vol. 1. Lagos: Guardian Books, Nigeria. 112–128.
- Aiyejina, Funso. *The Legend of the Rockhills and Other Stories*. Toronto: Tsar, 1999.
- Ajima, Maria. *The Web*. Makurdi: Fambi Nigeria, Ltd., 1999.
- Alkali, Zainab. *The Stillborn*. London: Longman, 1984.
- Aluko, T. M. *Kinsman and Foreman*. London: Heinemann, 1966.
- Aluko, T. M. *His Worshipful Majesty*. London: Heinemann, 1973.
- Amadi, Elechi. *The Great Ponds*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books, 1989.

- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *Fragments*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *Why Are We So Blest?* New York: Doubleday, 1972.
- Atta, Sefi. *Everything Good Will Come*. Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2007.
- Atta, Sefi. *A Bit of Difference*. Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2012.
- Atta, Sefi. *Swallow*. Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2010.
- Auden, W. H. W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts," in Sven P. Birkerts, *Literature: The Evolving Canon* 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996. 674.
- Ayebode, Femi. "Poem." *Saiwa*, 4 (1987): 59.
- Bâ, Mariama. *Uni Si Longue Lettre*, tr. by Modupe Bode-Thomas as *So Long a Letter*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1981.
- Babalola, S. A. *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- Balogun, Odun F. *Adjusted Lives*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995.
- Bangbose, Ayo. *The Novels of D. O. Fagunwa*. Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope Publishing, 1974.
- Banta, Martha. *One True Theory and the Quest for an American Aesthetic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Barber, Karin. *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Barber, Karin. *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and written culture in Africa and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Barber, Karin. *A History of African Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Barnes, Sandra T. *Patrons and Power: Creating a Political Community in Metropolitan Lagos*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Basserman, Lawrence, ed. *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*. New York: Garland, 1996.
- Bate, W. Jackson, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1970.
- Beier, Ulli and Gerald Moore, ed. *Modern Poetry from Africa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. Revised as *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, 4th ed., 1999.
- Beier, Ulli and Gerald Moore. *The Stolen Images*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Berman, Russell. "Politics: Divide and Rule." *Modern Language Quarterly*, 62. 4 (2001): 317–330.
- Beti, Mongo. *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. London: Heinemann, 1971.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.
- Bradbury, Malcolm and James McFarlane, ed. *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*. London: Penguin, 1991.
- Bryce, Jane. "Half and Half Children: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel." *Research in African Literatures*, 39. 2 (2008): 49–67.
- Buchan, John. *Prester John*. London: Thomas Nelson, 1910.
- Bunch, Will. "From Resentment of College to America's Rejection of Knowledge." In *After the Ivory Tower Falls: How College Broke the American dream and Blew Up*

- Politics—and How to Fix It*. New York: William Morrow/Harper Collins, 2022, pp. 215–242.
- Carey, Joyce. *The African Witch*. London: Carfax, 1951.
- Carey, Joyce. *Aissa Saved*. London: Carfax, 1952.
- Cary, Joyce. *Mister Johnson*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939; new ed. 1962.
- Chalabi, Fadhil J. *Oil Policies, Oil Myths: Observations of an OPEC Insider*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2010.
- Chambers, R. W. *Man's Unconquerable Mind: Studies of English Authors from Bede to A. E. Housman and W. P. Ker*. New York: Haskell House, 1967.
- Chandler, James, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, eds. *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Chrisman, Laura. *Reading the Imperial Romance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Clark, John Pepper. *Song of a Goat*. Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1961.
- Clark, John Pepper. *Poems*. Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1961.
- Clark, John Pepper. *America, Their America*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1964.
- Clark, John Pepper. *A Reed in the Tide*. London: Longman, 1965.
- Clark, John Pepper. *Casualties*. London: Longman, 1970.
- Clark, John Pepper. *A Decade of Tongues*. London: Longman, 1981.
- Clark, John Pepper. *State of the Union*. London: Longman, 1985.
- Cooper, Barbara M. *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in a Hausa Society in Niger*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006.
- Cole, Teju. *Open City*. New York: Random House, 2012.
- Coly, Ayo A. *Postcolonial Hauntologies: African Women's Discourses of the Female Body*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Harpers, 1910.
- Cooper, Brenda. *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2008.
- Cordell, Dennis. "Paradoxes of Immigrant Incorporation: High Achievement and Perceptions of Discrimination by Nigerians in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas (USA)," In Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi, ed. *Trans-Atlantic Migration: The Paradoxes of Exile*, New York: Routledge, 2008. 13–28.
- Dinesen, Isak. *Out of Africa*. London: Putnam, 1937.
- D'Almeida, Irene Assiba. *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845)*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Egbuna, Obi. *Wind versus Polygamy*. London: Faber, 1964.
- Echeruo, Michael J. C. *Mortality*. London: Longman, 1968.
- Ekwensi, Cyprian. *People of the City*. London: Heinemann, 1954.
- Ekwensi, Cyprian. *Jagua Nana*. London: Heinemann, 1961.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Wasteland: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot. London: Faber, 1971. Rep. *The Wasteland and Other Poems*. Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2011.
- Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent," In Frank Kermode, ed. *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber, 1975. 37–44.
- Emenyonu, Ernest N. ed., *A Companion to Chaimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2017.

- Eze, Chielozone. "Feminist Empathy: Unsettling African Cultural Norms in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives." *African Studies*, 74. 3 (2015): 310–326.
- Ezonwane, Uzoma, ed. *Critical Essays on Christopher Okigbo*. New York: G. K Hall & Co, 2000.
- Fagunwa, D. O. D.O. *Igbo Olodumare*. Edinburgh: Nelson, 1949
- Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. New York: Smith and Haas, 1932.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Poetry in Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Why Do We Quote?: The Culture and History of Quotation*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Translated by Alan Russell. New York: Viking Penguin, 1951.
- Garuba, Harry, ed. *Voices from the Fringe*. Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1988.
- Garuba, Harry. *Shadow & Dream and other poems*. Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1982.
- Garuba, Harry. "The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-Figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry," *English in Africa*, 32. 1 New Nigerian Writing (2005): 51–72.
- Gerard, Albert. *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa* Vol. 1. Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1986.
- Gibbs, James. "Review of Tayo Olafioye's *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Critical Appraisal*." *World Literature Today*, 76. 1 (Winter, 2002): 128.
- Giwa, Audee T. *I'd Rather Die*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1994.
- Goldsby, Jacqueline. *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Greene, Graham. *The Heart of the Matter*. London: Heinemann, 1948.
- Griswold, Wendy. *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Habila, Helon. *Measuring Time*. New York: Norton, 2007.
- Habila, Helon. *Oil On Water*. New York: Norton, 2011.
- Habila, Helon. *Waiting for An Angel*. New York: Norton, 2004.
- Haggard, Ryder. *Ayesha*. London: Ward Lock, 1905.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hawkes, Terence. *Metaphor (The Critical Idiom)*. London: Methuen, 1972.
- Head, Bessie. *Maru*. London: Heinemann, 1971.
- Healey, Joseph E. *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change Fourth Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006. 154–155.
- Herman, Melville. *Moby Dick (1851)*, Oxford World's Classics with an introduction by Patrick McGrath, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Hight, Gilbert. *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Hughes, Winifred. *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1880s*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Iyayi, Festus. *Heroes*. London: Longman, 1986.
- Iyayi, Festus. *Violence*. London: Longman, 1979.
- Jones, Eldred Durosimi. *Othello's Countrymen*. Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Jones, Eldred Durosimi. *The Freetown Bond: A Life Under Two Flags*. Oxford: James Currey, 2012.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*, rev. ed., New York: Modern Library-Random House, 1961.
- Joyce, James. "Eveline." In *Dubliners*. London: Grant Richards, 1914.

- Kafka, Franz. *Metamorphosis*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1946.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. *Common Woman: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Kelly, M. Bernice (compiler) and Janet L. Stanley (editor), *Nigerian Arts: A Who's Who and Bibliography*. London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1993.
- King, Bruce, ed. *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*. Lagos: University of Lagos/Evans Brothers, 1972.
- King, Bruce and Kolawole Ogungbesan, ed. *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*. Zaria and Oxford: Ahmadu Bello University Press and Oxford University Press, 1975.
- King, Bruce. "Nationalism, Internalization, Periodization, and Commonwealth Literature." In Bruce King, ed. *From New National to World Literature: Essays and Reviews*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2016. 157–167 (p. 162).
- Larson, Charles. *The Emergence of African Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.
- Launko, Okinba. *Minted Coins*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1987.
- Laye, Camara. *Enfant noir* (Paris, Plon, 1953); translated as *The African Child*, trans. James Kirkup (London: Collins, 1955).
- Laye, Camara. *The Dark Child, American edition, with an introduction by Philippe Thoby-Macelin* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955).
- Lessing, Doris. *The Grass is Singing*. London: Michael Joseph, 1950.
- Lewis, C. S. *Oxford History of English Literature: English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- Lo Lyon, Taban. *Fixons and other stories*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- Lo Lyon, Taban. *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs*. London: Heinemann, 1971.
- Maduakor, Obi. "Female Voices in Poetry: Catherine Acholonu and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie as Poets," in Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo, ed. *Nigerian Female Writers*. Lagos: Malthouse Press, Ltd., 1989. 75–91.
- Mapanje, Jack. "Smiller's Bar." *Saiwa*, 4 (1987): 39.
- Marcus, George. *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- May, Charles. "The American Short Story in the Twenty-First Century," In Viorica Pâtea, ed. *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First Century Perspective*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007.
- Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking Press, 1949.
- Moore, Gerald. *Seven African Writers*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Moore, Gerald. *Wole Soyinka*. London: Evans Brothers, 1971.
- Moore, Gerald. *Twelve African Writers*. London: Hutchinson, 1980.
- Morris, Andreas. "25-Year-Old Nigerian Christian Student Killed, Body Burned By Classmates Over 'Blasphemous' WhatsApp Message." *CBSNews.com*, May 14, 2022.
- Munonye, John. *The Only Son*. London: Heinemann, 1966.
- Musa, Umma Aliyu. *Emotions in Muslim Hausa Women's Fiction: More than Just Romance*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Newell, Stephanie. "From the Brink of Oblivion: The Anxious Masculinism of Nigerian Market Literatures." *Research in African Literatures*, 27. 3 (Fall, 1996): 50–67.
- Newell, Stephanie, ed. *Writing African Women*. London: Zed Books, 1997.
- Newell, Stephanie. *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.
- Newman, Edward. *Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English?* New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974.

- Ndibe, Okey. *Arrows of Rain*. London: Heinemann, 2000.
- Ndibe, Okey. *Foreign Gods, INC*. New York: Soho Press, 2014.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Nuttall, A. D. *Dead from the Waist Down: Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Nwachukwu-Agbada, J. O. J. "Tears of Laughter." *Saiwa*, 4 (1987): 47–48.
- Nwachukwu-Agbada, J. O. J. "Aliases Among the Anambra-Igbo: The Proverbial Dimension." *Names*, 39. 2 (June, 1991): 81–94.
- Nwahunanya, Chinyere. *A Harvest From Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature*. Oweri: Springfield Publishers, 1996.
- Nwahunanya, Chinyere. *Tragedy in Anglophone West African Literature*. Owerri: Springfield Publishers, 2003.
- Nwankwo, Chimalum. *Feet of the Limping Dancers*. Enugu: Abic Publishers, 1987.
- Nwankwo, Chimalum. *Toward the Aerial Zone*. Lagos: Africa Spearpoint Publishers, 1988.
- Nwankwo, Chimalum. *Voices from Deep Water*. Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1997.
- Nwankwo, Chimalum. *The Womb in the Earth & Other Poems*. San Francisco: Africa Heritage Press, 2002.
- Nwankwo, Nkem. *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1975.
- Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru*. London: Heinemann, 1966.
- Nwapa, Flora. *One is Enough*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1992
- Nwoga, Donatus, ed. *West African Verse*. London: Longmans, 1967.
- Nwoga, Donatus. "Poetry as Revelation: Wole Soyinka," In James Gibbs, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1980, pp. 173–185.
- Nwana, Pita. *Omenuko*. London: The Atlantis Press, 1935.
- Nzekwu, Onuora. *Wand of Noble Wood*. London: Hutchinson, 1961.
- Nwana, Pita. *Blade Among the Boys*. London: Hutchinson, 1964.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. *Onitsha Market Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. "Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel." *Research in African Literatures*, 24. 4 (1993): 123–140.
- Ogede, Ode. "Review of Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present* 2 vols. Lagos: Guardian Books Nigeria, 1988." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 60. 4 (1990): 555–558.
- Ogede, Ode. "Billets of Prose: Ojaide's 'Poetic' Discourse in Labyrinths of the Delta," *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 17.2 (July 1995): 102–110.
- Ogede, Ode. "Review of Audee T. Giwa, *I'd Rather Die*," *World Literature Today*, 69. 4 (1995), pp. 855–856.
- Ogede, Ode. *Art, Society, and Performance: Igede Praise Poetry*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997.
- Ogede, Ode. "Poetry and Repression in Contemporary Nigeria: Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta*." *African Literature Today: New Trends and Generations*, 20 (1996): 62–72.

- Ogede, Ode. *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast: Pitting Imaginary Worlds against the Actual*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000.
- Ogede, Ode. "Exile and the Female Imagination: The Nigerian Civil War, Western Ideology (Feminism) and the Poetry of Catherine Acholonu," *Neohelicon*, XXVI.1 (1999): 125–134; reprinted in *African Literature Today* 22 (2000): 90–99.
- Ogede, Ode. *Achebe and the Politics of Representation: Form Against Itself from Colonial Conquest to Occupation and Independence*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001.
- Ogede, Ode. "Popular Literature in Africa." In F. Abiola Irele and S. Gikandi, ed. *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 626–642.
- Ogede, Ode. "Review of Tanure Ojaide's *Poetry, Performance, and Art: Udje Dance Songs of the Urhobo People*." *Research in African Literatures*, 37. 1 (2006): 129–130.
- Ogede, Ode. *Achebe's Things Fall Apart: Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum, 2007.
- Ogede, Ode. *Intertextuality in Contemporary African Literature*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2011.
- Ogunbiyi, Yemi, ed. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present* 2 vols. Lagos: Guardian Books Nigeria, 1988.
- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Ohaeto, Ezenwa. *I wan Bi President*. Enugu: Delta, 1988.
- Okara, Gabriel. *The Voice*. London: Heinemann, 1964.
- Okara, Gabriel. *The Fisherman's Invocation*. Benin: Ethiope Publishing, 1978.
- Okigbo, Christopher. *Labyrinths with Paths of Thunder*. London: Heinemann, 1971.
- Okonkwo, Chidi. *Decolonization Agnostics in Postcolonial Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1999.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *Victims*. London: Longman, 1970.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *The Last Duty*. London: Longman, 1976.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *Tides*. Essex, UK: Longman, 1993.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991.
- Ola, Virginia U. "Identity Crisis in the Tragic Novels of Isidore Okpewho." *African Literature Today: Recent Trends*, 13 (1983): 56–68.
- Olafioye, Tayo. *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Critical Appraisal*. Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2000.
- Olatunji, O Olatunde. *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry*. Ibadan: University Press, Ltd., 1984.
- Olney, James. *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Omotoso, Kole. *The Edifice*. London: Heinemann, 1971.
- Omotoso, Kole. *The Combat*. London: Heinemann, 1972.
- Omotoso, Kole. *Sacrifice*. Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1974.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Songs of the MarketPlace*. Ibadan: New Horn, 1983.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Village Voices*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers Nigeria, 1984.
- Osundare, Niyi. *The Eye of the Earth*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1986.
- Osundare, Niyi. "Echoes from the Rural Abyss." *Saiwa*, 4 (1987): 46.

- Osundare, Niyi. *Moonsongs*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1988.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Waiting Laughter*. Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1990.
- Otokunefor, Henrietta and Obiageli Nwodo (eds), *Nigerian Female Writers*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 1989.
- Ousmane, Sembene. *God's Bits of Wood*. London: Heinemann, 1960.
- Ousmane, Sembene. *Xala*. Tr. by Clive Wake, London: Heinemann, 1976.
- Oyono, Ferdinand. *Houseboy*. London: Heinemann, 1966.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan. *Amos Tutuola Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1999.
- Paton, Alan. *Cry, the Beloved Country*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1948.
- Peters, Lenrie. *The Second Round*. London: Heinemann, 1965.
- Peters, Lenrie. *Satellites*. London: Heinemann, 1967.
- Poirier, Richard. *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Poovey, Mary. *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Prichard, R. E. "Tudor and Elizabethan." In Hawkins-Day, ed. *A Reader's Guide to Literature in English*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1996, pp. 91–92.
- Raji, Remi. "Ibadan and the Memory of a Generation: From the Poetry Club to the Premier Circle," *English in Africa*, 32. 1 New Nigerian Writing (May 2005): 21–35.
- Randall, Richard S. *Freedom and Taboo: Pornography and the Politics of a Self Divided*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989.
- Richards, I. A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1924.
- Rotimi, Ola. *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Sacks, Peter M. *The English Elegy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *Sozaboy*. Port Harcourt: Saro International, 1993.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello* (originally published in 1603).
- Schreiner, Olive. *The Story of an African Farm*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1883.
- Smith, Rowland. "Rewriting the Frontier: Wilderness and Social Code in the Fiction of Alice Munro." In Jacqueline Bardolph, ed. *Telling Stories*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001: 77–90.
- Shoneyin, Lola. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. New York: William Morrow, 2010.
- Sollors, Werner. *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Inter-racial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Soyinka, Wole. *A Dance of the Forests*. Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Strong Breed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Interpreters*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1965.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Idanre and other Poems*. London: Methuen, 1967.
- Soyinka, Wole. *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. London: Rex Collins, 1971.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Man Died*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Mandela's Earth and other Poems*. Ibadan: Fountain Publications, 1989.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Climate of Fear: The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World*. New York: Random House, 2005.

- Soyinka, Wole. *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*. New York: Pantheon, 2020.
- Swift, Jonathan. "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue." London, 1712.
- Tahir, Ibrahim. *The Last Imam*. London: Kegan Paul, 1985.
- Taiwo, Oladele. *Culture and the Nigerian Novel*. London: Macmillan, 1976.
- ten Kortenaar, Neil. *Debt, Law, Realism: Nigerian Writers Imagine the State at Independence*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021.
- Thomas, Nicholas. *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Tutuola, Amos. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town*. London: Faber, 1952.
- Tutuola, Amos. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. London: Faber, 1954.
- Ulasi, Adaora. *Many Thing You No Understand*. London: Michael Joseph, 1970.
- Ulasi, Adaora. *Many Thing Begin for Change*. London: Michael Joseph, 1971.
- Underwood, Ted. *Why Literary Periods Mattered*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.
- Unigwe, Chika. *On Black Sisters Street*. New York: Random House, 2009.
- Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. and Onno Van Der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." In Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 158–182.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Weep Not, Child*. London: Heinemann, 1964.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *The River Between*. London: Heinemann, 1965.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann, 1967.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Petals of Blood*. London: Heinemann, 1978.
- Weinberg, Samuel Kirson. *Incest behavior*. New York: Citadel Press, 1955.
- Wellek, Rene and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature* new rev. ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984.
- White, Ellen. *The Desire of Ages*. Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2005.
- White, Hayden. "The Fictions of Factual Representation." In Angus Fletcher, ed. *The Literature of Fact: Selected Papers from the English Institute*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976, 21–44.
- Wilmot, Patrick F. "Untitled," *Saiwa*, 1 (1984): 7.
- Wonodi, Okogbule. *Icheke and Other Poems*. Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1964.
- Wright, Edgar, ed. *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature*. London: Heinemann, 1973.
- Zell, Hans, Carol Bundy and Virginia Coulon, ed. *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature*. London: Heinemann, 1983.

Index

Note: Page numbers followed by “n” refer to notes.

- Abani, C. 2, 127
abortion 168, 208, 237
accent 84–85
accommodation 84, 151
Achebe, C. 2, 12, 16, 28, 36, 40, 155, 284, 286, 288, 289, 292, 293; *Arrow of God* 9, 11, 32, 243; *Man of the People*, A 8, 49; *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 288, 297–298; *No Longer at Ease* 69, 165; *There Was a Country* 7; *Things Fall Apart* 7, 10, 31, 32, 228, 243, 263, 284; “Vengeful Creditor” 206
Acholonu, C. 12, 29
Adéèkó, A.: *Arts of Being Yoruba* 227
Adepeju, K. 23
Adetoro, S. A. 16
Adichie, C. N. 35, 40; *Purple Hibiscus* 247; *Thing Around Your Neck*, *The* 39, 247–285
adultery 210
affective theory of music 135–137
African internecine tribal wars 159
African internecine wars 157
African Literature Today 26, 296
Africanness of the African novel 25
African Studies Association of America (ASA) 23
Ahmadu Bello University 15, 17, 18, 20, 22–24, 292
Aidoo, A. A.: “From the Only Speech that was not Delivered at the Rally” 17; “Heavy Traffic” 17; “Now That the Weather Man is Gone Crazy” 17
Ajima, M. 21, 35; *Web*, *The* 8, 39, 47–70, 247
Akolo, J. 16
alcoholism 194–195
alienation, mental and psychological
 anguish of 131
Alkali, Z. 2
allegory 8, 38, 71, 113, 247, 262, 263, 277
American exceptionalism 289
American hegemonic order 127
ammunition 147
anapestic hexameter 118
ANA see Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA)
anecdote 31, 153, 247
Aniakor, C. 16
animalistic behavior 215
anti-Semitism 148
Aquinas, T. 190
Armah, A. K.: *Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *The* 16, 152, 270; *Why Are We So Blest?* 83
Armatoe, G. 32
armed robbery 36, 58–62, 204, 242, 247, 250, 253
ASA see African Studies Association of America (ASA)
assimilation 84, 110, 151, 269, 271
Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) 14, 15, 18
Atta, S. 40
Auden, W. H.: “Musée des Beaux Arts” 199
authoritarianism 228
autocratic subjugation 227
automobiles 78–79
autonomy 213
Awoonor, K.: *This Earth, My Brother* 16
Ayebode, F.: “Poem” 17

- Bâ, M.: *Une Si Longue Lettre* (trans So Long a Letter) 244
- Balogun, F. O. 2
- Banta, M. 297
- baptism 161, 173
- Bate, W. J. 6–7
- Baye, R. 16
- Beattie, A. 48
- Bentu, L. T. 16
- bigotry 114, 129, 144, 145, 241, 280
- bi-racial 9, 117–119, 127, 144
- Bloom, L. 142
- body shaming 214
- Boko Haram insurgencies 204
- bondage 121–122
- Bradbury, M. 5–6
- Braddon, M. 238
- bribery 56, 247
- Brueghel, P. 199
- bullying 214, 221, 234, 236, 253
- bureaucratic red tape and inefficiency 204
- cannibalism 10, 48, 63
- Carver, R. 48
- Chambers, R. W. 290
- Chandler, J. 297
- child-bearing 222, 225, 228
- childlessness 220, 222, 229, 234, 245n17
- child molestation 173, 179
- Chinweizu 29
- Christian fundamentalism 97–103, 157, 173, 204
- civilization 3–5, 28, 32, 122, 143, 223, 290
- Civil War 36
- Clark-Bekederemo, J. P. 2, 16, 27, 29, 31, 289, 293; “Abiku” 13; *America, Their America* 261; “Ibadan” 13; “Okokun” 13; *Song of a Goat* 32
- class analysis 24
- classism 247
- class oppression 159
- class prejudice 204, 231
- cognitive impairment 166
- Cole, T. 35, 38; *Open City* 9, 10, 33, 37, 39, 113–156, 242, 294
- collegiality 231
- Collins, W. 238
- colonization 10, 11, 28, 32
- Coly, A. A.: *Postcolonial Hauntologies* 226
- commercial advertising 213
- commercialism 22, 211–212
- commoditization 75
- competitive distribution of scarce resources, politics of 217–218
- conspicuous consumption 36, 143
- conspiracy of fate 201
- Cook, D. 16
- corruption 8, 9, 19, 21, 31, 35, 36, 48–49, 51, 53–55, 57, 68, 69, 71, 86, 91–93, 97, 152, 161, 171, 204, 232, 247, 251, 252, 254, 256, 257, 293
- Crashaw, R. 13
- Creative Writers Workshop 18
- criminality 143
- cultural relativism 269
- cultural seismology 5
- culture of mismanagement 204
- custody rights 212
- Dadie, B. 32
- D’Almeida, I. A. 222
- Davidson, A. I. 297
- debunking 31
- dehumanization 84, 119, 183, 186, 235, 262, 279
- Dei-Anang, M. 32
- demonization 144
- depersonalization 183, 184
- depression 110, 134, 155, 191
- despotism 219, 235
- dialect 34
- Dickens, C. 238, 293
- Diop, B. 32
- Diop, D. 32
- dirge 29, 129
- dishonesty 9
- disreputable behavior, glamorization of 35
- domestic violence 173, 212, 219
- Donne, J. 13
- Douglass, F.: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* 121
- Echeruo, M. J. C. 27; *Mortalities* 13
- economic deprivation 170
- economic disempowerment 34, 41, 110
- economic marginalization 1, 28
- economic mismanagement 36
- economic recovery 21
- economic torture 159
- Ede, A. 2
- egalitarianism 273
- Egejuru, P. 14
- egocentrism 91

- egotistic self-indulgence 87
 Ekwensi, C. 2, 31; *Jagua Nana* 11–12
 elegy 34, 114, 130
 Eliot, T. S. 272, 284; “Love Song of Alfred
 Prufrock, The” 275–276; *Waste Land*,
The 22
 emblem 8, 34, 38, 47, 50, 90, 217, 223, 259
 emotional disequilibrium 130
 emotional gratification 213
 emotional injury 193
 emotional torture 36
 employment: authorization 80; corporate
 80; discrimination 84–85
 empowerment 189, 232, 257
 Enekwe, O. 29
 English language usage 115–118, 288–289,
 291–295, 298
 English Literary Association 17
 environmental degradation 36
 equality 116, 121, 213, 219
 equal property right to women 212
 equanimity 237
 Etherton, M. 16
 ethnicity 110, 117, 153, 164, 165
 ethnic pluralism 84
 ethnic polarization 28
 ethnic prejudice 159, 164
 ethnography 202, 203
 evangelization 104
 Ewule, J. 16
 extremism 148, 290
 Ezenwa-Ohaeto, C. 21–22; *I wan bi*
president: poems in formal and pidgin
English 22
- Fagunwa, D. O. 2; *Igbo Olodumare* 42n1
 fatalistic attitude 133
 fatalistic paradox 36
 fatal temptation 159
 father–child interactions 228
 Fatunde, T. 14
 Faulkner, W.: *Light in August* 118
 female celibacy 245n7
 female chastity 245n7
 female sexual pleasure 226
 financial gratification 75–77
 Finnegan, R. 296
 Fitzgerald, F. S.: *Great Gatsby*, *The* 71
 flattery 169, 171, 232
 forced marriage 207
 Ford, R. 48
 frantic fear 176
- Gabriel-Adewale, T. 2
 gang rape 160
 Garuba, H. 14, 15, 18
 gender representation 2
 generosity 96, 105, 148, 178, 237
 genocide 160, 162
 germaphobia 162
 Gibbs, J. 16
 Giwa, A. T.: *I’d Rather Die* 22
Good Housekeeping All-American
Cookbook 270
 gothic frame 118
 graciousness 237
 grammar 289, 293, 294
 graphic pictorialism 34
 “green card bride” scam 81–83
 Griswold, W.: *Bearing Witness* 25
- Habila, H. 2
 Harley, R. 293
 Harootunian, H. 297
 Hartman, S. V. 121
 hate crimes 144
 Hawkes, T. 47
 Healey, J. F. 120–121
 health care 55
 hegemonic politics 35
 Hemingway, E. 284
 Highet, G.: *Classical Tradition*, *The* 3–4
 hijacking 56
 Homer 12
 housing 21, 32, 55, 85, 271
 humiliation 114, 164, 186, 209, 234,
 253, 280
 hybridization 113
 hyper-individualism 132
 hyper-realism 48
 hyper-self-consciousness 150
 hypocrisy 80, 144–145, 151; of double
 moral standards 204; institutional 84;
 politics of 197; rank 175; religious 104
- iambic pentameter 117–118
 Ibadan project 16, 17
 identity crisis 127–128
 identity transfer 184
 Idi Bukar (aka John Haynes) 22–26; *First*
the Desert Came and Then the Torturer
 22–23, 26
 idiosyncratic linguistic mannerism 96–97
 Ifeoma, O. 2
 Illah, E.: “Kabukabu” 19–22, 24

- immigration 1, 20, 41, 78–80, 92, 93, 113, 114, 125, 126, 130, 132, 148, 150, 151, 153, 157, 261, 272, 277, 278, 279, 282, 283
- incantation 30
- inequality 121–122
- inequity 36, 84, 116, 219, 244, 274
- infrastructural decay 204
- Inikori, J. E. 23
- injustice 28, 32, 84, 85, 117, 148, 149, 177, 204, 208, 240, 242
- insecurity 1, 8, 23, 35, 36, 48, 58, 138, 242, 247, 252, 258, 275; debt-retirement 232; economic 19; financial 187; social 19
- institutional hypocrisy 84
- institutional racism 84, 118
- insubordination 87
- intellectual superiority 129
- intolerance 150, 229; racial 280; religious 282, 283
- introspective technique 130
- Ipadeola, T. 2
- Iyayi, F. 2
- Jegede, D. 16
- Jones, E. D. 26, 39, 41; *Freetown Bond, The* 16
- Joyce, J.: *Ulysses* 12
- Kafka, F. 180; “Metamorphosis” 66
- Karras, R. M. 182–183
- Keats, J.: “Ode on a Grecian Urn” 47
- kidnappings 36, 203–204
- kindness 237
- Kuka* 17
- Kuti, F. 149
- lament 128–129
- landscape, architectural transformation of 94–95
- Larson, C.: *Emergence of African Fiction, The* 44n44
- Launko, O. (Femi Osofisan) 2, 30; *Minted Coins* 30
- Laye, C.: *Dark Child, The* 37; *L’Enfant noir* (translated as *The African Child*) 37
- leisure-walks 137
- Lewis, C. S.: *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* 297
- liberty 213
- lifelike dialogue 34
- linguistic absurdity 71, 93, 95–97, 102, 104, 111, 204, 289, 291, 294–295
- linguistic decay 289–290, 293–294
- Lo Liyong, T. 16; *Fixons* 15; *Frantz Fanon’s Uneven Ribs* 15
- Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde* 135
- mania of rich and powerful people 85–91
- manic depression 191
- Mapanje, J.: “Smiller’s Bar” 17
- marginalization: economic 1, 28; political 28
- marital rape 212
- Marvell, A. 13
- Marxism 24, 25
- Mason, B. A. 48
- materialism 48, 67
- material prosperity 172
- matrimony 226
- May, C. 48
- McFarlane, J. 5–6
- media, technological transformation of 94
- meditation 113, 135, 272
- Melville, H. 117; *Moby Dick* 118
- mental abuse 191
- mental disease 155
- mental torture 159, 161
- mercantilism 71, 75, 170, 204
- metaphor 9, 10, 39, 47, 48, 201
- Miller, A.: *Death of a Salesman* 110
- Milton, J. 13
- minimalism 48
- mismanagement: culture of 204, 243; economic 36
- misogyny 209
- mock epic 71, 72
- monogamy 212–213, 223
- moral confusion 28
- Morris, A. 283
- motherhood 41, 221, 222, 229, 237
- multi-ethnic marriage 261
- Munro, A. 280
- Ndibe, O. 35, 38, 176; *Foreign Gods, Inc.* 9, 11, 33, 37, 39, 71–112, 130, 294
- Ndu, P. 2, 29
- NEPA *see* Nigerian Electric Power Authority (NEPA)
- Newman, E. 114–115; *Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English?* 115
- New York Anatomy Act of 1789 123
- Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 (Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967–1970) 1, 29, 247
- Nigerian Electric Power Authority (NEPA) 95, 171

- Nsukka arts movement 16
 Nussbaum, M. C. 212, 219
 Nuttall, A. D.: *Dead from the Waist Down* 291
 Nwachukwu-Agbada, J. O. J. 27; "Tears of Laughter" 17
 Nwana, P. 2
 Nwankwo, C. 2, 30–31; *Voices from Deep Water* 30; *Womb in the Earth and Other Poems, The* 30
 Nwankwo, N.: *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours* 229
 Nwapa, F. 2, 12, 176
 Nwoga, D. 31, 57
 Nwoko, D. 16
- Obafemi Awolowo University 292
 obscurantism 13, 30
 obsessive individualism 132
 Odekunle, F. 23
 Ofeimun, O. 29
 Ogunbiyi, Y.: *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present* 29
 Ogundipe-Leslie, M. 16
 oil exploration 36
 Ojaide, T. 2, 29, 295
 Okafor, C. A. 269
 Okafor, D. 14, 29
 Okara, G. 27, 29, 31; *Fisherman's Invocations, The* 2, 13; "One Night at Victoria Beach" 13; "Piano and Drums" 13; "Snow Flakes Sail Gently Down, The" 13
 Okeke, U. 16; *Rev. Dr. Stanton: A Missionary's Misadventures in Africa* 73–74
 Okella, *The* 18
 Okigbo, C. 2, 12–14, 16, 27, 29–33, 40, 284, 289, 293; *Labyrinths: With Paths of Thunder* 13, 33; "Love Apart" 277; "Paths of Thunder, The" 33
 Okpe, T. 16
 Okpewho, I. 2; *Victims, The* 244
 Okri, B. 2
 Omi, M. 113
 Omotoso, K. 2
 Onitsha Market 2, 3
 Onobrakpeya, B. 16
 OPEC *see* Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)
 oppression 1, 24, 27, 35, 41, 104, 116, 119, 122, 165, 193, 200, 213, 221, 242–244, 286; class 159
 Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) 79
- Osadebay, D. 32
 Oshinowo, K. 16
 Osundare, N. 2, 29, 30; "Echoes from the Rural Abyss" 17–18; "Words of Iron, Sentences of Thunder: Soyinka's Prose Style" 30
 Ousmane, S.: *Xala* 243–244
 outrage 19, 26, 27, 32, 44n49, 84, 94, 106, 143, 175, 182, 186
 Owuor-Anyumba, H. 16
 Oyeyemi, H. 2
- parable 48, 71, 283
 Partington, J. E. 111n3
 paternalism 121, 261, 280
 "paternalistic" system 120–121
 patriarchy 41, 200, 208, 209, 215, 219, 220, 223, 226, 227, 229, 234, 243, 262, 263, 265; narcissistic 229
 patronage 49, 232
 p'Bitek, O. 16; *Horn of My Love* 15; *Song of Lawino and Song of Okot* 15, 32
 perennial student agitation 36
 personality disorders 86
 Peters, L. 15–16; "Homecoming" 16; *Satellites* 16; *Second Round, The* 16
 Phillips, J. A. 48
 phraseology 28
 physical abuse 189, 191
 physical torture 161
 physical violence 219
 pluralism 150, 294; ethnic 84; politics of 291
 poetic justice 239
 "Poetry and Repression in Contemporary Nigeria" 26–27
 Poirier, R.: *World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature, A* 287
 police brutality 21, 23, 24, 54–58, 290
 politically or financially motivated
 hostage-taking 36
 political marginalization 28
 polygamy 202, 203, 205, 212–215, 217–223, 228, 234, 241, 244, 245n18
 polygyny 1, 41, 202, 203, 213, 218, 221, 223, 224, 234, 242, 244, 284
 poverty 35, 41, 53, 55, 58, 66, 86, 133, 164, 170, 171, 188, 200, 204, 221, 274
 praise 257
 precociousness 174
 prejudice 132, 141, 292; class 204, 231; ethnic 159, 164; racial 189
 premarital sex 168, 208; prohibition of 159
 pronoun reference errors 294–295

- prostitution 1, 11–12, 41, 67, 157–159, 165–168, 170, 172, 175, 180–184, 187–192, 198–201, 205, 213, 219, 244; definition of 190; “degrading” nature of 182–183; delineation of 190
 psychological abuse 189, 191
 psychological gratification 213
 psychological realism 70
 psychological torture 36, 159, 161
 psychosis 155
 psychotherapy 163
 puzzlement 176

 race/racism 41, 113, 123, 141, 154, 270; bearing, politics of 144; bi-racial 9, 117–119, 127, 144; hierarchy 146; institutional 84, 118; racial anxiety 127; racial arrogance 261, 292; racial discrimination 260; racial formation 113; racial intolerance 280; racial misunderstandings 141; racial prejudice 189; racial profiling 41, 152, 260; relations 83, 118, 141; Western theories of 128
 racist hegemonic order 36
 Randall, R. S. 190
 rank ungraciousness 230
 Reade, C. 238
 Reed, J. 16
 rehabilitation programs 162
 rejuvenation 107
 relative tranquility 137
 religion: religious charlatanism 155; religious hypocrisy 97–104; traditional, diminished status of 9
 repression 18, 23, 33, 35, 82, 247, 257, 259
 “Resisting Repression in Nigeria: The Lyric Poetry of Femi Osofisan” 18–19
 respect for evidence 297
 rights of minorities 36
 ritual conduct 104
 ritual murder 236–237
 robotization 183–184
 romanticization 37
 Rotimi, O. 2, 40

 sadism 163
Saiwa 17, 23
 Scarry, E. 181
 schizophrenia 155
 sectarian violence 247, 282
 Sefi, A. 2
 Segun, M. 16
 self-aggrandizement 49, 57
 self-blame 208
 self-deception 240
 self-delusion 181
 self-denial 49
 self-disgust 191, 192, 209
 self-examination 208
 self-exploration 189, 190
 self-gain 49
 self-glorification 124
 self-gratification 176
 self-identification 270
 self-inadequacy 191
 self-interest 132
 selfishness 87
 self-loathing 192
 self-obsessiveness 150
 self-perpetuating bitterness 133–134
 self-pity 208
 self-preservation 132, 200, 211
 self-recrimination 208
 self-renunciation 269
 self-righteousness 240
 sensual gratification 213
 sex abuse 41, 126, 176, 219
 sex slaughterhouses 157
 sex trade 186
 sexual abuse 176, 219
 sexual arousal 217
 sexual assault 126, 166; verbal 225
 sexual battery 176, 225
 sexual brutalization 176, 204
 sexual immorality 274
 sexual licentiousness 247
 sexual molestation 177
 sexual mugging 225
 sexual promiscuity 155
 sexual teasing 237
 sexual torture 225
 sexual violation 161
 sexual violence 66, 132–133, 225, 226
 sex work 189
 Shakespeare, W. 293
 shame 192, 208, 220, 261
 sham idealism 171
 Shoneyin, L. 35, 40; *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, The* 33, 39, 41, 202–246, 294
 slavery 121; chattel 157, 200
 slave trade 120–121, 200
 Smith, R.: “Rewriting the Frontier” 280
 sociability 106
 social anxiety 128, 141
 social isolation 134
 social mobility 271

- solidarity 19, 27, 51, 138, 149, 216, 281
 Sollors, W. 114
 Soyinka, W. 2, 8, 16, 27, 30–32, 34, 36, 40, 286, 289, 292, 293; “Abiku” 13; *Chronicles of the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* 7; “Death in the Dawn” 13; *Kongi’s Harvest* 32; *Lion and the Jewel, The* 32, 223, 224, 295; *Man Died, The* 129, 130; *Strong Breed, The* 8, 63–65; “Telephone Conversation” 13
 SPLA *see* Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA)
 stealing 77–78
 stereotypes 31, 83, 132, 140, 146, 184, 205, 222; male, freedom from 41
 stigma 220
 stoicism 291–292
 Structural Adjustment Programmes (IMF) 27, 286
 subverted life narrative 158
 Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) 160
 Swift, J. 293; “A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue” 298
 systemic exploitation 123
 taboos 159, 210
 Tahir, I.: *Last Imam, The* 23
Thing Around Your Neck, The (Adichie) 39, 247–285; “American Embassy, The” 261; “Arrangers of Marriage, The” 265–271; “Cell One” 248, 249–260; “Imitation” 271–276, 284; “On Monday of Last Week” 276–277, 277–279; “Private Experience, A” 282–283; “Tomorrow is Too Far” 261–265, 279, 284
 Thiong, N. wa 103–104; *Grain of Wheat, A* 15; *River Between, The* 15, 32; *Weep Not, Child* 15
 triggering guilt 208
 Tutuola, A.: *Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Dead’s Town and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, The* 2
 Udechukwu, O. 16, 29
 Ukala, S. 14
 unallocated spousal rotations 219
 Unigwe, C. 10, 35, 38, 40; *On Black Sisters Street* 10–12, 39, 157–201, 205, 209
 United Nations 157, 162
 University of Benin 18
 University of Calabar 18
 University of Ibadan 23, 292
 University of Nigeria 248, 277, 292
 University of Lagos 123, 171, 292
 Usman, Y. B. 23
 utopianism 37
 Van Der Hart, O. 133
 Van Der Kolk, B. 133
 Vaughan, H. 13
 vengeance 239
 verisimilitude 34, 134, 248
 victimhood 229, 265
 victimization 103
 violence 119–120, 147, 161, 279; domestic 173, 212, 219; physical 219; prevalence of 139; sectarian 247, 282; sexual 66, 132–133, 225, 226
 virginity 159, 160, 208
 vituperation 157
 Wangboje, S. I. 16
 Warren, A. 296
Web, The (Ajima) 8, 39, 47–70, 247; “Checkpoint” 54–58; “Day of Nemesis” 62–68; “Gloss Over” 48–54; “Mary and the Business” 68–70; “This Kinda of a Luck” 58–60, 62; “What Men Can Do” 60–62, 248
 Weinberg, S. K.: *Incest Behavior* 176–177
 Wellek, R. 296
 Westernization 31
 widowhood 133, 204, 205, 244, 256
 Wilmot, P. 23–26; “Untitled” 23–24
 Winant, H. 113
 Wolf, T. 48
 Wonodi, O.: mysticism 13
Work in Progress 17
 World Bank: IMF (International Monetary Fund) Structural Adjustment Programme 21
 xenophobia 84, 165
 youth unemployment 36
 Zaria arts school 16
 Zaria Creative Writers Workshop 19

