

Isidore Diala Editorial

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Nigerian literature: Triumphs and travails

In using the title “Nigerian Literature: Triumphs and travails” to solicit articles for this issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* one had deliberately aimed at teasing the contributors to engage with the many paradoxes inherent not only in the history of the development of literature in Nigeria but also in the history of the Nigerian nation itself: Africa’s greatest nation but also occasionally threatening to disintegrate into a mere gathering of ethnic sovereignties; a particularly endowed nation but equally teeming with many individual narratives of abject poverty; a great and distinguished people but historically lacking in credible leadership; the cradle of world renowned writers (among them a Nobel laureate and many other laureates) and scholars but also lately the estranged home of many exiled intellectuals and artists. That hope, explicitly expressed in the call for articles, was that the discussion of our literature would acknowledge the worldliness of the texts by foregrounding the historical and social contexts in which literature emerges. But, of course, the expression of that expectation itself was superfluous.

As the articles in this volume demonstrate the core of Nigerian literature, the various artistic modes of expression quite apart, is the lived experience of the people and thus the indispensable social commitment of the writers is the filter through which their peculiar image of the human situation is represented. Reconstructions of pre-colonial life with its joys and limitations aimed at contesting colonial myths and stereotypes; the dehumanisations of colonization; the struggles for independence; the disenchantment with the perversions of self-rule; the savagery of the civil war; the sustained brutalisation of military rule and a consequent criminalisation of the national psyche; the corruption of politics and the entrenchment of the culture of uninhibited materialism in all spheres of national life; and lately the despoliation of the environment and the expected sacrifices and criminalities at the heart of a struggle for both survival and the redistribution of wealth; these and related experiences constitute both the landmark historical experiences of Nigerian people and the subject matter of Nigerian literature. Consequently, as the articles again demonstrate, scholars’ ideological affiliations, critical apparatus and terminologies, and the authorities invoked notwithstanding, the sustained critical focus on the nation invariably remains

a common denominator. That the compact between the literary imagination and the historical process, like the interface between the written and oral literatures of the nation – another engagement canvassed – is the compelling subject of Nigerian literary criticism, is incontestable much, by the way, like the triumphs and travails of both Nigerian literature and the Nigerian nation.

Dan Izevbaye's "Living the myth: Revisiting Okigbo's art and commitment" is an ideal starting point for this volume not only because it incarnates the themes of triumphs and travails in a compelling manner but also because he deals with a period of Nigerian history generally recognised as critical for both political and literary reasons. Izevbaye examines the fascinating conflation of national history and Okigbo's own personal circumstances and temperament to contend that the poet's obsessive theme of death can only be regarded as a logical intellectual and artistic anticipation of his heroic but fatal involvement with the Nigerian-Biafran war. For though presented as dramatic ritual with considerable aesthetic distance, Okigbo's narration, as Izevbaye argues, invariably re-establishes itself as the authentic autobiography of the poetic self.

Yet in considering Okigbo the ideal representative of his age, Izevbaye highlights Okigbo's incarnation of the defining attributes of that generation of writers and so extends the relevance of his scholarly insights to the entire period. Izevbaye reveals Okigbo's 1960s as crucial in the evolution of a new culture for the emergent nation. The amalgamation of multiple cultural groups in colonial Nigeria led to the emergence of a new Western-educated elite that relied on English for the articulation of its nationalist aspirations, anxious though of the implications of inscribing English as a politically privileged cultural bearer. Similarly, acknowledging as instructive the literary heritage available in that language, Okigbo and his generation were equally aware of their national responsibility for a cultural resurgence. If Izevbaye regards the guilt-ridden return of Okigbo's protagonist in *Heavensgate* as representative of the strong penitential element in the gesture of this new elite to reinvent tradition, he also regards Okigbo's fixation with transition (sustained by adroit inventions, appropriations and replications of tropes of sleep, dream, sex, and death) as representative of that generation's chastened recognition that its dream of homecoming was not necessarily arrival yet. That anxious dialogue of the African writer's legitimate literary heritage as well as even legitimate medium of expression still resonates in contemporary critical discourse as do many other insights raised in Izevbaye's article.

Many of the essays in this volume can be grouped into clusters with regard to how they respond to some of the salient issues raised in Izevbaye's article or how they complicate or extend them. Charles Nnolim's article, Niyi Okunoye's and Onyemachi Udumukwu's take up the theme of the writer's responsibility to his society. Nnolim celebrates Chinua Achebe's sterling accomplishments as a pioneer artist and intellectual

leader in Nigeria and Africa. He considers Achebe's greatest legacy his establishment and definition of the tradition of the Nigerian/African novel and argues that the rise of a "School of Achebe" demonstrates Achebe's inimitable distinction as a novelist. Identifying the failure of leadership as Achebe's pre-eminent and most enduring theme, Nnolim argues further that Achebe is essentially a social critic obsessed with his concern for the public welfare. Drawing on virtually all Achebe's writing, fictional and non-fictional alike, Nnolim argues with characteristic painstaking dexterity that the theme of poor leadership which Achebe gives explicit treatment in *The Trouble with Nigeria* is in reality the presiding theme of the writer's entire oeuvre.

Okùnroyè examines the historical struggle against military dictatorship in Nigeria in the last three decades of the twentieth century and highlights the role of poets in the cultural component of that struggle while all through indicating the crucial role of the press, the intellectual elite and civil society organisations in creating the environment for the poet's work to have its greatest impact. In the backdrop of the complete liquidation of the Nigerian economy, the violation of human rights, the persecution of and in many instances the elimination of dissidents, the hounding of many prominent scholars and artists into exile and the general stagnation of the nation, Okùnroyè sets in relief the pre-eminence of military dictatorship in redefining both the poet's conception of his social responsibilities (evident in the radical conflation of the identities of the activist-persona and the poet) as well as the tastes of the audience, the victimized and resilient Nigerian people whom the poetry was also about. Okùnroyè's signal insight is the dynamism of anti-authoritarian poetry in Nigeria as he identifies and explores the major trends that evolved in the tradition.

Similarly, Onyemachi Udumukwu contends that the Nigerian novel attempts to record the process of the evolution of the nation through multiple constraints. Discussing Chimamanda Adiche's engagement with traditional constructs of the woman by examining her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, as a paradigm for demystifying forms of patriarchal violence, Onyemachi contends that *Purple Hibiscus* is exemplary in its appropriation of "voice" as a strategy for the constitution of the interplay of the subject and ideological interpellation which he argues sets in relief the Nigerian novel's representation of the changing experience of nationhood. Characterising the first-person narrator, Kambili, as a "homodiegetic voice," Udumukwu painstakingly traces the young female character's growth to self-knowledge and social responsibility.

Writing also on Adichie, Sophia Ogwude discerns echoes of the voices of the masters of African literature especially Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngugi in Adichie's exploration of the theme of religious bigotry (and the demonisation of the tenets of any religion by a zealous implementation of its misunderstood creeds), in her social vision and commitment, in her conscious and sustained striving to present a positive African image while compassionately interrogating moribund values, in her exaltation

of a true dynamic African spirit, and, moreover, her visionary projection of the African society. In all though, Ogwude sees in Adichie the triumphant heir of the great tradition of the African novel established by Chinua Achebe.

The focus on the correlation of developments in the political sphere with corresponding responses of the literary imagination in post-independent Nigeria which is a basic assumption of many of the articles in this volume actually harks back to the origins and motivations of postcolonial Nigerian/African literature. Izevbaye notes the recognition of Nigerian writers of Okigbo's generation of the imperative to re-invent the indigenous tradition in their work, and Nnolim characterises the great tradition of the African novel which Achebe established as rooted in an autochthonous indigenous culture, exalting the voice of immemorial community and vestiges of primordial ritual and ceremony, a tradition Ogwude celebrates Chimamanda Adiche for reaffirming. On his own part, J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada considers *Children of the Eagle*, a novel by another female Nigerian novelist, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, a fictionalization of African female elites' interrogations of and censures against extant patriarchal practices in traditional African societies and highlights her application of tropes that set in relief these imputations. By identifying Ezeigbo as a Professor of Literature, Nwachukwu-Agbada acknowledges her familiarity with feminist discourses in the West. Significantly, though, he locates the apparent influence on Ezeigbo's construction of the pivotal "herstory" at the centre of her trilogy not in Western feminist discourses but contends instead that both in her conception of her female protagonists and her enunciation of her feminist discourse, Ezeigbo has recourse to the traditional status of women in the Igbo society. Thus, Udumukwu calls postcolonial Nigerian writers children of a "double consciousness" whose work reflects their dual heritage and argues that the description of an adequate aesthetic for their literary productions must take this unique patrimony into consideration. In this volume, Ben Obumelu, Biodun Jeyifo, Emma Ngomoha, Leon Osu, George Olusola Ajibade, Moses Tsenongu in varying ways throw some light on the related issues of the interface between the indigenous literature and the written as well as the African writer's legitimate literary heritage.

Emma Ngumoha locates Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* in Yoruba folklore and examines the role of the poet in a traditional agrarian African community as a shamanic rainmaker. Ngomoha both explores the local myth of the Olosunta Rock as harbinger of rain with beneficial impact on agriculture and the representative human perception of rain literally and figuratively as a cleansing and renewal of life. The participatory nature of the verse and the use of symbolic instruments that either mimic the sound of the rain wind or the thunder storm (both of which typify oral African poetry) are explored as crucial components of the structure of poetry as magical incantation. Yet all through, Ngumoha locates the African practice in an ageless

universal human magico-religious tradition built around primeval fertility cults inspired by the mystery of the surcease of life in winter and its awesome rebirth in spring.

Leon Osu examines Irobi's conflation of Igbo rituals, myths and festival performances with revolutionary Marxist Brechtian aesthetics. Osu foregrounds the Igbo heritage to which Irobi traces "the luminal spirit" and the "power of phenomenology" behind his creativity as well as the class conflict and dialectics pivotal in Marxist ideology while painstakingly setting in relief also Irobi's audacious re-invention of the material that he uses, both traditional and ideological. In Ajibade's article and in Tsenôngu's further attention is paid to the qualities of folk literature.

Moses Tsenôngu discusses a specific type of oral literature, nuptial poetry among the Tiv of Nigeria, in the process pointing in the direction of the centrality of love, sensuality, marriage and procreation in the society. He examines the various forms of the genre, highlighting their peculiarities both in terms of the utilitarian and the aesthetic, the professional and the non-professional practitioners. Expectedly, the insights of Tsenôngu's reading lie well beyond his claim of the virtual self-sufficiency of his English translations of the Tiv poems. Ajibade's article is a sustained effort to examine in detail a long poem in an indigenous language, Yorùbá. In Ọlátúbòsún Ọládàpò's poetry, as Ajibade contends, one observes the increasing politicization of folk literature as the poet transforms *Àjé*, witchcraft, into a metaphor of nature's bountiful gifts, which the individual must accept the responsibility of appropriating and deploying for the good of his/her communities. All through, by stressing the poet's sustained use of multilayered paradoxes and metaphors, his appropriation of the expressionism and suggestive imagery typical of folk literature, Ajibade shows the need to go beyond competent (literal) translation, to approach interpretation, occasionally even mystical or oracular conjectures, to set meaning and significance in relief. But it is probably in Biodun Jeyifo's and Ben Obumsele's articles that these issues are fully theorised.

Remarking on the image of Ogun as a compromised and malevolent Muse in *A Dance of the Forest*, Jeyifo discusses the powerful intertextual presence of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in the work and exalts the then young African playwright's extraordinary accomplishment in not only successfully absorbing Shakespeare's canonical influence but even more importantly transforming the influence into a new and original synthesis. Jeyifo considers Soyinka's achievement in this regard awesome, given the critic's recognition that African indigenous ritual drama and Elizabethan drama had been separated by the colonial ideology of 'superior' and 'inferior' races and cultures, and by what he terms the overdetermined reactions of the colonized to the effects of this colonialist, racist ideology. Jeyifo inscribes Soyinka as iconic in his trenchant recognition that the sources of artistic inspiration are multiple, diverse and even

often contradictory. Jeyifo's anxieties about the directions in which younger generations of Nigerian writers will take this compelling insight to are partly resolved in Obumsele's discussion of Okri's debt to Soyinka.

Ben Obumsele in his study of Okri's *The Famished Road* etches in bold relief the typical international heritage of the contemporary Nigerian writer. Obumsele draws attention to Okri's indebtedness to Wole Soyinka in terms of his use of Yorùbá folklore, especially the myth of Ogun. Yet Obumsele's emphasis is on Okri's capacity for hybridization and synthesis of literary traditions. Thus he argues that in adopting traditional motifs, Okri typically updates and re-interprets them. Obumsele notes in this regard that though Okri's inclination is to interpret Azaro's experience of spiritual anguish and disgust with a criticism of political and economic conditions, Okri's more crucial insights are ontological and thus existential. Obumsele discerns in Okri's *The Famished Road* not only knowledgeable allusions to Yorùbá mythology, Soyinka, the West African political novel but crucially also to Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka, and Iris Murdoch among others.

Obumsele implicitly raises questions that point to the responsibility of the contemporary (Nigerian) writer to a possible international audience, the need for a redefinition of audiences and constituencies, the need to create a magpie composite in which readers from different cultural backgrounds will each find a familiar motif to stimulate the imagination. His conclusion too entails a sober reevaluation of traditional notions of originality and even creativity: Okri is praised highly for taking possession, re-creating and transfiguring the various sources that he uses; he is new and astonishing on account of the audacity, humour and poetic vitality he brings to bear in the effort to synthesize "African spiritist discourse" with the literary traditions of other lands which his Western education has made part of his patrimony.

The emphasis in James Tsaior's reading of Tanure Ojaide's *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* is indeed on the international resonance of Ojaide's theme rather than on the national. Okunoye chronicles the harrying of many Nigerian artists and scholars into exile by the military and identifies "exilic writing" as one of the major trends in Nigerian anti-authoritarian poetry that evolved as a consequence. His example is, significantly, Ojaide's *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live*. In examining the same volume, Tsaior actually pays some attention to the contingencies of political repression and economic recession at the core of the local Nigerian "push" factors that compel exile. But he is primarily concerned with locating Ojaide's experience of and meditations on exile and the exilic consciousness in a postmodern context. Noting the writer's archetypal exilehood arising from his/her simultaneous dis/location within and outside the limits of his/her society, Tsaior remarks how Ojaide complicates and problematizes the concept and regards part of Ojaide's achievement as his redefinition and re-conceptualisation of the concepts of "home" and "exile," no longer as binaries but as a composite experience. But invoking Saidian

and Rushdean models, Tsaaior's preferred locale is the globalised space with indistinct boundaries.

Many current evaluations of the factors crucial to literary production and scholarship in the country are understandably gloomy: a corrupt political leadership characterised by its ineptitude and frightful lack of vision, the collapse of the publishing industry, the continuing brain drain impoverishing the teaching of literature and the quality of literary writing and scholarship in the country portend that such themes as migration, translocation, exile, ennui, and kindred anxieties may well endure in Nigerian literature (see Diala 2008, Jeyifo 2006, Williams 2006, Nnolim 2005). Every generation recreates its defining experiences in its literature. Nnolim discerns an emergent trend in current Nigerian literature that "depicts a society adrift and a people lost in the imbecilities of futile optimism, hoping that materialism and the pursuit of dirty lucre will compensate for the loss of the nation's soul; for the Nigeria we encounter in its contemporary fiction is a nation without a soul, without direction, without a national ethos – it is a rudderless ship a-sail amidst the jetsam and flotsam of a directionless voyage to nowhere" (5). But that movement (when it is susceptible to control) also often gravitates to the West, with its gratifications, temptations and seductions. The corpus of Nigerian literature in the Diaspora continues to grow and to demand some attention as a sub-genre of Nigerian literature.

The best any special issue can strive to is a representative collection of articles in any given field. With the dispersion of Nigerian literary scholars and artists across the globe, with the demoralization of faculty in most universities in the country and the well-known lack of infrastructure, given even scholars' preferences often to pursue their own research interests rather than investigate a new suggested area, even commissioned articles may not always be delivered and extended deadlines will remain too close. Scholars and artists are human and are located in time and space with their inherent inhibitions. But between Nigeria's oral and written literatures, and between the celebrated work of the pioneers of written Nigerian literature and emergent Nigerian writing, some important ground seems covered here and, moreover, by scholars representing several generations of literary scholarship in Nigeria.

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