

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

**RE-INVENTING ORAL TRADITION IN BEN OKRI'S TRILOGY: THE
FAMISHED ROAD, SONGS OF ENCHANTMENT AND INFINITE RICHES.**

AND

THE SEEDS' TALES

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A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Ruskin University for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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JULY, 2015

Most Nigerian novelists shun the use of Nigerian oral traditions in their works due to a myriad of reasons. From this perspective, the project investigated why Nigerian oral traditions are rarely used in contemporary Nigerian novels. However, findings revealed that some modern Nigerian novelists use these oral traditions in their literary oeuvre. The project explored Ben Okri's trilogy: *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* and analysed how the author used these traditions. It was discovered that Ben Okri uses riddles, proverbs, myths and legends to present Nigeria's history, present issues and to proffer solutions to the country's countless problems and more importantly, these elements allowed the author to experiment with narrative techniques. Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and Freud's *Uncanny* were studied to extrapolate some of Okri's ideologies. The project concluded that contemporary Nigerian authors have a role to play in the preservation of Nigerian oral traditions and I showed this in my creative writing piece, *The Seeds' Tales*.

KEY WORDS: Nigerian Oral Traditions; Nigerian Literature; Nigerian Novelists; Ben Okri

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	I
ABSTRACT.....	II
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	III—IV
COPYRIGHT DECLARATION.....	V
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE. THE USE OF MYTH AS AN ORAL TRADITION TECHNIQUE IN OKRI'S <i>THE FAMISHED ROAD</i>.....	9
INTRODUCTION.....	9
HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PHENOMENON.....	11
FEATURES OF MYTH IN <i>THE FAMISHED ROAD</i>	17
<i>THE FAMISHED ROAD</i> AS A CRITICAL TOOL IN ANALYSING POST- INDEPENDENT NIGERIA.....	23
CHAPTER TWO. HAUNTOLOGY IN OKRI'S <i>SONG OF ENCHANTMENT</i>.....	32
INTRODUCTION.....	32
THE QUESTION OF HAUNTOLOGY IN NIGERIA: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF OKRI'S <i>SONG OF ENCHANTMENT</i> VIS-À-VIS DERRIDA'S SPECTRE OF MARX.....	33
CHAPTER THREE. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DREAM MOTIF IN BEN OKRI'S <i>INFINITE RICHES</i>.....	50
INTRODUCTION	50
DREAM AS A HISTORICAL LENS IN OKRI'S <i>INFINITE RICHES</i>	52
ANALYSES OF DREAM MOTIF IN OKRI'S <i>INFINITE RICHES</i> USING FREUD'S <i>UNCANNY</i> AND <i>THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS</i>	63

AFRICAN INTERPRETATION/REPRESENTATION OF DREAMS AND REALITY IN INFINITE RICHES.....	71
CHAPTER FOUR. ORAL TRADITION AS A NARRATIVE TOOL IN THE SEEDS TALES.....	76
CONCLUSION.....	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	101
THE SEEDS' TALES.....	109
PART ONE. PREAMBLE.....	110
STORIES.....	118
THE SEEDS.....	147
PART TWO. PREAMBLE.....	211
THE SEEDS' COURT.....	224

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July 2015

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INTRODUCTION

The use of oral traditions in contemporary Nigerian fiction is close to extinction and as Ato Quayson rightly warns, African “folklore, legends, histories, parables, aphorisms, allegories and co; are within the ready grasp of oblivion” (Quayson, 1997:36). There are ample reasons why the apparent disappearance of these traditions seems inevitable. Bernth Lindfors argues that “[African authors] speak to Europe first with the aim to reach a much larger audience both at home and abroad”(Lindfors, 1997: 136). Wendy Griswold gives good reasons why most African authors may focus on reaching a global audience; she claims “many publishers and readers of Nigerian novels are nowhere near Nigeria, but instead are in London and New York, Berkley and Stockholm” and then goes further to reveal this chilling reality—“Nigerian writers bemoan lack of a reading public, the perfidy of publishers, and the impossibility of earning a decent living from writing in Nigeria (Griswold, 2000:5). Apart from telling stories, one could argue that an attempt to gain global readership, which amounts to publishing deals and financial freedom, serves as a motivation for most Nigerian authors.

Walter Collins agrees with Griswold’s argument as he also points to how the difficult logistics of publishing coupled with low rates of literacy— both at the level of review and audience — creates pitfalls for novels that do appear in Nigeria (Collins, 2010: 5). Lindfors takes it further by stating that multilingualism in Africa makes communication across ethnic and international boundaries difficult in anything but a colonial language (Lindfors, 1997:2). Nigeria, a multilingual country, with over

three hundred languages, therefore needs to use the “colonial” language for communication but its usage could serve as a disadvantage too—the death of certain Nigerian oral traditions.¹

First generation Nigerian authors like Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka, however, have shown how some African oral traditions like proverbs, myths, songs, and riddles can be incorporated into the so-called colonial language to communicate themes in their works and most importantly, how these traditions can be preserved². Bernth Lindfors in his book titled *Comparative Approaches to African Literatures* (1994) argues that Amos Tutuola’s writing owes a great deal to native oral traditions. Also, Isidore Okpewho in his seminal work, *Africa Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Community* (1992), claims that “[Achebe] sprinkles [his works] with elements of content and technique taken from the oral traditions.”

But, Abiola Irele believes “the [African] novel has acquired today a cultural significance that was once the exclusive province of oral narrative”(Irele, 2009:1). If Irele assumes that African novels espouse the cultural and symbolical techniques of the African oral traditions, the question, therefore, is: why have contemporary African authors especially in Nigeria jettisoned, almost in entirety, the use of oral traditions in their fiction? What, if any, has been preserved or transformed to fit contemporary Nigerian novels? In order to explore these questions, it is necessary to briefly trace the historical contexts of Nigerian fiction.

¹ The colonial language as used in the Nigerian context bears certain levels of similarity with what Deleuze and Guattari’s tetralinguistic model where “vernacular, maternal, or territorial language, used in rural communities” merge with “urban, government and worldwide language”. Their essay “What Is a Minor Literature?” sheds more light on the importance of using a tetralinguistic model in a third world country.

² For an extensive study of the import of the African folktale into Nigerian fiction and how it communicates to both ethnic and international ears, see Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1953) and Wole Soyinka’s *Àkè* (1989). literary tradition.”

It is arguable that the Nigerian novel gained its influences from western missionaries. Irele expounded the above claim thusly: “In this explanation of the rise of the novel in Africa, literacy and writing are represented as having developed largely as a function of western education introduced by the various Christian missions in their evangelical effort”(Irele, 2009:2). Inside the innards of this western “education” Daniel O Fagunwa, a Nigerian author who wrote mostly in Yoruba language based on indigenous cosmology and cultural traditions on the one hand and Christian moralism on the other, found the confidence to pen *Ogboju-Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1950).³ Fagunwa’s works inspired Amos Tutuola to write *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1952); arguably, the first Nigerian novel written in English language, which caused western excitement and local dissatisfaction (Eustace, 1979:5; Lindfors, 1994:4).⁴

As the criticisms, both good and bad, about Tutuola’s work dissipated, Achebe would rise to the literary front with the publication of his most acclaimed piece of fiction, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). According to Muoneke, Achebe’s writing serves as a rejection of colonialism and a reply to Conrad’s misrepresentation of Africa (Muoneke, 1994: 40).⁵ Irele gives a general overview of how the misrepresentation of the African people influenced Nigerian fiction; he argues thusly: “the pressures

³ The original text which was written in Yoruba was translated to English by Wole Soyinka in 1968 to *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter’s Saga*

⁴ Most scholars have argued fervently that this work should not be considered as the first piece of fiction to emanate out of Nigeria because Tutuola was not a professional writer, the work lacked mimetic representation and above all belittles the concept of the novel. See, Vladimi Klima’s *Modern Nigerian Novel* (1969) and Charles Nnolim’s essay: “Trends in the Nigerian Novel” in *Literature and the National Consciousness* (1989). Nnolim argues fervently that Tutuola’s novel, though widely received in the western world, fails to meet up with aesthetics of the novel form and therefore, should not be called a novel.

⁵ Achebe also, in addition to his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, writes a critical essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", in response to Conrad’s racist depiction of Africa.

inherent in this situation have been central to the genesis of modern African literature [...]”(Irele, 2009:4).

For most Nigerian contemporary authors, the use of oral traditions serve more than a form of identification as used by first generation authors but also as a tool to explore society’s issues.⁶ Ben Okri is one of the contemporary Nigerian authors who incorporate Nigerian oral traditions in his novels to analyse the African society (Choudhury, 2014:3). The essay, therefore, focuses on how Okri with his trilogy, *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), and *Infinite Riches* (1998), re-invents oral tradition and contributes to the preservation of these endangered Nigerian folkloric features. Okri employs myths, the use of dream motifs, riddles, proverbs, and legends, in his novels; according to Cooper, “Okri’s work remains steeped in indigenous images and west African oral culture”(Cooper, 1998:67).

However, Okri’s first series of works *Flowers and Shadows* (1980); *The Landscapes Within* (1981) lacked those oral folkloric characteristics shown in his later works. After the publication of *Flower and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within* in London, Okri returned to Nigeria for a brief period (Fraser, 2002:103). While in Nigeria, he wrote a couple of short stories where he started experimenting with the use of oral traditions in fiction (ibid). In his collection of short stories titled *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986) he started infusing legends and myths in his narratives and like Okigbo’s return to traditional religion in “Heaven’s Gate”, Okri returned to his tradition through writing.

⁶ Helen Oyeyemi makes use of the Yoruba belief in twins to discuss the issue of culture clash and hybridization in her debut novel *The Icarus Girl* (2005). Nnedi Okoroafor with her *Who Fears Death* (2010) uses elements of oral traditions to envision Africa’s future.

Quayson says Okri's stories leave "readers with an adjusted attitude to reality" (Quayson, 1991:103). In other words, Okri began to explore other options to present reality. Quayson observes:

What seems to have finally led to his invocation of indigenous resources was his second sojourn in London from the early eighties, perhaps as a means of negotiating a sense of identity in a metropolitan diasporic environment. The earlier writers offered a set of indigenous concepts and a way of organising reality, which he was happy to draw upon in his own quest for identity, and an appropriate mode of literary expression. (Quayson, 1991:101)

The dominant word in the above quotation is "identity" and one could argue that in search of identification in a western world, Okri dug from his Nigerian cultural heritage. Sharmistha Lahiri describes this search for identification, as "one salient feature common to all experience of exile, it certainly could be the issue of identity, the quest of the self for its moorings, in history as well as in the immediate existential order of things"(Lahiri, 2001:8). As Achebe, Soyinka and Tutuola did in pre-independent Nigeria, Okri criticizes the hegemonistic politics of mainstream culture (Lahiri, 2001:8). As a migrant writer in the United Kingdom, Okri's:

Geographical sense of distances and isolation enables him to view in perspective the predicament of his people who having lost their significant connections with the past and being confronted with sudden gaps and silences in their immediate view of reality are left to lead an empty life (Rajakrishnan, 2001:46).

From *The Famished Road* (1991) to *StarBook* (2007) one notices Okri's "significant connections with the past" which he argues needs to be understood for a new vision to be created (Wilkinson, 1992:83). Okri also displays what is eminent in the narrative approach of Latin American writers who always try to comprehend and "interpret [a disfigured] past in order to decipher the present and to use the present to understand the past and project the future" (El Fiscal, 2001:166). Okri, through *The*

Famished Road, *The Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, shows that the African oral traditions can be preserved and most importantly, can be re-invented for contemporary uses, didactic purposes and for the exploration of that third space created by imagination.

The first chapter explores the myth in Okri's *The Famished Road* and how it serves as a tool to represent Nigerian politics before independence. Michael Dash explains that postcolonial writers turn to "myths, legends and superstitions of the folk in order to isolate traces of a complex culture of survival which was the response of the dominated to their oppressors (and to) shatter the myths of 'historylessness' or 'non-achievement' "(Dash, 1995:200). In this chapter, I investigate why postcolonial writers like Okri turn to oral traditions to "isolate traces of a complex culture of survival". I trace how myths and traditions help Okri respond to dominant linguistic and aesthetic structures.

The origins of the myth will be explained as it plays a vital role in comprehending the author's stylistic structure. In *The Famished Road* (1991), Azaro, the main protagonist discovers that "[...] out of the centre" of his "forehead, an eye opened" with which he sees "beautiful thing[s] in the world" (TFR, 299). This strange eye on the protagonist's head is Okri's attempt to see reality, Cooper argues, "with a new 'third eye' (Cooper, 1998: 67). This 'third eye' Cooper further asserts helps Okri to "span this world, the previous one and the one to come"(ibid). With the "eye opened" the author reveals hidden truths about independent colonies and their continuous quest for new paths to a glorious future (TFR, 299).

The second chapter therefore takes up the concept of hauntology in Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* in order to explore those strange voices and the hidden in

Azaro's community. Ghosts, historical happenings and ancestors haunt Okri's literary milieu, which reiterates Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology where "all meaning is informed, overshadowed, and haunted by the ghosts of other meanings"(Van Elferen, 2010: 287). To analyse the concept of hauntology in Okri's *Songs of Enchantment*, I turn to Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* in order to understand the ghosts within Nigeria as a nation.

The third chapter explores the dream motif in Okri's *Infinite Riches*. This chapter provides an analysis of dream in the text with regards to their functions and how they affect the lives of Azaro, Ade, Dad and Mum. Repressed memory impacts the daily existence and dreams of these characters. In a country like Nigeria with a short spell of independence, memories of colonization are sometimes painful, unsettling and traumatic. To aid my investigation on how these traumatic experiences and memories direct the lives of characters in Okri's *Infinite Riches*, I use Sigmund Freud's text *Interpretation of Dreams* and essay *Uncanny*. Okri argues that how we perceive and confront history determines our present and future (Wilkinson, 1992:87)

Chapter four explores how I have used these oral traditions in my novel. Here, I discuss how I infuse elements of oral traditional elements to narrate the issues of maternal and infant mortality in Nigeria. I depart from Okri's use of oral traditions by using songs and oral performance in my work, which is a tool used to draw my audience into the lives of the characters' life. My creative piece, *The Seeds' Tales*, gives me the opportunity to experiment, explore and use riddles, proverbs and legends as a narrative technique of presenting the novel's themes. In addition, I use the elements of hauntology and dream to explore the history of abortions, cultural beliefs and infant mortality in Nigeria.

Oral traditions not only give authors an avenue to narrate their stories but also give them a platform to explore different themes. For example, Okri uses myths, riddles and proverbs to probe and analyze the dreams of a new nation. The concluding chapter, therefore, brings to the forefront some recommendations on how oral traditions can be used in contemporary times. The readings I undertake and the texts explored inform my own novel and direct me appropriately to use the right features of folkloric elements.

CHAPTER ONE

THE USE OF MYTH AS AN ORAL TRADITION TECHNIQUE IN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

INTRODUCTION

The African oral tradition, which comprises of riddles, proverbs, myths, tongue-twisters, incantations, stories and legends, has been employed by a number of Nigerian authors for two major reasons: “to show a certain attachment to [African] modes of behaviour” and to propagate the “increasing tendency on the part of African writers to identify with the literary traditions of their people in terms of both content and of technique” (Okpewho, 1992:294). Mounira Soliman argues that African authors not only use these oral traditions as a way of identifying with their social and cultural beliefs but also see them as a medium for the historical documentation of folkloric materials, which contributes to the process of building up the African collective memory that the colonial powers had tried to eradicate (Soliman, 2004:150).

The àbíkú phenomenon, one of Nigeria’s mythical beliefs, serves many Nigerian authors as a device for the documentation of African folkloric material. It is a major component of Nigerian oral traditions within literature, which has been used quite extensively by first generation Nigerian writers like Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta as “part of the project of defining the national status” and as a definition of “homogenous orality [which] provides the ground for distinctively ‘African’ society and culture” (Quayson,

1997; McCabe, 2002).⁷

A case, therefore, could be made for analysing Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) within the constructs of the Nigerian oral tradition and as a part of the author's aim to present contemporary Nigeria with these traditions. Close textual analysis reveals that Okri employs the àbíkú myth to present a nation haunted by memories of altered histories, which disrupts all possibilities of national identity (Fernandez, 2008:135). In the same vein, Aldea argues that Okri's use of the myth is "a national allegory" which dramatizes "the vicissitudes of a Nigeria about to be born on several levels, personal and collective"(Aldea, 2011:137). The child is a resonant myth for exploring the traumatic colonial and postcolonial history of Nigeria. It is imperative, at this juncture, first of all, to trace the origins of the àbíkú myth and, later locate its significant role in *The Famished Road* (1991).

⁷ Eileen Julien in her work, *African Novels and The Question of Orality* (1992), frowns at critics who use oral traditions as a yardstick for measuring African authenticity. She opines that this kind of assumptions is "problematic" and goes further to elegantly compare this ideology to racism. I argue otherwise and firmly support the notion that one can relate African oral traditions to African authenticity. One must ask how one identifies an American, French, British novel if not from their social and historical context?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ÀBÍKÚ PHENOMENON

The belief in the àbíkú phenomenon is widespread across various ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria particularly amongst the Yorubas, Igbos and Ijos (Quayson, 1997; Asakitikpi, 2004; Soliman, 2004). The Igbos refer to the spirit-child as an ogbanje while the Yorubas and Ijos call it àbíkú (Quayson, 1997: pp.122-123).⁸

Different scholars have defined abíkú in a variety of ways but their definitions share a common and standard translation, which is: a child “born to die” (McCabe, 2002:46). Mobolade describes àbíkú as any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family (Mobolade, 2014). Quayson describes àbíkú as “a child in an unending cycle of births, deaths and re-births”(Quayson, 1997:122). These several trips made by àbíkú between the known and unknown world is a constant burden to the child’s family, especially the mother who battles with repeated loss of her child and physical weariness of childbirth. Quayson describes the àbíkú’s expeditions as a “constellar concept” because “it embraces beliefs about predestination, re-incarnation and the relationship between the real world and that of the spirits”(Quayson, 1997:123).

Douglas McCabe, in his interesting article, “Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Texts and Soyinka’s ”(2002) argues, however, that descriptions of àbíkú presented by Quayson, Mobolade, Cooper, amongst other scholars, tend to “hastily appropriate àbíkú to serve as a symbol for present-day, metropolitan concepts and concerns” and “occludes the historicity of àbíkú” which displaces a full comprehension and historical functionalities of the àbíkú myth in literature. Although some of McCabe’s arguments in that article are contentious and erroneous as De Brujiun rightly notes in

⁸ Okri, though from Delta State of Nigeria, uses Yoruba’s definition of àbíkù in his trilogy.

her essay “Coming to Terms with New Ageist Contamination: Cosmopolitanism in Ben Okri's "The Famished Road" (2007), he, nevertheless, provides a detailed historical background why àbíkú engages in an endless series of “going and coming”.⁹

Through his consultation with Babalola Ifatogun, a senior ifà babaláwo diviner from the Oyo Yoruba town of Ilobu, McCabe gives a detailed historical account why àbíkús maintain a mysterious life (McCabe, 2002: 46). Àbíkús are thieves from heaven, according to McCabe, who come to steal on earth (ibid). They come from a group of heavenly people whose founding purpose is to siphon the riches from the household they arrive into by birth (ibid). The most important riches to the àbíkú come in the form of tears of the bereaved mother and as Mobalade puts it, “after each death, the àbíkú makes a great deal of money from the sale of tears of the mother”(Mobalade, 1973:62). Àbíkú’s stealing, extortion and callousness on earth is motivated by a strong loyalty with their spirit friends. McCabe states:

Each àbíkú is born into a household and poses as a child that is either sweet natured and beautiful (and therefore likely to be lavished with good things) or sickly and disturbed (and therefore likely to be the beneficiary of expensive sacrifices). In such a way, the àbíkú quickly accumulates money, cloth, food and livestock. Then, at a certain time and by a certain method prearranged secretly with its group, the àbíkú dies and takes the spiritual portion of its loot back to heaven. After dividing the spoils with its group, it prepares to re-enter the world and fleece the same or another household. (McCabe, 2002: 46, emphasis added)¹⁰

⁹ This is the opening line of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo’s poem entitled “Abiku” (1965). The poem shows the struggle of a parent trying to plead with the spirit-child to remain on earth amidst Nigeria’s squalor.

¹⁰ It is important to note that in the essay, McCabe uses the Yoruba term that describes àbíkú’s group, which is called égbé àrà òrun and the house, which the child comes into as ilè. I chose to use their literary meanings in English for easier comprehension.

Mccabe's argument that àbíkús are "sickly and disturbed" bears close resemblance to Azaro's existence in Okri's *The Famished Road* who, at birth, is "unwilling to come to terms with life" (Okri, 1991: 4). Àbíkús' desire to return to the spirit world is motivated by the "heartlessness of human beings" which leads them to embark on cyclical movements between life and death (Okri, 1991:3). Azaro, the àbíkú child in Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), explains why àbíkús engage in a series of "coming and going". He explains:

As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. We made these vows in the fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world. Those of us who made such vows were known among the living as spirit-children... We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding. (Okri, 1991: 4)

To stop the àbíkú child from robbery, "coming and going", and to break their pact with the ether world, the parents and community must locate where àbíkú "hides the charms that link it to its spirit companions on the other side for the proper rites to be carried out to snap that connection" (Quayson, 1997:123). The community or the parents stand the risk of losing the baby if this charm is not located (Mobolade, 1973; Quayson, 1997).

The stubborn spirit has to be fettered to deter àbíkú from living a vagrant life and from floating away into chthonic spaces. Another way to locate the charm, as proposed by Mccabe, is for the household to employ a babaláwo (a local chief priest) to listen to conversations between àbíkú and his spirit companions, in order to find the specific spot where he/she has hidden the charms and uncover the "methods of return to heaven" (Mccabe, 2002:46).

Àbíkú's repeated trips to the ether world can be cut short by blocking the precise conditions necessary for its death, marking its body so that his heavenly companion may mistake him as an earthly child; and names like Ayórunbò (one-who-goes-to-heaven-and-returns), Málomó (don't-go-anymore), Dúrójayé (stay-and-relish-the-world) are given to àbíkús by the family as a way of pleading with them to remain on earth (Mobalade, 1973:63).

With these somewhat tyrannical and unruly features maintained by the spirit child, McCabe reveals that ifà babaláwo, consequently, defines the àbíkú as an "errant" child because it maintains a nomadic life, wandering between heaven and earth, unclaimed by any geographical space (McCabe, 2002:47). In other words, the àbíkú child is a wanderer between two worlds who fails to choose a permanent abode.

Asakitikpi, however, gives a totally different historical account of the àbíkú myth. He describes them as children denied entry into heaven because of their inability to work on earth (Asakitikpi, 2008: 59). Because of their denial into heaven, àbíkús create their own "space in the spirit world with a selected forest as their abode" and prove to heaven that they can achieve something grand without any help (ibid). They hold meeting usually in big trees such as the baobab, iroko and other similar trees. Their physical features cannot be seen with ordinary eyes; only an ifa babaláwo possesses such power to see a gathering of àbíkú (ibid). Mobolade gives a description of how àbíkús attend meetings with their kindred spirits:

The Àbíkú infant regularly attends Àbíkú meetings, which takes place in the dead of night, when almost everyone is in a sound slumber, especially their mothers. At the appropriate time, the àbíkú infant, as he lies on the bed beside the mother, is suddenly transformed into a grown-up man or woman. In this disguise, it goes to the meeting. On returning, the àbíkú lies quietly by the side of the mother, changes into an infant

again and, in the twinkling of an eye, falls into an apparently innocent childlike sleep, while the mother sleeps on, quite unaware of the whole situation. (Mobolade, 1978:62)

Ifà babaláwo, with his spiritual powers, can attend such meetings. In his attempt to bar the child from returning to the heavens, the ifà babaláwo has to make a secret appearance during the meeting to listen to their conversations and more importantly, get information about where the charms have been hidden.

Asakitikpi whose exploration of the àbíkú myth stems from a medical analysis of the àbíkú phenomenon and its implication on child mortality in Nigeria, concludes that àbíkú “children may not have the powers that are conferred on them” and as such, “may not even exist but may be real only in the imagination of traditional peoples”(Asakitikpi, 2008:61). He further stresses that “children so labeled may actually be sickle-cell patients or victims of other childhood diseases that were/are prevalent in most parts of southern Nigeria”(ibid). The former argument presents a problem: Asakitipi fails to define “traditional peoples” or what “traditional” means. Asakitikpi, however, goes on to raise another interesting point in the last sentence concluding his essay. He states that the àbíkú phenomenon majorly “borders on the realm of the supernatural and metaphysics: a realm of enquiry that makes scientific explanation both irrational and antithetical” (Asakitikpi, 2008:62). But, one may argue on a logical plane that this “supernatural” and “metaphysics” is one major theme of mythological belief and science’s explanation cannot eradicate, in entirety, those beliefs held by a group of people. Armstrong calls this supernatural belief held by humans, “perennial philosophy” which entails seeing “everything that happens in this world, everything that we can hear and see here below has its counterpart in the divine realm, which is richer, stronger and more enduring than our own”(Armstrong, 2005:4). To therefore assert that the belief in the àbíkú myth is irrational and

antithetical, as argued by Asakitipi, belittles the collective reasoning of a group of people.

Perhaps this “imagination” to see the world as a counterpart in the divine realm, this attempt to explore “supernatural” and the “metaphysical”, spurred the minds of writers from different backgrounds to employ myths in their works and, most importantly, see the world through “a third eye”(Cooper, 1998:1). A third eye which the supposed father of magical realism, Franz Roh, describes as an attempt to “recognize this world...with new eyes”.¹¹ Gayland sees this use of imagination in fiction as a better way to understand society and argues that postcolonial writers like Ben Okri use these new eyes to “jolt the reader out of the lassitude and momentum of the customary” which “results in a new compound view or peripheral vision” (Gayland, 2005:290).¹²

¹¹ In Stephen Selmon’s essay, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse” he describes Franz Roh as the first person to coin the term magical realism in 1925 in connection, however, with post expressionist art. The term has gained prominence in literature especially among novels like Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991) Allende’s *The House of Spirits* (1982) and Marquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967)

¹² This point allows writers to view reality from another horizon and to analyse situations anew. Soyinka (a Yoruba), Clark-Bekederemo (an Ijo), Achebe (Igbo), Tutuola (Yoruba) and Morrison (African-American) have, therefore, used the àbíkú phenomenon in their literary corpus to explain society from different perspectives (Quayson, 1997:123). Quayson asserts that though writers draw from the same set of concepts, their explorations of the significance of the phenomenon shows different usage and approaches (ibid). In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* the use of the phenomenon presents an “ethnographic usage”; in Clark-Bekederemo’s “Àbíkú”, “the concept is personified and àbíkú is addressed in supplicatory tones” while in Soyinka’s “Àbíkú” it shows a “non-conformist” child to norms of society while Morrison’s *Beloved* portrays an àbíkú in search of history.

FEATURES OF MYTH IN *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

Having thus briefly considered the historicity of the àbíkú myth, some of its definitions and features in Nigeria literature, the chapter proceeds to consider how Okri uses the àbíkú myth in *The Famished Road* (1991). The chapter also explores how the àbíkú phenomenon serves as a narrative technique in the novel. To denote how the àbíkú myth informs the author's work, it is imperative to provide a brief summary of the novel and how Azaro's birth affects his family, the community and the world at large.

The Famished Road is a story about an àbíkú child named Azaro. The story is set in post-independent period just after Nigeria's independence. The main narration is told from Azaro's point of view. Azaro, a boy of seven, has the ability to move between the real and the unreal but after his rambunctious movement between the spaces "he chose to stay" on earth with his family (Okri, 1991:4). The main emphasis in the novel is placed on Azaro's cyclical movement between living and dying, his Mum and Dad, the photographer, and, Madam Koto, the bar owner on their street. Azaro's confusing movement in the novel represents the disturbing transformation of Nigeria in its post-independent era. Grace describes Azaro's existence as "symbolic of the nation's struggle to come into and remain in existence"; Hart and Ouyang also argue that Azaro operates as "a metaphor of political disempowerment in Nigeria" which is revealed in the Nigerian civil war, military regimes and inchoate political structures (Grace, 2007:148; Hart and Ouyang, 2005: 10). Munro takes it further, by stating that Okri's *The Famished Road* is an image of a movement to transformation plagued by "hunger"(Munro, 2006:40). The road, to a transformed society, indeed, is famished.

An avalanche of negative connotations characterizes Azaro's community: primitive squalor, political thuggery, corruption and other forms of social malaise.¹³ The community seems to collapse under the watch of Azaro but he decides to stay mainly because of his Mum's "bruised face" and "to break [his] pacts with [his] spirit companions"(Okri, 1991:226). What is more, Azaro constantly fights death with such verve. At a point, he was left for dead but miraculously rises from death which earns him the name "Azaro", a short form of Lazarus:

When I woke up I found myself in a coffin. My parents had given me up for dead. They had commenced the burial proceedings when they heard my fierce weeping. Because of my miraculous recovery they named me a second time and threw a party which they couldn't afford. They named me Lazaro. But as I became the subject of much jest, and as many were uneasy with the connection between Lazaro and Lazarus, Mum shortened my name to Azaro. (Okri, 1991:8)

The unbelievable recovery of Azaro bears a resemblance to the biblical story of Lazarus who was raised by Jesus Christ after he was pronounced dead by members of his family.¹⁴ However, in this novel, Azaro fights his way back into life and according to the herbalist who resuscitates him, he "is a child who didn't want to be born, but who will fight with death"(Okri, 1991:8). This constant fight with death is complicated by the fact that àbíkú cannot control himself sometimes from taking these trips to spirit world (Okri, 1991:5). What becomes of incremental interest is Azaro's mysterious disappearances, and the fact he manages to find his way home.

¹³ These social malaises were tied to the country's inability to understand the constructs of independence as Grace and Munro have argued. Also, in his seminal book, *Nigeria: After the Nightmare* (2011), Hagher argues that "Nigeria was not prepared for self-governance because the British colonialist was in all respect incompetent to provide a template of stability, the colonial model offered governance as extraction and the taking of spoils." The "taking of spoils" became the bane of the new politicians and this would invariably lead to gross corruption, which later enticed the military regimes.

¹⁴ The story of how Jesus Christ raises Lazarus from the dead is located in John Chapter 11 and verses 1-44.

First, there was the disappearance during the riots when “several women, smelling of bitter herbs” who appeared out of darkness swooped him “up into the bristling night” (Okri, 1991:11). In some cases, unseen spirits lead Azaro into the space on endless repetitive journeys throughout the book.¹⁵ From the beginning of the novel an expectation is set up for why Azaro’s cyclical movement would be constant:

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry. (Okri, 1991:1)

That the river cum road is always hungry is the crux of the novel. The road hints at a false formation of what was not meant to be. Possibly, it explains why Azaro complains, “Being born was a shock from which I never recovered” (Okri, 1991:7). The expectation that there might be a way to prevent the road from swallowing Azaro and members of his community is an important dimension in this book. Madam Koto, Dad, Mum, the photographer, all fall under the mysterious powers of this road which would be explained further in the later part of this chapter. Each character learns to struggle with the dangers on the endless road, “which in turn fed into paths, which fed into dirt tracks” and leads to no destination (Okri, 1991:113).

Dad does all kind of odd jobs just to make ends meet. He works as a load carrier in the market, as a night soil man and later, as a boxer. The harsh nightmarish realities make him develop an ability to combine these three complex jobs. Azaro reveals, “He fought the wind, the midges, and the mosquitoes that rose from their million larvae all over the swamp of the road.”(Okri, 1991:353). In his bid to fight the trappings of poverty, he develops his fighting skill that would lead to some winnings

¹⁵ Quayson’s *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka & Ben Okri*(1997) extensively covers Azaro’s numerous disappearances . See pp 153-156.

in the fight against Yellow Jaguar. His second fight against Green Leopard, however, turns sour; the punches from Green Leopard paralyse Dad for two days and when he recovers, he changes his job. Like Idemudia in Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979), Dad's constant battle with the daily realities sparks new ideas in him. His venture into politics is motivated by his desire to change his society and he would achieve this by "clearing away all the rubbish that had accumulated in the consciousness of our people" and to build a country where "all the poor people would have regular meetings with the Head of State" (Okri, 1991:pp. 408-409). His political dreams and goals to change his people soon fade away as the party of the rich squashes his glorious plans with their emphatic thuggery and corruption.

Mum's case is not different from Dad's. She sells cheap wares from matches to cigarettes through hawking and, sometimes, from a store in the market. Mum is caught between the love for her family and the battle with grinding poverty. Coupled with Azaro's intermittent existence, she is forced to make her life's choices based on what the day brings. Mum's incessant suffering serves as a motivation for Azaro to remain on earth.

She plays an important role in the protection of her child and maintains a powerful communication with Azaro. For example when Azaro finds himself in the policeman's house, he is able to call on Mum for help:

"That night, in the dark, with eyes pressed tight, and with all the fury of my empty stomach, I summoned up the image of my mother. When I saw her very clearly, I spoke to her, begging her to come and save me. After I had spoken to her I fell asleep, certain that she had heard me." (Okri, 1991: 24)

Mum appears at the front door of the policeman that same evening to save her son. This connection typifies the esoteric bond between Mum and Azaro. Other times their love goes sour especially when Mum disciplines Azaro for his erratic behaviours.

The photographer plays a significant role in *The Famished Road* as the recorder of events. He is a complex and challenging figure who shares with radical postcolonials, the perception of oppression and a commitment to resisting it (Cooper, 1998:57). He is a documenter of the harrowing experiences of the people in his community. With postmodernist approaches, he captures secrets events that plague people in the community. Coupled with his messianic characteristics, he discovers certain abilities to kill rats that eat the food and material in Dad's house.

Our first glimpse of the photographer's brilliance is when he reveals the evils of the Party of the Rich. He captures, to the community's delight, and to the chagrin of politicians, how political thugs molest people on the street during a political rally.

Azaro describes the images:

There were pictures of us raging, attacking the van, rioting against the cheap methods of politicians, humiliating the thugs of politics, burning their lies. The photographer's pictures had given great prominence on the pages of the newspaper and it was even possible to recognise our squashed and poverty-ridden faces on the grainy newsprint. (Okri, 1991:156)

The photographer's singular act of covering the evils of politics leads him to live a life characterised by constant danger. Beatings were piled on him after displaying the vices of bad politicians, which led to his neck dripping with blood, and his body scarred with wounds. Okri, one may argue, portrays the dangers of practising journalism or recording events in Nigeria. The photographic enterprise of the photographer, to borrow Sontag's phrase, "give[s] us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images"(Sontag, 2002:3) Okri presents this "anthology of images", with his trilogy, to his audience.

Another character worth mentioning is Madam Koto. She comes across with unique characteristics. First, she is a caring woman who gives free drink to Dad. On another plane, she assists Mum to get well during her bout with sickness and allows Azaro to carry out menial jobs in her bar. Her bar is a temporary abode for politicians and drunks. Her myth grows when she raises a man from the ground and with athletic precision, slams him to the ground; then resumes her business with “superb nonchalance” which everyone talked about (Okri, 1991:37). From then:

Her legend, which would sprout a thousand hallucinations, had been born in our midst—born of stories and rumours which, in time, would become some of the most extravagant realities of our lives. (Okri, 1991:37)

Her myth developed to grotesque proportions as she allowed the bad blood of politics overthrow her personality. At the peak of her political involvement, Azaro notices “Madame Koto was pregnant with three strange children” who “sat upright and the third was upside down in her womb” and these children “were all mischievous, they kicked and tugged at their cords, they were the worst type of spirit-children, and they had no intention of being born.” (Okri, 1991: pp. 464-465).

There is no end to the mysteries that plague the occupants of Azaro’s community; they never make any real progress. This reiterates Okri’s question: “Isn’t it just possible that [they] are all àbíkús?” (Wilkinson, 1992: 84). In summary, one could argue that Azaro’s characteristics are visible in the life of each character—a cyclical movements of sort. Also, The features of the child are replicated in the author’s milieu where there is a movement to no known destination.

***THE FAMISHED ROAD AS A CRITICAL TOOL IN ANALYSING
POST-INDEPENDENT NIGERIA***

The road to a totally free country is littered with strange experiences, which the author describes in his novel. First, there is the road which was once a river at the beginning of things and second, a road that remains hungry and always willing to eat its occupants (Okri, 1991). Okri, one may argue, draws the title of his book from Soyinka's poem "Death in the Dawn", a supplicatory poem to the gods of journey and the road (Quayson, 1997:122). The prayer of supplication, located in the fourth stanza of Soyinka's poem reads thus:

The right foot for joy, the left, dread
And the mother prayed, child
May you never walk
When the road waits, famished. (Soyinka, 1967:11)

Perhaps this is the same road Azaro's grandfather talked about as Dad relates the story to his son when he says: "Your grandfather [...] is the head-priest of our shrine. Priest of the God of roads. Anyone who wants a special sacrifice for their journeys, undertakings, births, funerals, whatever, goes to him. All human beings travel the same road." (Okri, 1991:70). One can allude to the fact that Dad, Azaro's father, respects the culture of the land and invariably, implores Azaro to appease the gods of the spirit world so that his stay on earth can be peaceful. Azaro, however, falls short of this warning, as he is in constant disagreement with the King of the spirit world who describes Azaro as "a mischievous one" and who "will cause no end of trouble (Okri, 1991:6). The King further revealed to Azaro: "You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of

riddles”(ibid). These are no mere threats from the King as the protagonist’s life is littered with constant woes levied on him. Dad reemphasizes the importance of appeasing the gods in another story he narrates to Azaro in another part of the novel.

Dad recounts:

What had happened was that the King of the road had become part of all the roads in this world. He is still hungry, and he will always be hungry. That is why there are so many accidents in the world.

And to this day some people still put a small amount of food on the road before they travel, so that the King of the road will eat their sacrifice and let them travel safely. But some of our wise people say that there are other reasons. Some say people make sacrifices to the road to remember that the monster is still there and that he can rise at any time and start to eat up human beings again. Others say that it is a form of prayer that his type should never come back again to terrify our lives that is why a small boy like you must be very careful how you wander about in this world. (Okri, 1991:261)

The road in Okri’s *The Famished Road*, as seen in Soyinka’s poem has multiple significances (Quayson, 1997: 122).¹⁶ It points to man’s desire for journeys and movement in search of new ways of doing things and highlights a nation’s quest to grasp the so-called freedom bequeathed on her by colonialists. Quayson describes this desire for change, as “a hunger for completion and meaning, something which the novel suggests is extremely difficult to reach”(Quayson, 1997:122). Cooper summarizes the road as:

...the danger of curiosity and adventurousness that can kill the restless traveller. It is colonial degradation, the African past, the universal human condition. It is simultaneously an opening up of the possibility of change and “newness entering the world”. This possibility establishes some ironic distance from conservative warnings from the past, even when this ironic

¹⁶ In his interview with Jane Wilkinson, however, Okri is quick to suggest that his road differs from Soyinka’s road. He quips that his “road is quite different” and “takes you from one place to another, on a journey, towards a destination.”(Wilkinson, 1992:83)

distance falters in the face of the writers' own trepidation and ambivalence. (Cooper, 1998:82)

The “danger of curiosity and adventurousness” described by Cooper is prevalent among post-independent nations in the so-called third world countries who, like Azaro, never “looked forward to being born” (Okri, 1991:1). Hence, there is a gnawing desire to return to pre-colonial ways where life was without external influence. “Colonial degradation” is shown when the white man orders men to work under the scorching sun— a pointer to colonial Nigeria—“ to drink in the evils of history” (Okri, 1991:326). Azaro describes his utter discontent for the white man because he gives “bad-tempered orders in an unfamiliar language”(ibid). The road is:

... their soul, the soul of their history. That is why, when they built a long section of it, or forgotten words of their prophet and begun to think they have completed it, land quakes happen, lightning strikes, invisible volcanoes erupt, rivers descend on them, hurricanes tear up their earth, the road goes mad and twists and destroys itself, or the people become distorted in spirit and start to turn the road into other things, or the workers go insane, the people start wars, revolts cripple everything and a thousand things distract them and wreck what they built and a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage. (Okri, 1991: pp 229-230)

Forgetting about their history unleashed a scourge on the people. The forgetfulness of how the country was, and how it was created would lead to the Nigerian civil war, an endless bout of military dictatorship and a misunderstanding of the workings of western democracy.¹⁷ The final destination of this road, laden with heavy images of the people's life, however, is unknown. There is a continuous search for a destination. Okri advises: “It's a road that is meant to take you from one place to

¹⁷ Sam Momah, in his book, *Nigeria Beyond Divorce: Almagamation in Perspective* (2013) argues that Nigerians existed in peace before the rude intrusion of the colonialists. He argues that there were well-organised empires which promoted peaceful co-existence amongst tribes; for example, the Sokoto empire, Nok empire, Ife empire and Benin empire existed peacefully only to be trampled by the amalgamation carried out by Britain in 1914.

another, on a journey, towards a destination” but the destination remains a mirage as seen from Azaro’s errant features (Wilkinson, 1992:83).

The road is also a significance of human existence and tells the beginning and the end of what humans would face if they fail to live in one accord. “This road of life, along which we all struggle and strive”, Cooper argues, “is reinforced in the book by means of a liberating image of the road towards wisdom and transformation” (Cooper, 1998:79). The road embodies willingness on the side of the people to grow and cross various hurdles in order to reach that final destination.

Quayson argues, “With this title Okri makes an important ritual gesture towards the literary tradition he is elaborating as well as to the indigenous traditions and beliefs” (Quayson, 1997:122). Cooper reiterates Quayson’s view but goes further in her analysis by stating that:

The old stories, the proverbs and myths, the tales of origins and warnings, of human well-being linked to the recurrence of the seasons and the conversation of custom are the stories that discourage change, foster purity in aquamarine origins and work against newness entering the world (Cooper, 1998:70).

Cooper highlights the use of sub-story, myths and proverbs in the novel, which are indigenous oral elements, employed by Okri. She elaborates the author’s reason for using these features of oral tradition but sets a confusion by stating that “the conversation of custom are stories that discourage change”. Cooper’s assertion that custom discourages change, contradicts the opening sentence of her essay, which states: “Okri’s hope and goal in *The Famished Road* is to see with a new “third eye”. A particular emphasis on the term “the third eye”, or “seeing with a new eye” as Franz Roh puts it, is to “discover a more [...] deeper basis” of contemporary issues

(Roh, 1995:20). Okri, therefore, uses the myth to uncover the deeper elements of Nigeria.

The bulk of the novel is seen through the eyes of Azaro. Unlike other àbíkús, however, Azaro desires to stay in the real world while at the same time refuses to break links with that of his spirit companions (Cooper, 1998; Quayson, 1997). Azaro's refusal to remain in the spirit realm makes his kindred friends question his loyalty to their pact and his constant journey to the spirit world confuses the family at the same time. This refusal represents the unpreparedness of Nigeria's independence and mocks the freedom doled out by colonialists. The warning by the King was made clear when he addressed Azaro as follows:

“You are a mischievous one. You will cause no end of trouble. You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of riddles. You will be protected and you will never be alone. (Okri, 1991: 6)

These riddles can be seen in the inability of a country to understand the tenets of western democracy. Through the eyes of Azaro, Okri reminds Nigerians and Africans to remember the richness of their traditions. With authorial intrusion, he introduces the reader to the beginning of things where all mysteries emanate from. He preaches: “These are the myths of beginnings. These are stories and moods deep in those who are seeded in rich lands, who still believe in mysteries.” (Okri, 1991:6) Cooper elaborates this quest for the search of beginnings as:

The call to decolonize by way of the pre-colonial culture, particular of the oral tradition, is that works that invoke it, partake of its style, invent variations of it, are simultaneously speaking in a coded shorthand of opposition to cultural imperialism and the onslaught of western forms and genres. (Cooper, 1998:74)

This is a fantastic way to explain why Okri chooses to use the African oral tradition in his work: “on the one hand, he [Okri] opposes the slavish imitation of western forms and ideas” which “gives rise to the search for a pure, pre-colonial past, linked to projects of national reconstruction”(Cooper, 1998:74). Okri’s ability to narrate the story, using the àbíkú phenomenon on the other hand, according to Cooper, shows his love of change and celebration of the transformations arising out of interactions with other cultures (ibid). The preservation of oral tradition which is one of the arguments of this thesis is captured excellently by Cooper when she argues that “the force of tradition—and the warning of repercussions if ancient wisdoms are abandoned—is only part of *The Famished Road*’s moral purpose and only part of the symbolic significance of the road” (Cooper, 1998:77).

Okri’s ideology is that one must not discard the cultures of other nations but one must first learn the histories of one’s land and then understand others. Through the use of stories within a story he gives a glimpse of what riddles lie in the wisdom of Nigeria’s oral tradition; an example of this is noticed when Dad interrupts the night with his story about the “King of the road” (Okri, 1991:258). Cooper postulates that there is traditional wisdom and storytelling in the form of the tortoise in oral tradition; a speaking tortoise that poses a riddle and provides the answer is the philosophical cornerstone of *The Famished Road* (Cooper, 1998: 74).

The symbols in the novel are not limited to the road. At the end of the novel, the three àbíkú children in Madam Koto’s belly represents the restlessness that followed immediately after Nigeria gained independence (Cooper, 1998:88).¹⁸ Here,

¹⁸ The following books cover and more importantly, explore the happenings immediately after Nigeria’s so-called independence: Akinola’s *Party Coalitions in Nigeria. History, Trends and Prospects* (2014); Falola’s *The History of Nigeria* (1999); Lim’s *The Infinite Longing for Home Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam*(2005) and Ojeleye’s *The Politics of Post-War Demobilisation and Reintegration in Nigeria*(2010)

unlike, elsewhere, transformation is unambiguously embraced. Azaro may encounter all kinds of hazards on his travels, he might well heed his father's warnings about wandering boys, but we are in little doubt that his exceptional growing understanding is linked to his itchy feet and his exposure through his restlessness to change, newness and strangeness—"my feet started to itch again, and I resumed wandering the roads of the world" (Cooper, 1998: 79). Madam Koto typifies the modern day corrupt politicians in Nigeria as Cooper argues. A close study of her role in the novel would reveal a movement from a normal bar owner to someone who would develop a monstrous attitude due to her affiliations with politics. According to Cooper:

"Madame Koto as implicated in the corruption of modern Nigerian politics. She becomes the embodiment, the physical symbol of the new power itself, rather than its transgression, with her warring àbíkú triplets, ominously signaling the country's bloody civil war to come." (Cooper, 1998:89)

From the bar we get a foretaste of what the country is going to look like when the politicians engage in attempts to running a country from a bar. Azaro describes them as "strangers to the world of the living" and as a matter of fact, they begin to develop animalistic features the more they mingle in the space of politics (Okri, 1991:524). The narrator begins to see prostitutes who would be "future brides of decadent power with legs of goats" and "some of the women, who were chimeras and sirens and broken courtesans, had legs of spiders and birds"(ibid). These descriptions only drive home the ominous trend portrayed in Fela Anikulapokuti's music where he compared Nigerian politicians to "animals in human skin".¹⁹ Summarily, Cooper asserts, "that history and politics are governed by this universal and repetitive cycle of greed [and] fuels the image of Nigeria itself as the àbíkú (Cooper, 1998:91).

¹⁹ In Fela Anikulapokuti's song "Beast of no Nation"(1989) he describes Nigerian politicians as "animals in human skin" who have no respect for real humans.

To put it in simpler terms, the àbíkú represents Nigeria. The cyclical journey of the àbíkú is evident in the Nigerian scheme of things. Wright sees Azaro's wandering in *The Famished Road* as “mundane and numinous” because he is a child without accurate direction (Wright, 1997:153). Wright stresses that:

The historical track upon which new nation-state careers aimlessly forward between a vanishing past and an unprepared future, an image of the uncertain path to independence and a dubious technological progress, and the transitional territory between life and death is displayed by the spirit child (Wright, 1997:153).

Wright presents the present reality of Nigeria—a country plagued by disillusionment, dangling in between life and death and staggering to an uncertain path of independence.

The chapter has explored how Okri uses the àbíkú phenomenon to represent the post-independent Nigerian state. Apart from Azaro's mysterious existence, other unseen characters with hidden voices exist in Okri's milieu and they give instructions on how Dad, Mum and Azaro can enjoy real freedom. The next chapter, therefore, attempts to explore the concept of hauntology in *Songs of Enchantment*.

CHAPTER TWO

HAUNTOLOGY IN OKRI'S *SONG OF ENCHANTMENT*

INTRODUCTION

Jacques Derrida, in *Spectres of Marx*, deconstructs the fixity of the present. He argues that there is no present. He asserts that “haunting is historical [...] not dated, never really given a date in the chain of presents” (Derrida, 1993:3). Derrida argues that something absolutely different haunts our realities, languages, writings, thoughts, and lives (Derrida, 1993:125). What haunts, is usually something one imagines, what one think one sees and which one projects (ibid). Therefore, haunting cannot be explained by a linear sequence of events but rather from different perspectives and as Dad in *Songs of Enchantment* advises “EVERYTHING IS ALIVE!” (OKRI, 1993:263).

Therefore, the present in Okri's milieu is a phalanx of various features. Seeing that “everything is alive”, hauntology, therefore, creates a platform to comprehend Okri's presentation of ghosts and the uncanny domination of ghosts in his novel. Okri insists that it is important not to surrender to present reality without tracing the various components that make the present.

In this chapter, Hauntology is used to analyse different conceptualizations of temporalities in *Songs of Enchantment*. Derrida says the present is “ordered, distributed in the two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet” (Derrida, 1993: 30). To put Derrida's words in simpler terms, the present is directed by various, unseen forces such as history, memory and traumatic experiences. These forces, albeit in various forms, haunts Okri's Nigeria; a textual analysis of Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* shows how hauntology aids the

understanding of reality.

**THE QUESTION OF HAUNTOLOGY IN NIGERIA: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS
OF OKRI'S *SONG OF ENCHANTMENT* VIS-À-VIS DERRIDA'S *SPECTRES
OF MARX***

Jago Morrison says, “writers, by their very disorientation, had become the historian of the crisis of civilization” (Morrison, 2003:9). Relating to Okri, it could be stated that he has become a historian of sorts trying to exhume the buried pasts of a new nation. Hauntology allows him to reveal these hidden crises of the present. What has not faded from Okri’s mind is the problem of, to borrow Morrison’s phrase, “framing contemporary history in fiction”(Morrison, 2003:10). Memory still serves as a crucial resource in the author’s portrayal of the present. Derrida’s hauntology asks that one views everything as ghosts—history, memory, text and the world(Derrida, (1993:100). What we call the past cannot exist, according to Derrida, “instead it continues to assert itself in the present in innumerable ways” (Morrison, 2003:24).

To paraphrase and borrow from Derrida, there are specters haunting Azaro’s community. These specters are “supernatural” and maintain a “paradoxical phenomenality” in *Songs of Enchantment* (Derrida, 1993:6). The supernatural is that part of existence, which cannot be explained rationally, and which “engineers [s’ingenie] a habitation without proper inhabiting”; it hangs and hovers over existence (Derrida, 1993: 20). To see these “inhabiting” forces, a third eye is needed or to borrow Roh’s post-expressionist phrase, the supernatural serves as a “mirror of palpable exteriority” which rids human’s “instinctive attitude” of describing reality from a single prism (Roh, 1995:18-19).

Furthermore, the “paradoxical phenomenality” can be viewed from two

levels: the presentation of events can weave into each other thereby creating a reality different from what humans perceive to be real and secondly, create a space between living and dying. This paradoxical phenomenon can also be a viewing of the world from a fourth stage, which Soyinka defines as a “vortex of archetypes” (Soyinka, 1976:149).²⁰ In *Songs of Enchantment* these archetypes exist in different forms and, as Okri puts it, his second novel in the trilogy is “the song of a circling spirit”, “a story for all of us who never see the seven mountains of our secrets destiny”(Okri, 1993:3) This seeming blindness and hovering spirits in Okri’s novel is one of the features of post-independent Nigeria.

“The story of colonialism’s transition to independence in former colonies at the end of the long periods of colonial rule”, O’Riley contends, is “postcolonial haunting”, which usually leaves the colonies in an awry state (O’Riley, 2007:1). The argument that postcolonial countries are haunted by a long historical past endorses Derrida’s assertion that “Hegemony still organizes the repression” faced in most post-colonies which is a “confirmation of [...] haunting”(Derrida, 1993:21). These manifestations of ghosts play an important role in post-colonial thoughts. In other words, the comfort of feeling at home involves the presence of these strange beings in the constructs of Azaro’s world.

Drawing on Derrida, Kenway et al, maintains that “the denial [of these hegemonic features is] the reason for the return of the specter and revenant”(Kenway et al, 2006:5). The denial of these historical features, perhaps, opens Dad and other characters in *Songs of Enchantment* to assaults from “the sounds of the world [they] had never paid much attention to” (Okri, 1993:216). Hence, Okri, through this novel,

²⁰ An analysis of Jungian archetypes might yield further analysis of Okri’s *Song of Enchantment* but this study would not address them.

“asks readers to confront accepted definitions of self, society, and culture” through an ontological system “quite foreign to the colonizers (Hawley, 1995; Hemminger, 2001).

Following Derrida’s claim that “haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony”, one can argue that Azaro’s community is filled with ghosts released from dominant structures (Derrida, 1993:46). His world is a place where “future events present themselves in phantasms and portents alongside relived histories and current-day injustices”(Hemminger, 2001:72). Azaro describes phenomena as “invisible beings” and “giants” who ride “on the backs of blue unicorns”(Okri, 1993:159). The invisible beings portend dangers of great proportions and as Azaro muses, these invisible masters brought:

The Way which had since been corrupted by succeeding generations, by greed and decadence, blindness and stupidity, by vulgar Kings and dim-witted chiefs, corrupted and turned into sinister uses in the eternal battle of ascendancies. (Okri, 1993:160)

“The Way” which represents freedom in post-independent Nigeria is destroyed by political greed.²¹ Hemminger describes it as a way “hungry for caring consideration, a way angry at the unchecked forces of human greed and environmental violence”(Hemminger, 2001:76). Taking Hemminger’s argument further, one may conclude that there is an uncanny repetition of history in “The Way”, in that the new faces show no consideration to their environment (ibid). Azaro laments that the “forgotten experiments” “[...] can re-surface with fuller results even in insulated and innocent communities”(Okri, 1993:160). A historical repetition of repression, of disillusionment, resurfaces in Azaro’s community.

²¹ In the next chapter, I give detailed historical happenings of colonialist mission to keep postcolonial nations in perpetual blindness and show how the so-called freedom leads to contemporary struggles.

Derrida opines that the specter is not present “in-flesh and blood”(Derrida, 1993:126). Expanding on Derrida’s point, Kirss claims that “what haunts is not subject to conscious memory”, but “recurs through uncanny phenomena” and always in repetitive form (Kirss, 2003:21). In Azaro’s community there is a “recurrence of [dreams] at various levels of political reality” and only by re-opening the wound of these repressed visions can a formidable road to freedom be constructed (Kirss, 2003:22). Azaro reports that his area “became a vast beast in torment” and was “surrounded by [...] companions of hyenas and panthers, chanting with the voices of possessed men” who “wreaked an incredible violence on the forces of wind” in his community (Okri, 1993:138). The volatility rendered by these beasts allowed “the future burst on” Azaro and made him see “armoured trucks and jeeps and great military lorries [...] ready for a new domination”(ibid). For Azaro, an ugly future is inevitable and one can allude to the fact that the “armoured trucks and jeeps” are a reminder of the military era in Nigeria which saw to the complete abuse of law and general dissatisfaction among Nigerians (Okri, 1993; Ali-Akpajiak and Pike, 2003)

Derrida’s hauntology aids the textual analysis of Okri’s *Songs of Enchantment* and shines a light on the role it plays in postcolonial realities. The multiple ways of being, to Okri, however, is “The [African] Way”(Okri, 1993:160). The Way:

[...] that makes it possible [...] for the language of angels and gods, birds and trees, animals and spirits [to be heard]; The Way that makes them greet phenomena for ever as a brother and a sister in mysterious reality; The Way that develops and keeps its secrets of transformation—hate into love, beast into man, man into illustrious ancestor, ancestor into god; The Way whose center grows from divine love, whose roads are always open for messages from all the spheres to keep coming through; The Way that preaches attunement with all the higher worlds, that believes in forgiveness and generosity of spirit, always receptive, always listening. Always kindling the understanding of signs, like the potencies hidden in snail tracks along forbidden paths; The Way that always, like a river flows into and flows out of

the myriad ways of the world. (Okri, 1993:160)

It is very important to quote, at length, Okri's description of The Way because he highlights important facts about the concept of hauntology from an African perspective. From his assertions, the African way presents coexistences between specters and reality. The African Way, Okri further asserts, is always open to "attunement with all the higher worlds" and maintains a flowing characteristic that could lead it to various places which follows Dad's declaration that "EVERYTHING IS ALIVE!" (OKRI, 1993:263).

Scholars maintain that Okri's use of the myth stems from the Yoruba mythologies where spirits are part of the material world (Quayson, 1997; Wright, 1997; Cooper, 1998 and Fulford, 2009). Yai posits that from a "Yoruba worldview [...] the best way to recognize reality [...] is to depart from it" and goes further to state that any "reality worth respecting is that which differs from" reality (Yai, 1993:35). Thus, in Okri's attempt to explain reality, he departs from it. This African Way also bears certain resemblance to Derrida's proposition where he asserts that "one must see, at first sight, what does not let itself be seen" and argues that it is a flaw not to notice the invisible (Derrida, 1993:187). Simply put, to understand the plights of the characters in Okri's *Songs of Enchantment*, it is imperative to "notice" the "invisible" features in the "obvious" and the "trivial"(ibid).

In *Songs of Enchantment* the kind of spectral haunting presented is defined by Derrida as someone "other" looking, the feeling of being looked at by an "absolute anteriority" and which is absolutely unmasterable or ungraspable (Derrida, 1993:6). The opening paragraph of the novel expands Derrida's idea. Azaro reveals it in clear terms:

We didn't see the seven mountains ahead of us. We didn't see how they are always ahead, always calling us, always reminding us that there are more things to be done, dreams to be realised, joys to be re-discovered, promises made before birth to be fulfilled, beauty to be incarnated, and love embodied. (Okri, 1993:1)

The absolute anteriority is not graspable, and because in Yoruba belief systems “the present belongs to the living”, while “the future to the unborn” it is clear why Azaro couldn't see the mountains of tomorrow (Soyinka, 1976:148). Derrida further posits that:

This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the "to be?" assuming that it is a matter of Being in the "to be or not to be," but nothing is less certain). It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves (Derrida, 1993:10).

The functions of ghost in Okri's reality cannot be overemphasized. In the African scheme of things, the concept of ghosts is predicated on the teleological feature of African “history and cultures” (Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:312). Ying puts Okri's experimentation with reality into context when she argues that the author sees no difference between “human and spirit world, the animate and the inanimate, life and death”(Ying, 2006: 108).

The ability to speak with a specter or hear a spirit speak may seem impossible to the “expert, a professor, an interpreter”, Derrida argues (Derrida, 1993:10). And these scholars like every human tend to question the “virtual space of spectrality”(Derrida, 1993:11). However, Okri, with his trilogy breaks that belief by using the concept of hauntology to explore certain issues in Nigeria. In *Songs of Enchantment*, at Madam Koto's bar, Azaro:

[...] was surprised to see a weird towering structure in front of her bar. At first I thought that this structure was responsible for the half-

rainbow. People had gathered and they kept pointing at the new phenomenon. It was a gigantic red masquerade, bristling with raffia and rags and nails. It had long stilts for legs and two twisted horns at the sides of a wild jackal's heads (Okri, 1993:pp.97-98).

The sudden appearance of the masquerade, which “no one could explain”, is one of such elements that appears in the milieu created by Okri (Okri, 1993:98). Perhaps, one could maintain that Okri's use of masquerade here is to “address reality with the most complex” cultural form (Asouzu, 2005:206).

Okri's characters in his trilogy speak to spirits, feel the presence of the spirits and sometimes tend to know what the spectral being seeks. The question whether ghosts exist or not arises as one studies *Songs of Enchantment*. It is perhaps true, that the logic behind believing in ghosts “points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic” (Derrida, 1993:78). This logic reiterates the magical realist concept propounded by Franz Roh who suggested that an artist must begin to look at reality from different perspectives. It is not enough to look at reality from a single vision; he illustrates this with his view of several apples on a table where “amalgam of colors, spatial forms, tactile representations, memories of smells and tastes” present a “truly unending complex” (Roh, 1995:19). Complex features characterize reality and it is the job of an artist to include these complexities in the work he creates.

Thus, Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* is informed by ghosts, stones, dreams and ancestors, which stems from an African belief systems. Reality in Africa, Irele and Jeyiefo argue, is not “only physical but also metaphysical” which they argued “is not limited to material things”(Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:313). According to them, Africa “is a world in which everything is interconnected in an arrangement in vibration”(ibid). This vibration, they claimed, could be referred to as “interactionism” where the

spiritual and the physical affect each other and more importantly, interact (ibid).

Everything dead still exists. Derrida, interestingly, argues that “Vigilance, therefore: the cadaver is perhaps not as dead, as simply dead as the conjuration tries to delude us into believing”(Derrida, 1993:120). The above argument points to the confused notions held about the “dead”. There is, as Derrida argues, a certain level of delusion to hold that type of belief. Most humans conceive the ghost, a phantom, as the return of a lost loved one, what Freud called the familiar stranger. A familiar stranger is a vivid characterization of the commanding meeting of familiarity and strangeness, which defines haunting.²²

This familiar stranger could alter the definition of visibility as proposed by Derrida:

The specter, as its name indicates, is the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. And visibility, by its essence, is not seen, which is why it remains *epekeina tes ousias*, beyond the phenomenon or beyond being. The specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see (Derrida, 1993:125).

Interestingly, Okri’s Azaro imagines specters, which appear in various forms. For example, while at the Madam koto’s backyard, he sees “red spirits clambering up” a “white horse”(Okri, 1993:101). At other times, humans bear grotesque characteristics:

Women with almond eyes, long fingernails and lace dresses floated past holding cigarettes in their hands. There were short men with powerful heads and small eyes, tall men with servants who fanned them, stocky men with bleary eyes. The red lights made everything seem unreal and I kept going up to people and touching their stomachs [...](Okri, 1993:99)

These strange beings that populate Madam Koto’s bar, Cooper argues, are symbolic

²² This strangeness also falls into Freud’s Uncanny, which is explored in details in the next chapter.

representation of “unchanging cycles of historical cruelty and the futility of striving for social transformation”(Cooper, 2004:227). Through Azaro’s vision, therefore, what exists is not an independent state but a beastly reflection of freedom. These descriptions of humans that populate Madam Koto’s bar are manifestations of what Derrida calls “beyond being” in that they don’t possess features of normal humans. They can emanate from dreams, repressed hopes, failures, imaginations and myths. Haunting, therefore, is not only about the visitations of reincarnated relations but manifestation of, to use Derrida’s phrase, “beyond beings” which can be willed by an individual with suppressed dreams.

In Okri’s *Songs of Enchantments*, Azaro gives a detailed account of these grotesque appearances:

We began to see holes in reality, in objects, in people, and wherever we happened to look. The sleeplessness increased our mass hallucination. People saw blue flying objects in the air. When one person saw them we all did. Red flares appeared in the clouds. Our houses began to move. The road trembled. The trees changed shape. The world started to succumb to strange distortions. People turned into chickens, goats and iguanas under our gaze. (Okri, 1993:157).

These manifestations presented by the child are plagues caused by contacts with the colonialists. These amnesia and delusions, Cooper claims, only buttress the fact that Azaro with other characters in the novel, are victims of foreign oppression (Cooper, 2004:229). To undo the “sleight-of-hand” between history and nature and other dichotomies, Derrida, advises that “a new experience of the event and of another logic of its relation to the phantomic” is important (Derrida, 1993: 86). Therefore, Okri employs, as Ayo argues, these “mythic landscapes with animist deities, supernatural beings” as an “anti-imperial tool and a re-working of history in fiction (Ayo, 2009:318). These animist deities in Okri’s *Songs of Enchantment* are drawn from an

African consciousness and it is more than an “anti-imperial tool”; they are, as Rooney puts it, “a matter of [an] African experience [...] and cultural inheritances that inform[s] the [understanding] of the world created by the author”(Rooney, 2000:120). It is safe, therefore, to state that historical revenants and a chaotic present is part of the social constructs in Nigeria and has a marked effect on the mentality of her citizens.

O’Riley argues that formerly colonized nations often suffer from awful memory of colonialism (the invisible) which orients their ethical and political commitments (O’Riley, 2007). Arlene Elder argues that Okri’s “message is as psychological as it is political” but fails to explain, in details, the psychological message in *Songs of Enchantments* (Elder, 2009:11). The psychological can be located in Dad’s struggle with blindness, his fight with political thugs and the various ghosts that plague his existence. Azaro gives a detailed account of his Dad’s fight against “imaginary dragons” while at the same time “knocking down invisible warriors”(Okri, 1993:250). Only after emerging victorious in the fight against invisible beings did Dad, according to Azaro, become “alert”(Okri, 1993:253). Okri asks the colonized mind to be free or alert about their nightmarish existence and reminds them about the importance of understanding history.

Azaro’s psychic ability to see into the margins of vision in cracks, through masks and other people’s dreams emphasizes the multifaceted modes of perception which can lead to deeper ways of seeing and knowing. To achieve this multifaceted way of seeing, Azaro “slipped out of the room, out into the adventures of darkness and dreams”(Okri, 1993: 254). At the same time, Okri’s narrative style draws from *The African Way*, which is attuned with other cultures. The world, Okri suggests,

needs to change their mode of seeing so that they can, like Azaro, make sense of the scrambled face of reality:

Maybe one day we will see the mountains ahead of us. Maybe one day we will see the seven mountains of our mysterious destiny. Maybe one day we will see that beyond our chaos there could always be a new sunlight and serenity. (Okri, 1993:297)

The author, however, doubts the fact that a post-independent Nigeria would truly be free of the mountains of freedom. Using the adverb “maybe” shows the author’s uncertainty that “the seven mountains of our mysterious destiny” would be over. Perhaps this doubt, as mouthed by Azaro, represents the voice of every individual in the world because, as Okri asks, “Isn’t it just possible that we are all àbíkús?”(Wilkinson, 1992:85). If one were to presume every human is an àbíkú, following Okri’s question, that would mean every human is restless.

In Azaro’s vision, spirits maintain a chaotic and colourful presence. Derrida observes: “Humanity is but a collection or series of ghosts”(Derrida, 1993:172). The characters in Okri’s novel witness these ghosts at different times. Azaro:

...saw the spirits of aborted babies crawling about and voices from realms both distant and near called my secret names, weaving them in sweet threnodies, and the forms of the dead appeared to me in flashes of darkness, and my head caught fire, and I began to rave again. (Okri, 1993:264).

These visions cloud Azaro’s head, overpower him and sometimes make him lose his composure in his house. If as Derrida argues that everything is haunted, one may argue that these aborted babies, hidden voices, appearances of dead have their roles in Azaro’s community. This, also, is a symbolical representation of dualities present in a post-colonial state where “history becomes a radical movement in the direction of freedom”(Adorno, 2006: 5). The study of memory becomes important for Azaro to really enjoy freedom; also, the dead appear to give him flashes of these

historical pasts. Again, Adorno argues that “the spirit that objectively realises itself through history [...] makes freedom a reality”(ibid). An understanding of history, therefore, is important for occupants in Azaro’s community to attain ultimate freedom.

The mere fact that humans in Azaro’s community try to remove the ghost make them ghosts too. One could argue that Azaro’s Dad is one of the most potent ghosts in the novel who is motivated to carry out “impossible acts” in order to cut off the hidden hands keeping him and his family in perpetual poverty (Lim, 2005:93). He is in constant battle with ancestors from the past and in connection with specters of the future. Azaro reports “Dad went on battling against imaginary dragons, slaying beasts with human faces, knocking down the invisible warriors with their copper raiment, whose faces were like severed wood-carvings.” (Okri, 1993:250).

The ghosts in *Songs of Enchantment* are hungry and selfish and lost. Azaro, who has an uncanny ability to see and hear from them, however, can only tell us what they have to say. The ghosts of the past want to be remembered, they want to be heard, they want their dreams to be met in the present. Azaro bears their news:

“I heard the great howling funeral wail of the unnumbered dead, heard their complaints, their cries, their lamentations, their regrets, their simultaneous speeches, their threats, their broken promises, their perpetual dreams, their furious list of all the ways they would have lived their lives differently, more luminously, with wise silence and effective courage’ I heard the voices of the unhappy dead, the unburied dead, those whose deaths were unacknowledged, those to whom justice hadn’t been done, whose restless sleep was spiked with the lies and silences of the living; I heard their voices, full of messages and signs, lessons to be learnt, histories that mustn’t be forgotten, stories that must be told, melodies that must be created, possibilities that must be discovered, lives that must be redeemed, sufferings that must be transformed into wonders, and all the thousand permutations of love that must be incarnated and kept whole and regenerated every day of our lives. I heard all these things and saw the forms of the dead all around me.” (Okri, 1993:257-258)

Adorno's claim that understanding "history is a radical movement in the direction of freedom" is worth reiterating because it aligns with Azaro's admonition for histories to be remembered (Adorno, 2006:81). For freedom to be attained, therefore, comprehending one's history plays a major role. Remembering and re-narrating history is one of Okri's missions in his trilogy and, as Quayson argues, Okri's trilogy allows him to access the previous world, the actual one and the one to come (Quayson, 1997:10). Azaro's milieu is haunted by, but not limited to: voices full of messages, lessons to be learnt from these messages and stories that must be told. And, as Hart and Ouyang posit, Okri's "use of the trope produces a powerful vision" which he uses to tell the repressed stories (Hart and Ouyang, 2005:10). Adorno warns of the overbearing power that history has on humans and also intones, "we are all products of history"(Adorno, 2006:70). As such, existence or reality in Okri's setting is a historical collage, which is non-linear and associative, one that challenges official narratives of history and different from the dominant perspective. It is a history that is overburdened with futures that don't materialize mixed with a collapsed present (Coundouriotis, 2000: 41).

Okri attempts to draw readers to "the complaints", "cries", and "regrets" of Nigerian heroes like Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo, just to mention those two, who wrest freedom from colonial missionaries only to be haunted by other hidden machinations. Okri's points open up various scope of conceiving Nigeria's history and how the failure of colonialism was a signpost towards disaster for Nigeria following independence (Olukunle, 2010:33). Through Azaro's lament, the author reiterates the need to confront the present in postcolonial Nigeria.

Hauntology is used here as a trope and as a reminder to the importance of the

past and how it could be used to heal the present. But there might never be an end to the suffering as Okri shows his doubt at the end of the book by stating: “Maybe one day we will see the mountains ahead of us” (Okri, 1993:297). As Azaro learns this crucial lesson about haunting, he becomes the intrepid angel of history.

Okri’s resolution of Azaro’s struggle between understanding the explosion of ghosts in his community and his fight against death helps us to see that haunting as a way of life and as a method of analysis, or as a type of political unconsciousness must be passed on. Okri provides a stunning example of how to hospitably and delicately talk to ghosts. The author, through this novel, argues that these Nigerian heroes “who fought for Nigeria’s independence must be remembered lest they become unhappy in death.”²³ They are, for better or worse, very much alive and present; hence, why the voices trouble Azaro and his community. But Okri also tells us that creating “our new lives, everyday, with will and light and love” will collectively exorcise the ghost of the past (Okri, 1993:3).

Reality in Okri’s the *Songs of Enchantment* is pregnant with unfulfilled possibilities, broken promises, and clamours for expedient action to heal the present. This action is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which is lost. The ghost always also figures this utopian dimension of haunting, encapsulated in the very first lines of *Specters of Marx*: “Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: / *would like to learn to live finally*” (Derrida, 1993: xvii).

The dead who lay their demands have to be evicted by the Nigerian will for

²³ This brings to mind the fifth and sixth line of Nigeria’s national anthem which goes thus: “the labour of our heroes/shall never be in vain”.

change. The ghosts are not living in the spirit world but rather existing ungraciously in the real world of Nigeria's political instability, high unemployment, dead hopes, social malaise and corrupt politicians, failed government institutions, and something will have to be done about that. This inability to pacify the dead leaves Dad sad, uneasy and unhappy. And, when he looks at the bony features of Mum, the slime on his walls, the ceiling with holes, he saw clearly what the real ghosts are the pressures in existence in their daily lives but in different forms (Okri, 1993:291).

Peek claims that "every human community recognizes a need for the special knowledge gained through divination" resonates across the length and breath of Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* (Peek, 1991:1) Okri attempts to re-introduce the "pivotal role of divination in African cultures" and in addition, to bring to the forefront the lost African traditions "lost as a result of earlier prejudices against divination"(ibid). Dad, in *Songs of Enchantment*, rightly warns, "Return to the old ways! He cried. 'Return to the ways of our ancestors! Take what is good from our own way and adapt it to the new times!'" (Okri, 1993:172). By taking positives from our own way and adapting it to the new times, Okri acts as an African diviner, who is usually trusted to make good decisions and dole out sufficient knowledge on everyday issues and act as a mediator, as Nigeria goes through transition from colonial to post-colonial existence (Peek, 1991:2). Yet again, the characters created by Okri are themselves diviners, as their bodies become "the vehicle of communication through spirit possession" (Peek, 1991:2).

It is impossible, Peek argues, from an African context, to discuss social interaction without consideration of divination (ibid). Interestingly, Peek raises an important question: "how can we possibly gain an understanding of contemporary African peoples and their on-going search for sufficient knowledge to complete their

life patterns unless we try to understand their sources of knowledge, their ways of knowing?”(Peek, 1991:14). Okri, with his use of the àbíkú myth in his trilogy answers Peek’s question by trying to analyse the Nigerian state through an African way of knowing.

For real freedom to occur, according to the author, there is the important need for an inward search, there is the haunting which takes place in the self that comes in form of strange elements: “At night we heard the haunting threnody of multiplied female voices from the impenetrable screen of trees” (Okri, 1993:70). These threnodies come as the author’s way of preaching to the populace. He reminds the readers from the beginning of the book that songs of enchantment is a “song of circling spirit” and a story for those “who never see that beyond the chaos there can always be a new sunlight”(Okri, 1993:3). In order for us to see the author’s new sunlight, he sends ghosts from the heads, minds and physiognomy of the characters to haunt his readers as well. There is an attempt, by the author through out the book, to reach the unconscious, which is fed by repressed desires, memories, and uncanny features. The next chapter investigates these psychological features that dictate reality in Azaro’s community.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DREAM MOTIF IN BEN OKRI'S *INFINITE RICHES*

INTRODUCTION

Dreams serve as a novel tool, which literary authors from across the world, including Europe, Asia, and Africa use to analyse a plethora of issues in their community. Ben Okri, for example, uses the dream motif to find “what is hidden, unexplained, and uncontrolled” in the world and “to invent ideas or [solutions]” to comprehend the mysteries of existence (Thomas, 1990:2). Yet, there are indications that Okri’s use of dreams in *Infinite Riches*, stem from both cultural influences and western experiences.

In western cultures, Tedlock argues, dreams are not accorded the same status as waking reality while in other cultures dreaming may “not be sorted out according to the simple oppositional dichotomy of real versus unreal, or reality versus fantasy” (Tedlock, 1987:1). The latter bears resemblance to an African view of dreams where disparities between realities is non-existent and confirms Horton’s assertion that dreaming from an African perspective is “admitted to [...] reality on the same footing as ordinary, everyday perceptions” (Horton, 1993:65). To take Horton’s assessment further, dreams play a vital role in accessing the waking world or, as Azaro in *Infinite Riches* (2009) puts it, “[...] there are two shadow worlds to every reality” or as Okri, in his interview with Wilkinson, puts it: “dreams are part of reality”(Okri, 2009:222; Wilkinson, 1992:88)

The Freudian approach to dreams involves explanation of dreams, which Freud argues is a product of “physical forces”. To put it simply, dreams in the

sleeping world are products of the waking life (Freud, 1991:56). However, the African approach to dream is embedded in the indigenous cosmology and spirituality of the community in question (Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:319). The visible world from an African perspective is inhabited by “biotic and non-biotic entities” which consists of ancestors, the supreme deity, “personal and impersonal spirits, and mystical worlds of witches and sorcerers”(ibid).

Okri draws from both Freudian and African approaches because he believes that African aesthetics is “not bound only to [a] place” but open to attunement from other worlds (Wilkinson, 1992; Okri, 1993). Okri falls into the category of writers who fuse “cultures” together both in language and aesthetics and this singular act, according to Ashcroft et al, is “syncretism”(Ashcroft et al, 2002:30). Cooper calls it “hybridity” which post-colonial writers use to show a “reaffirmation of cultural roots” and an understanding of the “new”(Cooper, 1998).

Okri’s use of dream in *Infinite Riches*, therefore, serves as a way to shine a light on the historical influences of Azaro’s community, how these historical dreams affecting their reality and how their unconscious affects their waking life. To understand why Nigeria finds herself as the beggar in the wide world, it is essential to trace the historical path that lead her into the uncanny movement of “coming back again and again to the same spot” (Freud, 2003:144)

DREAM AS A HISTORICAL LENS IN OKRI'S *INFINITE RICHES*.

Africa's history is littered with inconsistencies, half-truths, and faulted memories presented by the colonizers; one cannot trust the colonizer's historical records of Africa, who according to Okri's Azaro "rewrote our history". (Prakash, 1994; Venn, 2006; Persram, 2007, Okri, 2009). Freud postulates, "even the most truth-loving of men is scarcely able to relate a noteworthy dream without some additions and embellishment" (Freud, 1991: 110). That Nigeria would flourish and progress after independence, therefore, is the colonial master's "embellishment" of their dream about post-independent Nigeria.

Okri's *Infinite Riches* (2009) forces the reader to re-examine those conceptual embellishments and assumptions about Nigeria's history. Fanon, similarly, warns that independent colonies should not "go ecstatic over such careful renditions of [historical] truths" and adds that "we have every right to ask ourselves whether this truth is real, whether in fact it is not outmoded [and] irrelevant" (Fanon, 2004:162). Hence, Dad in *Infinite Riches* asks: "Who can be certain where the end begins?" (Okri, 2009:5). In order to know where the end begins and find new paths out of the "end", it is pertinent to borrow some features from the African mythical bird—Sankofa—that flies forward with its head looking backwards (Prendergast, 2011: 121). A West African adage drawn from the bird's symbolism goes thusly: "Sankofa! We must go back and reclaim our past in order to create a better future"(ibid). This adage summarises Okri's mission in *Infinite Riches* as he tries to articulate the dreams of colonial missionaries in order to understand contemporary Nigeria.

Okri in an attempt to scrutinize Nigeria's past leans slightly towards historicism. "Historicism" according to Paul Hamilton, "is suspicious of the stories

the past tells about itself” and “offers up both its past and its present for ideological scrutiny” (Hamilton, 1996:3). Okri shares certain characteristics with other postcolonial writers, who Edward Said argues, “bear their past within them as scars of humiliating wounds” which needs to be “potentially revised” (Said, 1994:34). Azaro, the àbíkú protagonist and the narrator, lays the indelible mark of the past and indeed, highlights his distrusts for revised histories when he begins to “think of [Nigerian] history as a dream rewritten by those who know how to change the particulars of memory” and sees the colonial dream as a “reality we never lived” (Okri, 2009:346). The reality of freedom is “never lived” and is fraught with imperialist legacies.

Hamilton, furthermore, uses Freudianism to capture the importance of investigating the past with this aphorism: “we forget at our peril the extent to which the child is father of the adult” (Hamilton, 1996:120). To explore contemporary Nigeria, therefore, without paying attention to what Freud calls the “infantile wishes” is not only dangerous but limits the thorough comprehension of the crushing lacerations of imperialism on Okri and his characters.

Lim’s argument about Okri’s “historical allusions” makes it appropriate for one to explore the happenings in pre-independent Nigeria and more importantly, trace reasons why the Governor-General would embark on “dividing up the country” which he desires to set free (Lim, 2005; Okri, 2009).

The Governor-General represents the imperialist in Okri’s *Infinite Riches* (2009) and was rightly described by Lim as “the whipping-boy whose primary function is to enact white racism”(Lim, 2005:104). The Governor-General, through his actions and mainly through his words, displays racist features. Azaro reveals this:

The Governor-General had spent seventeen days burning the crucial papers relating to the governance of a country whose people he

did not much like, and seldom saw except as shapes with menacing eyes and too many languages, too many gods, too many leaders. A people who took too little interest in the preservation of their culture. (Okri, 1998: 38)

The dream of the missionaries, from the beginning, was to destabilize the country by “burning the crucial papers relating to the governance” thereby leading the people on a dangerous path to a “traumatic” destination (Deyan, 2012:48).

There was a malicious attempt by the British colonizers to delude Nigerians who they “did not much like” into accepting an ill-fated freedom, which Akinola describes as a bid “to thwart such [independent] progress and undermine the authority of the new [political] elites”(Akinola, 2014:7). There are too many languages and with over three hundred tribes in Nigeria, any attempt at fostering unity presented a dilemma for the commercially inclined colonialists. In short, the mere fact of pursuing a national consciousness or national unity for Nigerians by the British at the time of independence might have resulted in a violent and untimely extermination of the benefits of colonialism (Akinola, 2014:7)

But Guo Deyan argues that the end of colonialism and Nigeria’s attainment of independence only “plunged [the country] into a new cycle of pathos (Deyan, 2012:52). Nigeria, metaphorically speaking, is an *àbíkú* set lose by missionaries to embark on a never-ending cycle of dying and living. Said describes the plight of post-independent nations better when he asserts, “There is nothing to look forward to: we are stuck within our circle”(Said, 1994:29). This circle, it would seem, serves to lock the colonised in a never-ending chase to freedom. A brief glance into Nigeria’s political history right before independence would expose the machinations of the British colonialists and how they set Nigeria off on a cyclical journey or, perhaps, provide the answer to Dad’s question “Who can be certain where the end begins?” (Okri, 2009:5)

To answer Dad's question one must turn to Okri's Governor-General who is not without historical precedent (Lim, 2005:10). Lim claims that Okri's depiction of the Governor-General in *Infinite Riches* (2009) was inspired by at least two British colonial administrators who served in Nigeria: "Sir Frederick Lugard, Governor-General of Nigeria (1914-1919); and Sir James Robertson, the last Governor-General of pre-independent Nigeria (1955-1960)" (ibid). Following the resolution reached at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) to thwart Europe's scramble for Africa's resources, Britain would legitimize their primacy over the Nigerian region, while the French, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the Danes, and the Germans would carve out their own African territories as the century progressed (Mackenzie, 1983; Deyan, 2012)²⁴

In 1912, after Britain overthrew Nigeria, Frederick Lugard was appointed the governor of the colony of the southern and northern protectorate (Falola, 1991:59). On the first day in January of 1914, Lugard amalgamated the two different protectorates without putting their cultural and tribal differences into consideration; Falola claims that the amalgamation was due to economic reasons (Falola, 1991:59).

Undoubtedly, therefore, Lugard and Robertson's dreams for Nigeria were, more than anything else, for commercial purposes or as Said puts it, western economies, after the Second World War "were hungry for overseas markets, raw materials, cheap labour" (Said, 1994:7). Britain's response to the economic disturbance at the end of the nineteenth century, consequently, was to conquer colonies with rich raw materials (Freud, 1991; Said, 1994). Britain maintained its dominance over Nigeria, according

²⁴ Mackenzie's *The Partition of Africa And European Imperialism 1880-1900* (1983) gives a detailed account of the Europe's partitioning of Africa and also includes a time chart that shows different years of Africa's acquisition by Europeans in the nineteenth century.

to Falola, for sixty years because: first, they had sufficient knowledge about Nigeria; second, they established bases for military operations in Nigeria (Falola, 1991:63).

Lugard saw black Africans as lacking in self-control, superstitious, deficient in the ability to create a desirable future and incapable of governing themselves (Lim, 2005:104; Johnson, 2003:108). His racist rhetoric bears some resemblance to one of the white man's caustic description of Africans in Okri's *Infinite Riches* who describes blacks as "ghastly People" (Okri, 2009:100). It is not also far-fetched when Azaro notes that the Governor-General, just like Lugard, does not like his people (Okri, 2009:38).

After Frederick Lugard's reign as Governor-General of Nigeria, James Robertson took his position. Lim, quoting from Margery Perham's *Transition in Africa, From Direct Rule to Independence, A Memoir* (1974), describes Robertson as a man of "dignity and imperturbability" and as a man whose sole task was to maintain the unity of "three highly spirited horses in unison"(Lim, 2005:105). Describing Robertson who supervised Nigeria's blind stroll into nationhood with words like "dignity" and "imperturbable" is not only ludicrous but also absurd. In the wake of the preparation for the 1959 elections, that would lead Nigeria to her independence or "death" as Okri puts it, there was agitation amongst the various parties about who would rule independent Nigeria (Akinola, 2014; Okri, 2009).

The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), Action Group (AG) and Northern People's Congress (NPC) were at loggerheads and there were fears, most especially whether the nation would start with her integrity intact or fatally compromised (Lim, 2005; Awa, 1960). 25

25 A representative of the NCNC party, Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, saw the impending doom that the election would bring to Nigeria and declared that "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth in certain high quarters" after the election but Robertson thought otherwise, he thought the country was ready to embark on the new journey (Awa, 1960:105).

Okri's *Infinite Riches* captures this moment in history when "the Governor-General prepared for the forthcoming elections and the inauguration of the first president" (Okri, 2009:145). After the election and the appointment of the first president, things fell apart; Dad declares, "The white people have just exploded a big bomb in our backyard." (Okri, 2009:145).

Speaking symbolically, the bomb represents colonialist missions, representing the psychological implantation of western culture on the so-called backward peoples and the creation of disunity amongst the people. Azaro describes the impending doom with an apt phrase: "The elections would seal the fate of the unborn nation" (Okri, 2009:393). Lim remarks, and rightly so, that the 1959 Nigeria elections set in motion "a chain of catastrophic events" (Lim, 2005:106). Similarly, Deyan shares Lim's argument when he asserts that the end of colonialism not only lead post-independent Nigeria "out of its traumatic past, but plunged [her] into a new cycle of pathos"—a failed dream (Deyan, 2012:52). There was no forward movement in Nigeria, instead there was a cyclical movement or to put it in another way, Nigerians and Nigeria did not completely understand or recover from the system set-up by the British imperialists. Imperialist trauma, from Deyan's point of view, always repeats itself. Azaro in a rather exasperated tone claims that, "our stories were patterned and circular and trapped"(Okri, 2009:120).

The election campaigns in 1959 pre-independent Nigeria were riddled with corruption, politicians jostling for the presidential seat by every and any means necessary, and the question of which tribe would rule became an important question; this scramble for power made Achebe surmise that Nigeria's beginning was ominous

(Achebe, 1984; Deyan, 2012). There was a senseless hustle for who would rule the new nation even though the politicians were not psychologically, socially and politically ready to rule a country (Momah, 2013:16).

This created a platform for hate among the political elites even before the elections. If, as Lims argues, Okri's Governor-General represents the last governor-general of Nigeria, James Robertson, one could make a case that Robertson "saw the violence of the dreams of the new nation" but was apparently impervious to it because of his nation's economic interests (Okri, 2009:235).

Surprisingly, Robertson's role in pre-independent Nigeria or his role in general receive little recognition from past and contemporary historians and raises some questions (Lim, 2012)²⁶. What are these secret documents, which Okri refers to in *Infinite Riches*? What crucial papers relating to Nigeria did the Governor-General burn? Okri does not reveal this to his readers.

However, Mason claims that two files held in the British national archives covering the era leading up to Nigeria's independence remains closed to the public and would remain so for another fifty years (Mason, 2007).²⁷ This does not only portray a new imperialist attempt to aesthetically conceal crucial documents about a nation's past but also gives credence to Okri's fictional representation of an "artificial entity"(Nigeria) built by "empire builders"(Okri, 2009:234). Harold Smith who was sent to carry out some missionary work in Nigeria during the 1950s described

²⁶ Lim argues in his book, *The Infinite Longing for Home Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam*(2012), that there is not enough or detailed writing about Sir James Robertson. Other historians whose books have been used in the writing of this chapter do not give a detailed account about the last Governor-General of Nigeria. One cannot conclude, however, that books have not been written about his role in the 1959 Nigerian elections, but in my research, I haven't found any.

²⁷ I have contacted the BBC to ask if I could listen to the radio program, which Mason referred to in his article, but my request was declined because "external bodies are not allowed to listen to, or, view their archives."

Robertson as a thug and as a man with a terrible reputation (Mason, 2007). Okri's Governor-General, it seems, unarguably, shares certain similarities with James Robertson. Azaro elaborates:

[He] still had twenty-eight days to burn all the secret documents, all the evidence of important negotiations, the notes about dividing up the country, the new map of the nation the redrawn boundaries [...] (Okri, 2009:38).

There is that temptation to argue that Okri tries to bare the truth of Nigeria's history "in order to exorcise the past" as most postcolonial writers are wont to do and to gain a temporary peace of mind (Soyinka, 1999:89). What Okri achieves, through his *àbíkú* trilogy, is more than the mere act of exorcising an ugly past. He also re-awakens the collective consciousness of his readers to the intentional, malicious and orchestrated attempt by a group of imperialists to keep a country permanently divided and subjugated. To further elaborate Lim's claim, that Okri paints a picture of Nigeria's history and to give credence to his assertion, one must turn again to what transpired in pre-independent Nigerian and post-independent Nigeria.

Rake (1965), Lim (2005), Deyan (2012) and Akinola (2014) maintain that the failure of the British administrations to unify various cultural tribes before the Nigerian elections undermined the electoral process and the so-called independence. Akinola argues that this failure heralded a "testy" and "conflictual" country. The conflicts arose from the various parties and more so, from the prejudices held against certain tribes in Nigeria by the British administrators.

Since, Robertson, the last Governor-General, preferred the submissive Northern Nigerian to the aggressive Southern Nigerians, he supported the handing over of the nation to the Northerners. A coalition of Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe's party NCNC and Sir Tafawa Balewa's NPC would later oust the very aggressive AG party

represented by Obafemi Awolowo. Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe became the first president of Nigeria while the Tafawa Balewa became the prime minister of Nigeria (Akinola, 2014; Lim; 2005). This coalition was criticised by staunch western politicians like Obafemi Awolowo but his criticisms against the new leaders and the British administrators only led to his incarceration (ibid). Historians like Falola and Akinola argue that there are indications that the new government, after independence, became puppets of Britain and their NATO allies.

After Nigeria gained independence, James Robertson returned to his country leaving behind a permanent wound. Okri's Governor-General, in the same vein, after seeing his "achievement" quips proudly: "WHEN YOU BEGIN TO FALL IN LOVE WITH A PLACE THAT YOU HAVE WOUNDED IN SOME DEEP WAY, MAYBE IT'S TIME TO LEAVE." (Okri, 2009:181).

Indeed, the deep wound would lead to a series of other events after the departure of British administrators. The singular fact that the new parties were always at loggerheads with each other due to tribal and regional differences, hatred, envy and dis-unification arose and shook the foundations of the newly democratic Nigeria (Rake, 1965; Akinola, 2014). There was no main winner in the 1959 elections and power had to be shared between the North's Balewa and South's Azikwe, which was tagged as an "unholy alliance" by Rake. It was termed "unholy" because there was the belief that the merging of the conservative Muslims from the north and the modern and commercially vibrant easterners and southerners would not last for a long time.

The unholy alliance led to the three-year civil war between 1967 and 1970, which led to the loss of over two million lives in Nigeria and the introduction of military rule that lasted for thirteen years (Akinola, 2014; Olukunle, 2010). Rake argues, however, that the British administrators must not be blamed for the woes that

befell many African nations after independence (Rake, 1965:7). He claims that the onus was on the new brand of leaders to “avoid the pitfalls on the other side of the door to independence”(ibid). Whether the new leaders were blind to the trap on the side of the door is not the issue here; what is significant is the conscious machination of imperialists to form a stillborn nation in order to please their selfish interests. Lim and Deyan hold a counter view to Rake in that they believe Nigeria’s ruined past contributed to its chaotic present. Akingbe, in the same light, argues that, from independence till present, political disassociation has often brought Nigeria to the brink of near collapse (Akingbe, 2013:128). The colonial dreams, one may conclude and as earlier stated, were economically charged and from Okri’s point of view, are multipronged.

Azaro reiterates this historical precedence in *Infinite Riches* and analyses what he makes of the Governor-General’s (Robertson) dream. It is important to present his summations at length for clarification and comprehension of the historical consequences on Nigeria’s present woes:

The dreams were too many, too different, too contradictory: the nation was composed not of one people but of several mapped and bound into one artificial entity by empire builders. The multitude of dreams became a feverish confluence of contending waters. The fever affected the dreamers, made their dreams more intense. All those who dreamt the nation created it even as they dreamed—all those who wanted their gods to prevail, their tribes to rule, their ideas to become paramount, their ideologies to wield the lash, their vengeance to be made manifest, their enemies destroyed, their crop yields greater than all others, their houses the biggest, their children the most powerful, their families the masters, their clans to gain the eternal ascendance of fame, their affiliations to rise the highest, their wars to be fought, their secret societies to gain the golden seat, their souls alone to know contentment, their mouths alone to taste the rich honey combs of the land. They all created the nation as they dreamt it. All those who dreamt such narrow dreams imprisoned us who came later in their fevered steel webs of selfishness and greed. (Okri, 2009:234)

The above may sound like a rambling from Azaro but it holds certain truths about the reality in his community. The dreams were not clearly thought out. They were dreams motivated by “webs of selfishness and greed” both on the colonizers’ part and the colonised. Azaro’s chant is a paranoia caused by situations of violence and circumstances around his community. The dream gained a feverish height, which affected the country after the door of independence was swung open. The after effect was dastardly and made Azaro accuse the Governor-General of cannibalism (Okri, 2009:237).

Then again, Azaro, Okri’s protagonist warns, like Saleem in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) that one should not consider him as a “reliable witness” because he suffers from “hallucinations” (Okri, 2009:335). These delusions are excretions, according to Freud, that “have been stifled at birth” (Freud, 1991:9). In other words, Azaro’s delusions stem particularly from his altered dreams.

**ANALYSES OF DREAM MOTIF IN OKRI'S *INFINITE RICHES* (2009)
USING FREUD'S *UNCANNY* (1919) AND *THE INTERPRETATION OF
DREAMS* (1899)²⁸**

For the purpose of understanding the characters' dreams and Okri's dreams in *Infinite Riches* (2009), I will use two Freudian texts: *The Uncanny* (2003) and *the Interpretation of Dreams* (1991). *The Uncanny* (2003) will provide the springboard to comprehend the unfamiliar/familiar environment in Okri's *Infinite Riches*; an understanding of Freud's *The Uncanny* will explain Okri's "disturbance of the familiar" (Bennett and Royle, 2004:34). *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1991) will help in analysing dreaming and how it affects the waking life of Azaro, the main protagonist in the novel, and other characters in the novel.

Sigmund Freud comes to mind whenever the dream phenomenon is mentioned in most academic fields—literature, science, anthropology and psychoanalysis. In literature, a Freudian approach can play a major part in understanding the unconscious of characters and, to an extent, in understanding why authors prefer to use the dream motif in their narratives. But, some critics argue that the "Freudian approach to literature has been much used and abused" and believe that psychoanalysis should be "handled by professionals and confined to [...] the clinic" (Weidhorn, 1970:8). Barcaro also posits that "it is easy to observe a kind of remarkable inconsistency regarding the role of [...] dreams" because Freud he argues, on one hand, "present[s] a theory centered on the primary importance of childish experiences and wishes" and on the other hand, often proposes examples implicitly demonstrating that it is possible to carry out psychological analyses without paying attention to a patient's childish

²⁸ The original publication dates of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and *Uncanny* are provided here. However, I used recent editions of these publications, which were published in 1991 and 2003 respectively.

wishes (Barcaro, 2010: 138). Thurschwell reiterates Barcaro's point by claiming that "Freud's theory of dreams can be seen as containing contradictory elements" because dreams are constantly evolving and therefore, cannot be described with a singular approach (Thurschwell, 2000:37)

Freudian approach to literature helps the reader and the author in various ways. First, it helps the reader see the work of literature in its raw form, creating a secondary vision of the text under study, which aids comprehension (Eagleton, 1983:181). Second, it opens up an avenue to "uncover the processes, the dream-work, by which [a particular text] was produced" thereby creating a platform to understand the author's motivation and more importantly, the author's analyses of reality's distortions, ambiguities, absences and elision (ibid). In other words, using Freudian principles in the analysis of Okri's *Infinite Riches* (2009) will make "us [...] ask various questions about boundaries and limits"(Bennett and Royle, 2004:39). Seeing that the Freudian approach provides an avenue to further comprehend novels, one could argue that it is safe to analyse *Infinite Riches* (2009) with the same method.

In *Infinite Riches* (2009), the characters take a step further in their quest to understand why everyday reality is dotted "with questions" instead of solutions (Okri, 2009:230). There is a clamour for a new thought process, a new way of dreaming and a cry for a revelation that would lead to the end of their suffering. Dad reminisces by asking:

When will our suffering bear fruit? One great thought can alter the future of the world. One revelation. One dream. But who will dream that dream? And who will make it real? (Okri, 2009:5)

These questions by Dad point to the significance of dreaming and stress the importance of raising thoughts that can "alter" the future of the world; they promote the author's belief that the world needs new dreams for it to be a better place. They

also bear resemblance to Okri's proposition that "[...] invisible things [...] shape the visible things" in the world (Wilkinson, 1992:88). Succinctly put, to create a new road that would lead the world out of suffering, there must be a change in the unconscious (ibid).

The author, it seems, craves a utopian world and more importantly, a new Nigeria where there is a new set of thinkers and leaders (Ashcroft, 2009:717). Azaro describes the old woman's dreams:

She was dreaming of a new breed of human beings. The creator-god was melting down the wicked forms of existing men and women, and a universal sense of humour [...] She dreamt good dreams [...](Okri, 2009:239)

Ashcroft describes Okri's quest for a new Nigeria as "a crucial thing" and further asserts that "the vision of a totally transformed world" is one of Okri's mission as an African author (Ashcroft, 2009:717). The old woman dreamt many dreams but the desire to see "a new breed of human beings" remains prominent (Okri, 2009:239). These infinite dreams of the old woman seems like a mirage as past events keeps altering them; the new breed of human beings have been corrupted by the happenings in the society.

Okri, in addition, uses Dad's dream to present his proposition to view Nigeria from another angle and, to borrow Cooper's phrase, requests that Nigerians assess their country with a "third eye" (Cooper: 1998: 67). In an attempt to scrutinize reality from a different angle, Freud argues that authors have "[...] many opportunities to achieve many uncanny effects that are absent in real life" (Freud, 2003:156). Dad, in a way, questions the "unhomely" or "uncanny" features present in his milieu, which is a species of what Freud calls, the "familiar" (*das heimliche, the homely*) (Freud, 2003:134). By asking questions about the occurrences around him, Dad's inquisition becomes uncanny because he is in "an area in which he is unsure of his way

around”(Freud, 2003:125). There is not much of a difference between heimlich (familiar) and *unheimlich* (uncanny), according to Freud; “*heimlich* becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*” (Freud, 2003:134). In the same token, Dad’s familiar environment merges with the *unheimlich*, which makes him ask potent questions in order to understand why the familiar environment consistently bears unfamiliar features.

Dad’s question: “But who will dream that dream?” reiterates the importance of dreaming in a waking life (Okri, 2009:5). Freud argues, “[...] the dreamer’s dreams had an important purpose, which was a rule to foretell the future” invariably, what dad asks for, is an individual who has the ability to dream a future filled with new existence and dad believes this can be achieved only by dreaming anew (Freud, 1991; Okri, 2009). In the same sense, Okri echoes Freud’s statement when he states that dreams can influence reality (Wilkinson, 1992:82). To change their reality, the inhabitants in Okri’s *Infinite Riches* have to dream, or better still, have to dig into their unconscious to find solutions to their myriad of problems.

Basking in that uncanny community which Freud describes as “finding the way around”, Dad continues, in a rather bizarre fashion, to ask questions that could help him understand reality:

Is history the converging dreams of many millions of people, living and dead? Have I just died and am I now living in another zone? Are we asleep all the time? When we wake, is it one level above the deep sleep of our days? Do we wake when we die? (Okri, 2009:6).

Such is the existence of the characters in Okri’s *Infinite Riches* (2009), the constant suffering they encounter everyday make them question why they live “in a state of frustrated expectancy” (Okri, 2009:81). Then again, this frustrating reality inspires Dad to ask: “Are we asleep all the time?” The question is an authorial intrusion

whereby Okri asks Nigerians if they have chosen to turn a blind eye to the issues that cloak their waking life. In an attempt to answer that question, Okri advises that, “Those who cannot transform their bad dreams should be rudely awoken.”(Okri, 2009:233). In addition, Azaro says questioning the Nigerian reality is a necessary way to understand the present reality, he says “the people of the fertile land were also dreaming the nation into being and not questioning the nature of their dreams”(Okri, 2009:234)

Dad asks the right question but seems to be at a crossroad when he asks: “Have I just died and I am now living in another zone?” It could be argued, that Dad’s predicament, borders on the uncanny effect as he tries to trace back the “infantile sources” to his dilemma (Freud, 2003:141; Okri, 2009:6). Freud describe these infantile sources as the material resources from which dreams emanate; he asserts: “one of the sources from which dreams derive material reproduction—material which is part neither remembered nor used in the activities of waking thought—is childhood experience” (Freud, 1991:74). To understand Dad’s illusions and dreams, it is important to define dreams.

Freud defines dreams as “a manifestation of a reproductive activity which is at work even in the night and which is an end in itself” (Freud, 1991:80). Dreams serve as a means to an end, which are “usually an excretion of thoughts that have been stifled at birth” (Freud, 1991:132). Freud further describes dreams as a “safety valve for the overburdened brain [...] they possess the power to heal and relieve (Freud, 1991:145). Noticeably, in *Infinite Riches* (2009), dreams, in addition to dreaming about a new society, serve as the “safety valve” for the characters, in that, only in that dreaming space do they find a safe haven, a place free from the consistent suffering in their community. Azaro sings about this:

Draw a deep breath, for my new song is pitched to the wings of those birds of omen, birds that fly into new dawns changing with their flight into the forms of future ages. (Okri, 2009:249)

Subsequently, the Governor-General's dream does not align with Freud's argument that dreams "possess the power to heal and relieve" instead, the dreams are laden with "evil intent" which is an uncanny act (Freud, 1991: 149; Freud, 2003:149).

Azaro, with his telepathic powers describes the Governor-General's dream:

Thirty miles away the English Governor-General, who hated being photographed, was dreaming about his colonial rule. In his dream he was destroying the documents. Burning all evidence. Shredding history. As I lingered in the Governor-General's dream a wave of darkness washed me to an island, across the ocean, where many of our troubles began, and on whose roads, in a future life, I would wander and suffer and find a new kind of light (Okri, 2009:12)

The Governor-General's dream would later lead Nigerians and Nigeria to a chaotic and famished existence; it aligns with Azaro's argument that "after a great dream often comes great chaos" (Okri, 2009:250). After the Governor-General's dream about Nigeria was concluded, what followed was a cyclical journey to nowhere. Azaro is quick, and rightly so, to argue that it was the Governor-General's dream that leads him to his *àbíkúish* life of wandering and suffering. In other words, the Governor-General's dream is the main element that stifles Azaro's wishes to live a free life. Azaro states, "My spirit was reeling from the violence of the dreams of the new nation" which was hastily whipped up by the Governor-General and his missionary cohorts (Okri, 2009:235). In the Governor-General's dream, Nigeria, like an *àbíkú*, was born to die.

Furthermore, Freud describes dreams "as the fulfillment of a wish"(Freud, 1991:199). In other words, dreams can be seen as a wish come true. Unfortunately,

for Azaro, this fulfillment comes as empty promises that amounts to an unfulfilled dream:

They brought hope and activity and argument and lovely voices. They had dreams of improving the lives of women, dreams of getting the government to change our society's perception of women, of creating better hospitals, and setting up schools and universities to educate women for the best jobs that the land had to offer. (Okri, 2009:87)

Freud's definition of dream "as the fulfillment of a wish" undermines Azaro's perception of dreams because in his part of the world, dreams are mere promises created by politicians, which puts them in a repeated cycle of woes. Azaro, from the above quotation, refers to the political elites who thrive off the agony of the masses and who consistently shut the doors on "new possibilities"(Okri, 2009: 87).

The repetition of "dreams" unfulfilled, the lack of desire by the political elite to create an egalitarian society and end gender inequality is heavily laden with uncanny features. Freud, accurately, describes this repetition of the same features as "the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names, through successive generations" (Freud, 1991:142). From Azaro's point of view the same features, destinies and misdeeds have altered the collective dreams of his community. But he lays part or most of the blame on the rude intruder into his society—the Governor-General.

There is a historical precedence to the recurrence of the bad dreams, uncanny ghosts and animals that plague Azaro's life. Azaro argues:

But those who rewrote our lives deprived us of the choice of patience. They had foreshortened our possibilities with their corruption and their lies. Everything got spoiled because of the essential questions no one asked. And I saw how we could live other people's entire histories in such a short space of time, be blessed with plenty, and yet find ourselves beggars in the wide world. (Okri, 2009:pp 349-350)

Those who wrote Nigerian history set it for death from inception. There was no plan put in place to help the nation move into the future. Okri points to the fact that questions were not asked at the time of Nigeria's independence by Nigerians. Azaro, by stating that the nation is "blessed with plenty" yet is a beggar, reiterates Ross's argument "that oil and mineral states [like Nigeria] fare worse on child mortality and nutrition" and other basic infrastructures and are worthy of the label "paradox of plenty" (The Economist, 2005). To understand the paradoxes that plagues Okri's community in *Infinite Riches*, it is important to trace African interpretation of dreams.

AFRICAN INTERPRETATION/REPRESENTATION OF DREAMS AND REALITY IN INFINITE RICHES

There are undoubtedly echoes of Freudian characteristics in Okri's *Infinite Riches*. One cannot, however, dismiss the fact that there are certain influences of African presentation of reality and dreaming in the novel. Okri admits, "My blood is African...but my heart belongs to the world" (Hattersley, 1999). Drawing from the author's claim one may argue that his inspiration is, first of all, from an African lineage before extracting from various world perspectives.

Infinite Riches also displays a hybridised form of narration; a postcolonial feature, according to Ashcroft et al (1989), in which authors present a blend of cultures. Gayland calls this hybridisation "syncretism": a blend of the natural and supernatural, traditional and modern, realist and non-realist. In short, nothing is separate; everything is connected. Okri's use of the dream motif helps him to look into the past, link it with the present and compose multipronged variations of assessing reality (Gayland, 2005; Noble, Cooper and Javangwe, 2013).

Quayson, however, argues that for African cultures to achieve a coherent understanding of their place in the world, they must "borrow, challenge, steal, and rehash" external factors (Quayson, 1997:149). Quayson's assessment is problematic on two levels: first, it belittles the fact that Africans, pre-colonial era, had a sui genesis nature of narrating stories; secondly, the term "borrow" bears a negative connotation, in that it opines that for the African culture to be understood, an Eurocentric or external factor is needed.²⁹ Holdstock dispels Quayson's contentious

²⁹ "Borrow" as used by Quayson raises a lot of questions? What exactly is borrowed? What is the external factor? Is it the language used by an African writer? The use of the novel form? I'd argue that the term hybridisation is a better way to look at how most African writers and, even, postcolonial writers present stories. A more vexing term Quayson uses is "steal" which is absolutely incorrect. He does a disservice by not elaborating these terms in his essay.

statement with his claim that “ample evidence of an alternate consciousness exists in Africa” which is neither borrowed nor stolen (Holdstock, 2004:11).

Nobles and Saths’ argument creates a good scaffolding from which one can gain an understanding of dreams from an African perspective (Nobles and Saths, 2013:89). They posit: “modern or traditional, every aspect of psychological knowledge and practice is a reflection of the constructed world of a particular people” (ibid). If the psychological beliefs of a particular people which includes dreams, myth, religion, are drawn from, or are a reflection of, their constructed world then one could argue that Okri’s use of dreams in *Infinite Riches* is stimulated by his African cultural background. Before examples are drawn from the novel a definition and features of dreams from an African standpoint is, therefore, essential.

In their seminal work, *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of African Thought* (2010), Irele and Jeyeifo claim that “dreams” serve “as a basis for contrasting western and non-western systems of thought” (Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:319). They echo Tedlock’s assessment that geographical differences determine how dreams are viewed (Tedlock, 1987:1). Again, Irele and Jeyeifo put into perspective how dreams play a major role in the understanding of an African text like Okri’s *Infinite Riches* when they argue that:

African worldviews have common aspects and some differences in the perceptions of the visible and invisible worlds. The visible world is inhabited by human beings and other forms of biotic and nonbiotic entities. The invisible world has the operational field of ancestors, the supreme deity, personal and impersonal spirits and mystical worlds of witches and sorcerers. (Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:319).

Visible and invisible forces control Azaro’s community in a seamless way. After a crushing brutality was handed to Dad by the law enforcements agency, he enters into the invisible world to consult his ancestors for help (Okri, 2009:53). Dad’s call to his ancestors stems from the African belief that ancestors have the “power to act on behalf of the living”(Holdstock, 2004:170). Holdstock compares this African reliance

on ancestors with how westerners refer to angels in Christian beliefs (ibid). Therefore, the ancestors serve as Dad's angels who he calls for intercession.

Azaro, likewise, bounces in and out of the visible world and invisible world throughout Okri's trilogy. These are both effects of the crushing reality in his community. These contacts he maintains with beings from the other world are made possible "through the mediation of dreams"(Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010). Furthermore, Azaro's ability to circle "in and out of the dreams of the community" falls in line with the African concept of dream where there is a "communion of soul" with invisible spirits which transcends "time and space" (Okri, 2009; Holdstock, 2004). From Irele and Jeyeifo's point of view, he has an "insight by means of dream" to bring to the forefront the challenges present in his society (Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:319). Through Azaro's ability to flow into dreams and "hidden truths", realities are revealed; especially when he found himself in the dreams of the governor-general as "he was dreaming [of] Africa" (Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:320; Okri, 2009:235).

Okri with his use of the dream motif presents the African systems of thought where "metaphors, imagery, and symbolism are used to give meaning to events and to form bases for preparation of future occurrences"(Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010). The road metaphor and the àbíkú motif, according to critics, are the most important systems of thoughts employed by Okri to present his narrative about the future occurrences of a stillborn country (Quayson, 1997; Wright, 1997; Esther, 2007). When Azaro finds himself in the old woman's dream he presents a grim picture about the new country's future; he says the old woman "dreamt of the chaos to come, of the short reign of colonial domination, of the fevers and the awakening spirits which would break the nation" (Okri, 1998:239). The chaos to come can be found in the Nigerian civil war, military intervention and of course, political killings immediately after Nigeria gained

independence and with this dream motif Okri, as argued before, reveals certain hidden truths. Azaro also finds, through the Governor-General's dream, the picture of the famished road on "which all the fruits and riches of African lives would be directed towards sweetening [the governor-general's] good land" while he leaves hunger behind (Okri, 2009:237).

The àbíkú motif presents the chaotic life cycle of that new nation. An àbíkú, as explained in chapter one, is a child born to die; therefore, the new nation portrayed by Okri is a nation set up intentionally for its death. The àbíkú's wandering characteristics coupled with his constant unconscious disappearance is similar to the lost cause of the new nation. Azaro confesses that he "was simply wandering" where there are voices whispering to him about the injustices cast on him by strangers (Okri, 2009:311). These voices would later reveal to him "you are made from an immortal dream"(Okri, 1998:312). One is not certain whether this immortal dream would lead Azaro to living a normal life but they made him realise that his "history [is] in chains." These voices and visions that reveal secrets to Azaro, from the African perspective, could be ancestors who manifest themselves only "through dreams" (Holdstock, 2004: 171).

It is safe to conclude therefore that Okri uses African thought systems in *Infinite Riches* (2009). First, he employs the beliefs in ancestral lineage, dreams, and most importantly, the belief in spirit children who weave in and out of reality. Also, he buttresses Holdstock's argument that "there is no existence of the living separate from that of the ancestors" and in addition that without the constant intervention of ancestors "there can not be a happy future" (Holdstock, 2004:171).

To conclude, one can argue that Okri draws heavily from both the African approach and the Freudian perspective of dreaming. It is safe to state, therefore, that

Okri's approach aligns with syncreticity, which is an attempt to use multiple forms to narrate a story (Ashcroft et al 2002; Wilkinson, 1992). In my creative piece, *The Seeds' Tales*, I employ these multiple forms to narrate my story but with a unique approach.

CHAPTER FOUR

ORAL TRADITIONS AS A NARRATIVE TOOL IN *THE SEEDS'*

TALES

Oral traditions can be used as a narrative technique to present reality. Authors, Soliman argues, use it as means to document the “folkloric materials” to contribute “to the process of building up the African collective memory” which “the colonial power had tried earnestly to eradicate” (Soliman, 2004:149). In that light, I have decided to use certain elements of Nigerian oral traditions, which includes dreams, folklores, songs, and legends, in my novel, *The Seeds' Tales*. These folkloric features are used in my creative piece not only as a medium to present maternal and infant mortality in Nigeria but also as a way to preserve the endangered Nigerian folkloric traditions (Quayson, 1997:36).

There are telling similarities between my use of Nigerian oral traditions in *The Seeds' Tales* and Okri's usage in his àbikú trilogy—*The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. However, my novel comments and expands on Okri's use of Nigerian oral traditions and breaks away from his handling of these elements in social and historical contexts. Eileen Julien's definition of intertextuality, where contemporary authors, “expand” upon their predecessors work, describes my mission in *The Seeds' Tales* (Julien, 1992:26).

To show how I have employed these folkloric features in *The Seeds' Tales*, I would present examples; and point where necessary, similarities and differences between my use and Okri's usage.

First, the dream motif is an important element employed in my novel. As argued in the last chapter, authors use dreams to find the invisible forces that control reality.

A brief summary of an encounter I witnessed in the northern part of Nigeria is apt here for one to gain an insight into what motivated my story and why I believe the dream motif is one of the most effective avenues to narrate my experience.

In 2007, I was posted to Gusau, Zamfara state, a town in northern Nigeria, to work as a reporter/columnist for a local newspaper. I wrote human-interest stories, which involved writing about the daily happenings in the community.

During that period, an encounter was narrated to me by one of the women in the community. It was a story about Zainab. Zainab was sixteen, the sixth wife of a fifty-five year old Nigerian Harvard University graduate and she was pregnant too. She went into early labour and unfortunately for her, the baby's leg came out first—a taboo in that part of town.

News reached her husband about his wife's predicament. He called the town's hospital to find out if the gynaecologist on duty was either male or female. To his disappointment, there were only male gynaecologists around at that time. Then, he called and instructed his senior wife to ensure that Zainab remained in the house till evening when a female gynaecologist would be on duty. Zainab stayed like that for eight hours and finally, died.

There are many stories similar to Zainab's case in Nigeria. According to The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), “every single day, Nigeria loses about 2,300 under-five year olds and 145 women of childbearing age” which could have been avoided if “essential interventions reach[ed] women and babies on time”(UNICEF, 2014). These essential interventions are not readily available because

of perennial ills like corruption, lack of social infrastructures and lack of “skilled birth attendants”(ibid). Predation of national infrastructures in Nigeria, Adelugba and Ujomu claim, “have negative effects on the development of national consciousness both for men and for women” (Adelugba and Ujomu, 2008:38). What, then, would Zainab’s baby say or what questions would she ask, if she had a voice, about the perennial malaise in Nigeria?³⁰ In *The Seeds’ Tales* other dead babies gather to ask questions. Women like Zainab, who have lost their babies, have the opportunity in my novel to tell their stories and what led to their demise.

Zainab, a character in my novel narrates her ordeal of early child marriage and asks her audience: “How could my grandfather sell me for money? My grandmother said she would not sit under the roof and watch him sell me. Grandfather calmed down. He didn’t talk to me about it again. But it remained a poison in my head”(The *Seeds Tales*, 8). Early marriage is one of the major causes of maternal mortality in the Northern part of Nigeria and other parts of Africa (UNICEF, 2001). Fathers or grandparents of female children in most parts of Nigeria typically arrange their daughter’s marriage, and in some cases, without the girl’s consent (Weimann, 2010:61). Adebowale et al and Akpan argue that early marriages and arranged marriages are influenced by cultural beliefs in Nigeria and, more importantly, a bid by the parents to reduce the economic burden of raising a child (Adebowale et al 2012; Akpan, 2013). Hence, why Zainab is angry with her grandfather for selling her “for money” (*The Seeds’ Tales*, 8). Zainab and other women in the novel try to look for

³⁰ The gender of the baby was not known. I decided to use “she” here.

ways to address these issues. They, like Dad in *Infinite Riches*, call upon their ancestors and lost Seeds to provide them with workable solutions.³¹

Dreams, Irele and Jeyeifo argue, constitute “a significant methodology of divination in the diagnosis of human afflictions”(Irele and Jeyeifo, 2010:320). For Zainab and other women to diagnose maternal mortality, they enter into the Seeds’ dreams to attain knowledge and precise remedies for the ailment.

Furthermore, dream motif allows the Seeds to go into the minds of individuals in their community for the following reasons: first, to locate what motivates the complacency amongst affected victims of maternal mortality and to investigate the catastrophe present in modern Nigeria. The Seeds:

[...] taunted the space created by the gathering women, that space between death and life, the almost space. They came and went. They existed only in the women’s thoughts, dreams and hopes. They brought the women before courts. They asked questions. The Seeds fought two wars: a mission to control their journeys and a passion to prevent others from entering this space. (*The Seeds Tales*, 20)

The present political elites consistently contribute to the death of various infrastructures in Nigeria. UNICEF claims that, “less than twenty per cent of health facilities offer emergency obstetric care”(UNICEF, 2014). This is a worrying statistics, and one could argue that lack of good government policies contribute to maternal and infant mortality. The “almost space” in my novel, is a corollary of what Bhabha calls the “in-between” space where “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—[...] initiate new [ways] for collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society”(Bhabha, 1994:2). This space gives the Seeds an interstellar point from where to inspire a new way of doing things in northern Nigeria and where they judge human irresponsibility in the community

³¹ Ancestors would include, ironically, Scottish missionary Mary Slessor (1848-1915) who stopped the killing of twins in Calabar, Nigeria, women who fought against British overthrow of Nigeria in the 1920s and other Nigerian heroines that existed between 1900s until the 1970s.

and question existing cultures. This space allows them to locate and report their history to their mothers and fathers and to the audience.

With the dream motif, the Seeds were able to invite the “troops of soldiers who expelled them into this [almost] space” (*The Seeds’ Tales*, 118). These troops of soldiers who sent the Seeds on this journey include the women, men and other selected members in their community. By intruding their dreams, the Seeds use the opportunity to question them with the hope of preventing future deaths.

Mallama Ashante, one of the matrons in my novel mocks corrupt politicians. Corruption, amongst other illicit governmental practices like gross mismanagement of funds, tribalism, nepotism, remains till today, one of the major social malaises that keeps Nigerian institutions and Nigerians in despair. Hagher argues that corruption is “harmful to a nation’s psyche” and distorts policies implemented to save Nigerians (Hagher, 2011:71). Similarly, Wole Soyinka, one of the Nigerian authors, who has been critical and outspoken about the endemic suffering in Nigeria, posits that “a reduction of corruption” can lead to “an improvement in the quality of life of [Nigerians]”(Jeyeifo, 2001:194). One can conclude that if corruption, as Hagher argues, affects a nation’s mental furniture, then it might impact the citizens’ logic. Mallam Ashante, knowing the devastating effects of corruption on the welfare of women in the country, reiterates through her song:

*For they know not what they do
For they live in the times as fools
For they know not what to do
For they exist not as fools
For they know not what they do
For they exist only as fools (The Seeds’ Tales, 24)*

The fools represent members of the political elites whose sole dream is to put the people under consistent suffering. By exploring the interstices of the community the Seeds attempt to “shape reality into something special”(The Seeds’ Tales, 27). Dreams or the application of dream motif not only provides me with ways to explore the menace of maternal mortality in Nigeria but also to reveal the hidden truths about its consequences. The women, in their summoned dream:

[...]got close enough to see, in full glare, the Seeds of tomorrow and the ugliness of yesterday. Collective ugliness of the Seeds and the collective beauty of what they represented made the women sit in unison on the space that was beneath them. They felt as if they sat on a magic carpet as they could see everything white beneath them. They watched on. (The Seeds’ Tales, 46)

The women get a chance to see their lost children’s reality and witness the characteristics of their world. The women saw “bodies with no skeleton and skeletons with no bodies; headless bodies; legless and headless bodies; the midriff of a human; heads only; legs only” moving as if they were not dead (The Seeds Tales, 119). The ugliness, the broken limbs, and deformed bodies are prevalent features in the Seeds’ world which the women saw in the almost space. Undoubtedly, this belongs to the realm of the frightening which “evokes fear and dread”, which Freud calls “uncanny”(Freud, 1991:124).

The complex collage of dismembered bodies beautifies the environment where the Seeds choose to exist:

As [the Mother Matron and the King of Seeds] travelled back, the void was filled with different kind of elements. Colourful eyes, open mouths, brain matter, broken limbs and intestines were a few things they saw. (The Seeds’ Tales, 50)

The King of the Seeds and the Seeds, in addition to the artistic display in this almost space, showcase their deformity as a medium to evoke catharsis among the

women. This, the Seeds, believed would motivate the women to dream new dreams and come up with new means to tackle maternal and infant mortality in Nigeria. The dream motif also serves other functions in *The Seeds Tales*.

The dream motif allows me explore some elements of oral tradition. Characters reiterate their dreams as oral performers, singers, and storytellers and riddle makers. Zainab, Mary, Tope, the Mother Matron, and the Seeds show the audience their dreams and struggles and, most importantly, how different features in the society obstruct their dreams.

In addition, the dream motif allows me exercise authorial intrusion and act as an oral performer who asks pertinent questions about the story. This, however, is communicated mostly and, at length, through Nigerian Pidgin English, as the story progresses. The choice of language is key here, in that I try to capture the “tetra-linguistic” realities in contemporary Nigeria (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991:11). As argued in the previous chapter, there is a movement from the queens English to Pidgin English in no particular order. An example is where I switch from standard British English to Nigerian Pidgin English when posing a question to the audience who are women/girls caught within a community that breeds maternal and infant mortality. I ask: “Who know wetin go happen? Nobody know as the Mother Matron go come lead these women to freedom.”(*The Seeds Tales*, 84). With these I intend to breakdown the structures of sticking to a particular language.

The dream to live a better life and a dream to heal the past make the women use songs as a tool in their cause. Songs in African traditional setting, Finnegan

argues, acts as an “inducement to action and ambition”(Finnegan, 2012:140). The old woman induces action by proclaiming, with her warlike intoned song, that:

*Today na today we go know
Today na today you go talk who go save us
Today na the day we go come together
Today na today when dem go teach us how to.
Abi I lie (The Seeds’ Tales, 36).*

The song explains the urgency of finding the hidden truths about maternal and infant mortality. The old woman claims that the answer to the problem must be found in the present and maintains that there is strength when individuals who suffer similar plight “come together” to look for solutions to their problems (*The Seeds’ Tales*). Messages in the songs are used to elaborate the themes in the novel. Finnegan quoting Osadebay, argues that songs are used to present cases, fighting for a cause, and serves as an expression of contemporary reality in a particular society (Finnegan, 2012:136).

There is an abikuesque presence in *The Seeds’ Tales* where the unwanted Seeds of earth come back to the world via a myriad of ways. Unlike Azaro in Okri’s *The Famished Road* who “intends to stay” in the community with his mum and dad out of pity, the Seeds in my novel intend to blend into the unconscious of their characters in order to study the major causes of their exit. They achieve this movement in a:

[...] very unpredictable[way]. They paid no respect to the time of man. The more the victims thought they understood them the more they got confused. They were formless by nature, which added to their beauty, and they possessed the ability to change to house pets and wild birds. (*The Seeds’ Tales*)

The Seeds’ formlessness, unpredictability, extemporal existence bears similarity to the Yoruba cosmological beliefs of the òrìshás who serve as “guardians and explicators of human destiny”(Brandon, 1997:19). The Seeds’ mission in my novel is to lead the characters to the crux of the social injustices. The children attack one of

the politicians, Odumegwu Ojukwu, who served as the leader of the defunct Republic of Biafra and whose action led to deaths of over a million children in the Nigerian Civil War. He reveals that the children “stalk” him and accuse him of killing “their grandfather and grandmother” (*The Seeds’ Tales*, 87). Not only do the Seeds stalk historical figures in the Nigerian construct but also have the power to change present realities of politicians; a former president in Nigeria, Obasanjo, is a victim of their retaliation as:

The Seeds tormented his life. They have made him lose everything he loved the most. They have poisoned his children and made his wife leave. The Seeds have made him lose his license. (*The Seeds’ Tales*, 89)

By presenting chaos to contemporary politicians who perpetrate the death of social infrastructures, the Seeds intend to send a note of warning to other politicians. They control their thoughts, actions, and send mysterious signs to the politicians. The Seeds have turned the waking life of the political figures into a chaotic existence.

The Seeds’ attempt to show other characters their “great and small problems of [their] life” resembles the function of the orisha from the Yoruba cosmological beliefs (Brandon, 1997:14). This is somewhat different to what Okri’s Azaro, who, arguably, is a metaphorical representation of the society and the narrator in Okri’s trilogy. In *The Seeds’ Tales*, the Seeds act as agents, whose sole mission is to show the sleeping women and men how they can walk their way out of the present social malaise. The Seeds want to “judge human irresponsibility”(The Seeds’ Tales, 49).

By visiting the dreams of the Mother Matron, the King of the Seeds, is able to expose this “human irresponsibility” present in Gusau, the setting of the novel. Rooney argues, “spirits move us in that they animate and affect us and captivate and possess us” (Rooney, 2000:19). These Seeds morphed into spirits after death but still

possess the power to animate and create an effect in the milieu from which they departed.

While the àbìkù child is caught in the web of “an unending cycle of births, deaths and re-births” consistently plaguing the family where they find themselves, the Seeds in *The Seeds’ Tales* are actually dead. However, after they have understood and analysed the reasons for their deaths, they intend to change the cause. The Seeds’ main missions are: “to control their journeys and a passion to prevent others from entering this space” (The Seeds’ tales, 20).³² The Seeds clamour for a new beginning where there would be a reduced number of child deaths. This is widely different from the àbìkù in Okri’s trilogy. The Seeds are spirits “presented as realities and not as metaphors, symbols, figurative devices” as many critics tend to argue about Okri’s trilogy (Rooney, 2000:14).

The Seeds give a backstory of their lives and invite the audience to have a peek into the historical background of what inspired their invasion of reality. As such when the King of Seeds takes Mallama Ashante they find:

On their way, they saw deformed humans and, they saw war and peace. Everywhere seemed like a collage constructed by the hands of an amateur artist. The brush strokes of white and black flowers flashed into their vision, the white of rose flowers tickled their irises and the cacophony of the happenings boomed in their ears as they moved on. Everything was linked. The boy showed her a building. (*The Seeds’ Tales*, 43)

Everything, indeed, is linked in Mallama Ashante’s world: spirits of dead babies, ghosts of historical leaders, and other contemporary factors. The King of Seeds led the Mother Matron on a historical journey that led to his existence for two

³² In her book, *Magical Realism and The Fantastic*, Amaryll Chanady explains that magic realism is characterized by two conflicting but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an “enlightened” and rational view of reality and the other based on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of the everyday world. This supernatural world, in *The Seeds’ Tale*, was created natural events in the women’s world.

cogent reasons: first, to show human injustices that birth his present nature and reveal what motivated the present. The journey made:

The eyes of The King of Seeds overflowed with tears and Mother Matron cried too. The King managed to spit these words, “that was how we began. How our journey started. We could have changed it. We fought but we did not win but our old powerlessness turned into our new strength. Our tears were their laughter and our dying was their living.”

This is not a mystification of realities; it is the reality, which Mallama Ashante and other women and men in the novel have created with their complacency. The dead and the living belong to the same category of being and the Seeds although expelled from earth still have the power to control some of the happenings on earth (Nnolim, 2009:95). In African literature, there is the belief that the dead possess critical eyes needed to explore the living (ibid).

The idea of introducing the characters to an outer world borders on some characteristics of the use of fable in African literature. Julien argues that fable, by entering distant shore, forces one to look at the world from afar and makes one “aware of the deeper realities”(Julien, 1992:139). This vantage position not only gives the King of Seeds an opportunity to present historical perspectives of his earthly demise but also gives him room to heal.

These ungraspable characteristics in *The Seeds' Tales* could also be related to the concept of hauntology. Since Derrida asks one to view everything as ghosts or something that haunts, one could argue that the Seeds, the menace of infant and maternal mortality, dreaming new future haunt the community in *The Seeds' Tales* (Derrida, 1993:202).

There is a sense of “mourning” in *The Seeds' Tales* where by the women recount their experiences. Derrida defines mourning as an attempt “to ontologize

remains” of the dead and by “localising the dead”(Derrida, 1993: 9). Therefore, the Seeds are localised within the community of the women in order to locate the historical issues of maternal mortality and to find the root causes of these beings extricated from earth. As such the truth in *The Seeds Tales*, to borrow Derrida’s phrase, “allow themselves to be presumed, reconstructed, fantasised” (Derrida, 1993:4). A fantasised present reveals the hidden spectres that need to be appeased and motivates new actions to understanding how to heal the present.

The present, Derrida opines in *Spectres of Marx*, is the “coming and going, between what goes and what comes”(Derrida, 1993:29). Time is “modalized” which comprises of past, present, actual present and future present (ibid). The women in *The Seeds’ Tales* are haunted by past heroic deeds carried out by women in Nigeria and try to replicate such actions in the actual present.

Derrida’s hauntology, therefore, makes it possible to study the ontological structures, which informs: ego, consciousness, time, and identity. The Seeds are haunted by the consistency and entry of new Seeds while the women are haunted by avoidable deaths. The concept of cause and effect is at play where one cannot really separate the impossible and possible:

The Seeds visited in various forms. One of them visited through a new born child delivered by one woman. The child cried every day for one week. The woman took the crying child to Mallama Ashante down Tudun Wada road whose trade in business was silencing of babies. This child defied her Mallama Ashante’s abilities and embarrassed her skills as it kept crying and wailing. (*The Seeds Tales*, 40).

By visiting in different forms, the Seeds have the ability to turn into whatever would further their mission. Thus, the Seeds, first of all haunt the community while the community is consistently haunted by societal consequences. Like Dad and Mum

in Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* where they hear voices and asking for dead ancestors to find answers to their present woes, the women in *The Seeds' Tales* also look onto the Seeds to provide them with solutions to their problems.

The Seeds with their unpredictability break the concept of time, which correlates with Derrida's argument that the concept of hauntology is not "dated"(Derrida, 1993:3). The Seeds "paid no respect to the time of man", as such, tumbling into the dreams and visions of the characters is a normality (*The Seeds' Tales*, 41).

In addition to being haunted by the Seeds, the women are troubled by deeds of heroines who have changed, through their actions, the status quo in Nigeria. Mary Slessor, known as the White Witch in Nigeria, fought for the end to the killing of twins in 1800s in Nigeria; another heroine during the same period is Madam Efunsetan Aniwura, among others, are historical figures who, according to Olatundun, was "powerful, rich and influential" in Ibadan (Livingstone, 2009; Olatundun, 2010). Mariam retells her memory of the heroine and described her as the controller of economic activities in Ibadan whose voice could "make a grown man pee on himself" (*The Seeds' Tales*, 109). This embarrassing act of a grown man peeing at the sight of Efunsetan Aniwura is traced to her tyrannical feature, which included, ironically, put a ban on child bearing (Adeeko, 2005: 146). The women are haunted by her historical presence. For instance:

Waiting for the coming of the White Witch changed the women. It motivated them to pour their ordeals into the open. Perhaps, telling would bring the expected results. (*The Seeds Tales*, 2)

The idea that an angel would come down from unknown places to help the women has been the plight of many women in Nigeria, especially in the northern part of Nigeria, where the women rarely fight against known forms of tradition. However, there has been different organisations set up by Nigerian government to fight maternal and infant mortality but the problem is still on the increase. One can conclude, therefore, that the creation of governmental bodies does not help to address the problem. By telling their stories amongst each other, the women believe they would be able to come to a new agreement on how to come out of the disorder.

The wait has some symbolical representations about African states always waiting for aid from international country. Dambisa Moyo in her book, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is not Working and How There is Another Way for Africa* (2011) argues that African nations should cease from seeking international aid because it makes them much worse off. Hence, the wait by the women on an international figure represents African countries always waiting for an international haunting of sorts. There is a historical repetition of events in contemporary Nigeria where individuals look onto international organisations to help them solve local problems. As such:

The wait continued. They forgot that they had waited for the White Witch for more than fifty years. Once upon a time, they had driven her away. Now, they wanted her back. But, how was the White Witch supposed to help them? It was the right time, they thought, to come up with solutions that would guide them to a new destiny. (*The Seeds' Tales, 2*)

The Seeds, in short, are tired of the women and the men in their society waiting for history to repeat itself. Their rebellious attitude towards the characters in the novel stems from the notion to inspire a new type of thinking. To create new heroines, the Seeds admonish their former mothers to fight for what is right, to go against preconceived traditions and ask questions that would provide solutions to their predicament.

In conclusion, it is clear that many of the approaches used in *The Seeds' Tales* showcase some ways contemporary Nigerian authors can use Nigerian oral traditions in their fiction to address everyday realities and invariably, preserve them. In *The Seeds Tales* I have used these elements to such good effect, especially with the use of language. This is not to suggest that other Nigerian authors must use oral traditions in their novels. However, authors who care about preserving traditions should employ these elements in their works.

CONCLUSION

Okri, without a doubt, through his àbìkú trilogy: *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (2009), has contributed to the re-invention and preservation of the Nigerian oral traditions. The author achieved this with his use of oral traditional elements such as folklore, story-within-a-story, proverbs, riddles, and myths.³³ Choudhury further states that Okri, by incorporating these elements of oral tradition in his novels, “created a body of literature that distinctly expresses West African consciousness and sensibility”(Choudhury 2014:3) From Choudhury’s assertion, therefore, one can argue that Okri expresses an African “consciousness and sensibility” which bears a decolonizing ethos where writers from post-imperialist nations find “it necessary to re-imagine an African stripped of its imperial past”(Said, 1994; Choudhury, 2014). But, because Okri is principally focused on the historical and political events in pre and post-independent Nigeria, he does not adequately use the vast cultural bank of Nigeria’s oral traditions. Before pointing out these omissions in Okri’s trilogy, it is pertinent to reiterate features of the Nigerian oral traditions in his works and more importantly, highlight their significances.

First, and the most important element, is the àbìkú myth. This is perhaps the most significant trope in Okri’s trilogy (Quayson, 1997:87). It serves not only as the terrain for elaborating selfhood but also as an act of defining the idea of Nigerian society itself (Bhabha, 1991:22). The àbìkú phenomenon, as explained in my first chapter, provides the author with the platform to present the issues stifling the growth

³³ Quayson (1997), Cooper (1998), Wright (1997) and Choudhury (2014) argue that Okri uses these oral traditional features in his àbìkú trilogy.

of a so-called independent country. Quayson argues that Azaro, the àbìkú protagonist in Okri's trilogy, is a "symbol of the nation's experience" characterized by hope, betrayal and death (Quayson, 1997:88). In another light, Soliman argues that the àbìkú "does for the audience what they cannot or will not do for themselves" which is to explore the hidden secrets weighing the country down (Soliman, 2004:149). Through the eyes of Azaro, therefore, the audience is introduced to the evils of the colonizers and urged to see clearly, the true construct of post-independent Nigeria.

Okri, however, in his interview with Jane Wilkinson points to the fact that Azaro's existence "can be interpreted in many ways and should not be limited to a singular interpretation"(Wilkinson, 1992:84). Àbìkú phenomenon allows the author to explore a myriad of issues: the history of Nigeria, her politics, her tribal differences and her psychological deficiencies. "Myth", Okri argues "is what makes it possible for those who suffer and struggle, whatever the suffering, to live and sleep and carry on." (Wilkinson, 1992: 85). To put it in clear terms, myth can provide a safe haven for struggling individuals, and as Okri claims, their nightmarish existence can be analysed through a mythical lens.

Similarly, Gayland's argument aligns with Okri's description of myth where he points out that any writer interested in accessing the in-between or the unconscious tend to use "images and tropes" which include "journeys, mirrors, the double, monsters, castles, ghosts, forests, riddles and tests" to understand the burdens of reality (Gayland, 2004:97).

Furthermore, the author's use of the àbìkú myth allows him to "ask questions about why circumstances are as they are" and how humans can go "about [creating]

[...] change”(Gayland, 2004:117). To borrow a phrase from Bhabha, Okri’s exploration of the àbìkú phenomenon allows him to “touch the future” in order to proffer solutions to daily reality (Bhabha 1991:7). In short, Okri, with his àbìkú phenomenon employs a type of newness towards accessing the contemporary, renews the past, thereby interrupting, what Bhabha calls “the performance of the present”(ibid). The quotidian performance of the present has been shaken by the author’s ability to take the audience on a journey from reality to unreality. It is safe to argue that Okri acts as a critic of the Nigerian political and socio-economic realities and with his àbìkú myth explains the “unspoken, unrepresented parts that haunt the historical present” (Bhabha 1997:12).

Throughout the trilogy, history haunts the present, the characters, and arguably, the whole community. It comes in various forms: ghosts of the ancestors, spirits of àbìkú children from the nether realm and hidden voices hovering around the community. Wande Abimbola informs us that in “a certain level of understanding in Yoruba thought, there is no such thing as a non-living thing. Every object and creature of this earth can be made to come alive and participate in an important endeavor” (Abimbola, 1977:111). Everything is connected. Therefore it is appropriate when Azaro, in *Songs of Enchantment*, encounters a black rock [giving] off the living smell of a great human body (Okri, 1993: 239). Apparently, to the author, the great source to explain what is before our very eyes is something “that keeps flowing” from the “invisible” realm (Wilkinson, 1991:88). Okri further asserts that it is “Our mythic frame that shapes the way we affect the world and the way the world affects us”(Ibid). It is the “invisible things that shape the visible things”(ibid). The invisible things can come as dreams, memory and other abstract phenomenon or what Fraser describes as

“spiritualization of the modern urban space”(Fraser, 2002:92). Until we uphold these spaces, Fraser further explains, explore them intricately, do we begin to understand reality.

Okri is suggesting with his portrayal of Azaro’s life that Nigeria is one of those àbìkús whose recurring death has been systematically created by the colonizers and the political elites in the colonies. With the use of the dream motif, Okri reveals certain historical “truths” and points the audience to contemporary or persistent imperialist tactics employed to conceal a people’s history. The trilogy “renders in telling details the entire gamut of Nigeria’s history from colonialism, independence, and the advent of military rule” (Quayson, 1997:90). This telling revelation borders on dreamlike features, which sometimes may be illogical and unreasonable. For instance, the dream by the Governor-General to set a nation with different tribes free, as explained in the history of Nigeria in the previous chapter, is utterly unreasonable. Not only did this lead to tribal wars immediately after the departure of the last Governor-General but it also lead to the tribal hatred which still plagues Nigeria.

These elements of oral traditions employed by Okri have been able to help him “appeal to the psyche of the entire population in the guise of an aesthetically appealing narrative” (Gayland, 2004:104). Succinctly put, the author has employed the àbìkú trope to access the body of the nation, hauntology as a means to unmask the unseen distractions and more importantly, used the dream motif to explore the motivations of imperialists in pre-colonial Nigeria.

Having reviewed some of the elements that foreground the argument that Okri re-invents the use of oral tradition with his àbìkú trilogy, it is important therefore to point out certain gaps noticed in his usage. This is not to suggest that the author by

failing to use these missing elements bastardizes the African oral traditions but to point out certain flaws in his implementation.

Okri's language in his trilogy, though steeped in poetic and figurative style that is characteristic of African tradition, does not cover Nigeria's contemporary "linguistic reality" (Zabus, 2007:51). In other words, the author does not capture the speech habits in Nigeria. The contemporary linguistic reality in Nigeria comprises of the Queen's English, Pidgin English and the mother tongue used interchangeably and as dictated by circumstance. For example, the language used in a naming ceremony may differ from the daily linguistic exchanges used in politics. Ravenscroft posits that there is always a constant flow from Standard spoken English in Nigeria to Pidgin English in most social settings (Ravenscroft, 1969:18). If "culture", as Zabus argues, "informs language", it is safe to conclude that Okri's language use does not cover, in full, the Nigerian linguistic reality (Zabus, 2007:51).

A close study of Okri's trilogy reveals a half-representation of Nigeria's linguistic reality and the author, one could argue, "fails to link up [his] language with the sociopolitical structures" prevalent in contemporary Nigeria (Zabus, 2007:52). For instance Azaro's language is fluid, clear and excellent in grammatical structure, which does not convey the polyphonies of the Nigerian language. The only way Okri attempts to cover the linguistic reality, like most Nigerian authors, is to place the Nigerian English in the mouth of his characters.³⁴ Perhaps this is due to the fact that "these languages carry the burden of prejudices accumulated through the centuries" and maybe it is an attempt by the author, as argued in the introduction of this piece, to

³⁴ The attempt to place these languages in the mouth of characters is usually employed by Nigerian authors to showcase the characters' societal status, which, to me, is an erroneous representation of the language reality in Nigeria. One wonders why authors fail to use these so-called vernaculars in telling their stories. Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*(1994) and Iweala's *Beast of no Nation*(2009) use the Nigerian Pidgin English in their narrations but through a first person character-narrator.

appeal to western publishers and audience (Tunca, 2009:197). Nigerian pidgin is said to be the most widely spoken language in the country; yet, Nigerian authors tend to shy away from using it (ibid).

In this regard, one of the objectives in my novel, *The Seeds' Tales*, is to rehabilitate these stigmatized vernaculars, which would allow me cover the linguistic reality dominant in the country. To achieve this, I use the Received Standard English, the Nigerian pidgin and a sprinkle of the mother tongue. This stylistic experimentation not only allows me to explore the languages as used in Nigeria but also equips me with various contemporary modes to accurately present Nigerian oral traditions.

The question of language use in African literature, over the decades, has triggered a lot of debates among most scholars.³⁵ This debate on language is anchored on what Garuba terms “cultural organicism” which sees “language as an expression of the natural harmony between self, culture, and society” (Garuba, 2009:252). However, there is no consensus about what is the right mode of communicating the African reality in African literature. On one hand, critics like Obiajunwa Wali, in his seminal lecture, “The dead end of African literature?” clamours for a return to indigenous languages by African writers while authors like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka argue that writers can express their cultural heritage with the so-called Eurocentric language. Garuba, on the other hand, argues that, “[...] the novel in its focus on everyday life was the major literary instrument needed to accomplish the ethnographic project of nationalist desire” (Garuba, 2009:249). To achieve these ethnographic and nationalistic desires, African authors must put into consideration the

³⁵ Most notable among these scholars are Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Obianjuwa Wali, and the bole kaja critics, Chinweizu et al. They have, in various journals and lectures argued endlessly about the right language that an African writer should or must use in order to present the socio-political issues in Nigeria.

language used in the community where the novel is set. Wa Thiongo's extrapolates the need for literature to capture these nationalistic desires because, "a nation's literature", he argues is, "both a reflection of that people's collective reality" and "an embodiment of that people's way of looking at the world" (Wa Thiongo, 1986:5).

Garuba, in his summary of Rand Bishop's critical standards for the evaluation of African literature, notes that "a concern with language" plays a vital role in how writers' literary works are perceived (Garuba, 2009:249). African Authors like Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his *Wizard of Crow* (2007), Gbenga Agbenugba in *Another Lonely Londoner* (1992) and Alain Mabankou in *Broken Glass* (2010), to name but three, cover the linguistic reality of the settings in their work and also go a step further to incorporate an important part of oral traditions in their work—the oral performance.

Oral performance cannot be dismissed in African oral tradition as it plays an important role. This aspect involves the presence of a griot; the use of songs and dance and more importantly, the audience plays a role in the narrative by asking questions and making suggestions (Okpewho, 1992:292). According to Okpewho, "no groups of people have tried to promote the vitality of [oral performance] more than the creative writers—poets, novelists, and playwrights" (Okpewho, 1992:293). One could argue, however, that contemporary Nigerian novelists avoid the use of the oral performance in their works. This can be tied to the crucial problem of infusing elements like songs, dances, poetry and the voice of narrators and audience into the story.

This notion of infusing these elements of oral tradition in written form of literature is central in my novel, *The Seeds' Tales*. First, with an authorial intrusion laden with features of an African oral performer, I ask the audience pertinent questions about the current situation in their society. Although, answers cannot be

readily related to me as is expected in a typical oral performance; however, questions are used as a medium to ask readers about infant and maternal mortality in Nigeria. In addition, I allow the characters to act as narrators of their own story in an oral performance structure, which consists of addressing an audience filled with their peers. By doing this, they explore various language structures that fit the delivery of their message and there are interruptions from the listening audience, which adds to intensifying the plot of the story. Okpewho, however, warns that the author must be able to, in explicit form and clean sentences, describe the physical demonstration of the narrator (Okpewho, 1992:48). The author must capture histrionics, movement and gestures of the oral performer. In that light, I describe the facial expressions and leg movements of every narrator as they tell their tales.

Since storytelling performances must be carried out with “maximum use of innovation and manipulation” according to Okpewho, I use the first person narrative technique and the omniscient point of view to narrate the story of the women (Okpewho, 1992:45). This also allows me to use the various languages present in contemporary Nigeria.

Again, these gaps identified in Okri’s trilogy is not to suggest that the author does a disservice to Nigerian oral traditions, but to identify some of the omissions that have informed my work especially with regards to the narrative technique and language use.

Indeed, as argued in the critical piece, the author plays a role not only in re-inventing the lost traditions of his country but also shows how one can use it to discuss contemporary issues. With Okri’s use of oral traditions, he brings to bear the hidden stories of Nigeria’s past and as a tool to analyze contemporary Nigeria. It is safe, therefore, to assert that the use of oral traditions “has a continued vitality for

modern day society” (Okpewho, 1992:293). The question then remains: how can it be preserved for the modern society and future generations?

First, authors and other creative individuals should endeavor to employ certain, if not all, elements of oral traditions in their work. By doing this, they promote and preserve the rich cultural traditions in Nigeria. Employing riddles, songs, proverbs and myth in Nigerian movies helps in transmitting and preserving culture and urges other creative artistes to follow suit (Joshua et al, 2013). Other factors must be considered in the preservation of African oral traditions.

One relevant way to preserve the oral traditions, according to Okpewho, is to involve in a fieldwork where a scholar goes into a community to explore issues of cultures and histories of community for a number of weeks. Okpewho further advises that cameras and tapes must be used in recording the oral traditions gathered from the particular community in study for archiving purposes.

The research has been able to argue a case for novelist and the roles they play in the preserving of African oral traditions with the study of Ben Okri’s trilogy. Also, the research shows how my creative piece, *The Seeds’ Tales*, attempts to contribute towards the preservation of African oral traditions.

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THE SEEDS' TALES
(CREATIVE WRITING PIECE)

PART 1

PREAMBLE

Under Gusau's moonlight, they gathered at the tree of stories and waited for the White Witch. They waited patiently, watching the day shed its bright colours. This woman, who came from many rivers away, knew their culture and stories, but she saw things with different eyes. Her stories and actions made them stay, every tale leaving them with gifts—sadness, happiness, hope and despair.

The White Witch, it seemed, inspired the women and made them believe Mother Matron's proclamations that White Witch would rise again to save Gusau.

In accordance with the instructions from Mother Matron, the women remained disciplined; they made no noise at the riverbank. The women revered the White Witch because her story preceded her. She stopped the killing of twins some so many years ago. If she had not come, twins would be a taboo in the country.

The women took no notice of the environs: they had their eyes only for the slightest hint that the White witch might return to stop their contemporary woes. How could they get her to come again and perform miracles? That was the question on the lips of the women's minds.

Hours went by as they continued to talk about the wonders performed by white ghosts.

Mother Matron was in front of the river, washing her face when she saw an apparition in the middle of the river signaling for her to come over. She withdrew her hand slowly from her face and took about seven steps towards the woman dressed in fresh white crinoline. Other women watched Mother Matron for some seconds, tied their wrappers without attention, pointed at the same time, and then rushed to prevent her from drowning.

“Leave me alone. Can’t you see?” The Mother Matron protested.

“See what?”

“She’s here.”

“No, she’s not.”

The mother matron scooped a cup of water with cupped palms, washed her face, looked again and she saw azure colours reaching the middle of the sun.

“I thought they said she only comes in the evening and it’s just four.”

“Yes.”

“Really, I wonder why we need her,” Mariam started, “why can’t we be her?”

“Ok. We are here to learn how to be like her. Not necessarily be like her.” The Mother Matron replied.

Walking away from the river, Mother Matron told them about the importance of this particular visit. She looked at the women with a secret plea for comprehension, and she asked them to be patient.

“I give you my most heartfelt confirmation that if we allow her come, our lives would change forever. You’ve heard what she did in Calabar, who told you she can’t do it again in Gusau?”

The sun didn't allow the women stretch their time in the warm river. They returned to the safety of the tree's shade. Sun drank their energy while sleep poisoned the dancing air. The women rested.

As they slept, the river's shwish-shwish movement crept into their ears; also they heard a ship's horn in their imagination. It was coming close to Gusau as the sun died down. Saint Paul's Catholic Church's bell belched a gbom-gbom-gbom sound for Angelus. It woke the women. They stretched, yawned and cursed the bell at the same time for disrupting their slumber.

Evening wrapped them with dark colours and some of the women danced, others kept their sight on the river and others seeped the air in.

"The white witch! Yes, she's coming! How many people saw her."

Everyone signaled by raising their hands.

"Something very strange must have happened for all of you to be in this state. We must take advantage of this visit. We must!" The Mother Matron announced like a mother who found a lost child.

Some women nodded in agreement with Mother Matron's declaration. The only thing they regretted was not having the courage to actually climb onto the river and find the woman. As they waited, they decided to share their experiences.

But who would go first? That was the question.

Husbands had commanded their wives not to listen to the White Witch. Any African woman, they argued, who listened to this strange being will lose her person. She is the killer of dreams, they said. But the wives paid no attention. They had never seen anyone like that, for every time she opened her mouth, things happened.

This new spirit that washed over Gusau turned women into tyrants. For instance, Fatima walked away from her house without saying a word. Her bravery inspired other women in the community.

Waiting for the coming of the White Witch changed the women. It motivated them to narrate their ordeals into the open. Perhaps, telling would bring the expected results. There was fear, too—that old beast which ravaged their abilities to confront challenges of daily existences. The outside world, too, overlooked their plights. The river taught them to maintain no story structure and this gave them freedom. They stared at each other.

They forgot that they had waited for the White Witch for more than fifty years. Once upon a time, they had driven her away—the White Witch that handed them strange freedom. Now, they wanted her back. But, how was the White Witch supposed to help them? It was the right time, they thought, to come up with solutions that would guide them to a new destiny.

The moonlight was the only light. The air remained calm but balmy. The women continued to study each other's faces and took in the stories on each other's mien.

Silence continued.

They waited. Waited. And, waited.

The White Witch was coming and her absence inflamed their quietness. After all, there was a saying that any woman who told her own story without the presence of the White Witch would tell it wrong. Breaking away from such beliefs was imperative. They knew, however, that this strange woman's mouth was a spring for words of wisdom. So they remained silent, because the solutions came from the belly of their problems.

The silence continued for another hour. It morphed into hums. *Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm.* They were women who found themselves living in an arcane era, their inability to make a choice and their inability to change their children's destiny having led to misplaced hopes.

A woman with swollen eyes, walked in. Her face was a collage of hardships. The other women nodded slowly at her. She sat near a woman whose dark skin resembled the colour of night. Immediately, she joined the humming: *hmmm, hmmm, hmmm.* The chorus rose in the night, disturbing the birds. They called this new woman Rwanda. Her story was etched on her body. The scars, deep and pink, crossed her body. On her face there was a different kind of beauty. When she looked at the other women, they seemed to be soothed by her features.

No one spoke.

An open mouth knew nothing, but a closed mouth told wisdom. The wisdom of the people with closed mouth had its own tale too. The dilemma was how to shape the narrative. The women lacked the art of storytelling. Painting the picture as it was, seemed difficult.

Fatima wanted to stop the horrid hums. It annoyed her so much that she pulled out strands of hair from her head. Night enveloped them as they continued their wait. Another woman came into their gathering.

This woman has a shade of different colours. White patches on her dark skin and some fresh green around her neck. She greeted everyone in sweet patois. No one replied. Rumour had it that when she lost her language, her skin began to change. The dark of her skin regained its original beauty whenever she spoke her native language. Her skin responded to her language use.

These gathering women were the country; their bodies carried around tales of a nation. They hoped, by revealing their throes of existence, listening ears would spring into action. The silence swooped over their heads.

It was the fattest woman who broke the silence with a song. She was the first woman in the community who experienced the workings of the White Witch. It happened so many years ago.

While in labour, the fat woman struggled with breathing. An apparition emerged before her eyes. She took ten deep breaths and pushed. The village matron with the village doctor cleaned her sweat and encouraged her to carry on. She could see her baby's head. With legs wide apart, she continued to push. Again, she rested, rubbed her bump and after a while proceeded. Screaming, feeling a tear inside her, she squeezed the doctor's hand then pushed with every iota of strength. The baby's position did not change. That was when she lost consciousness. In that state, she saw the White Witch floating around in her crinoline.

The village matron splashed water on her face, which brought her back to reality. She pushed again. The baby's full head emerged and gently, the matron encouraged her to push until the baby came out. The pregnancy bump remained and the placenta would not come out even after several attempts.

This was the first of its kind. The doctor examined the stomach. He rubbed it and instructed the Mother Matron to do the same.

“Impossible!” They screamed.

Word was sent to the King that a woman had two beings in her. The King prescribed death to the other twin in the woman's stomach.

Obong, the twin who stumbled out victoriously, wailed through that whole night. As if the king's order pierced him.

The king's order was executed. The village doctor and village matron exterminated the taboo by giving the woman some nkom leaves and Somby ointment. After ingesting these concoctions, the fat woman gave birth to a dead baby.

However, the dead twin sought vengeance by floating around Calabar, slapping village chiefs and elders everyday and developed the bad habit of calling them by their first names. His attitudes disturbed the whole community.

Obong's mother cried until her tears turned into blood. The White Witch appeared this time in the waters that ran across her face and proffered a solution. The fat woman was advised to send some gifts to the crushed twin, which she did. Since then, Obong had regained his senses and remained peaceful.

The fat woman's tears and experience brought the White Witch to that town. The White Witch fought with Calabar village elders until they stopped the extermination of these strange-double-beings.

Now, the fat woman stood up and clapped slowly. Seats became uncomfortable as the light of the night became brighter. Anticipating the sudden appearance of the strange woman was like a game of dice: the outcome was unknown.

Mariam disliked the inactivity. This senseless lingering for another being from another part of the world flamed her dissatisfaction. The spitting dragon, as she was called, felt her life's journey needed little help from mystical beings. She stood up, walked past the tree and headed to the riverbank. A shadow came close and her thoughts escaped. She stared at the end of the river and saw where it merged with the clouds. Mariam concluded that, if waiting was the stranger's way of imposing her dominance, she was either a devil or an angel.

Their wait was characterised by the beliefs that the only solutions lay on the other side of the world. It has been like that for ages and was still the norm. The rays

of light from the moon gave them signs of new things to come. Silence became pregnant. The belly of reticence housed babies of thoughts and philosophies.

Fat woman finally broke the silence:

When we keep waiting; then the wait might be long

When we keep telling; then we can be strong

When they tell us to wait; we do wrong

When we tell ourselves our own story; we can't go wrong

Strike it from the moon like a stick hitting the throng

This is when we tell our own wrong for redemption.

She sang the song with a heavy voice, which rocked the eardrums of her listeners. The message sank deep into their being. Some of the women buried their faces in their hands while others looked into space, lost. Unity in pain was imperative. Their unified cries were perhaps a way to draw global attention. Herbal priests have failed them, local chiefs have turned deaf ears and politicians only purloin their daily bread.

The act of concealing pain was death. Overcoming bad memory was executed by purgation. The fat woman who had sung moments ago, urged her comrades to spit out their pains. She claimed that this gathering would be the last.

“I would never,” said a short woman, wrapped in black wrapper, “share my story.”

“Why?” another woman asked.

“We are known for telling bad stories. Saying this one, only adds to the single story.”

Whether they know or not; whether it had been told or not

Another retelling cannot kill

It can only heal.

For I tell you this. I tell you this:

It was telling that saved us from bad history

We can never be tired of our own telling

Fat woman started dancing while someone began to tap an empty paint container; another tapped a Coca-Cola bottle; another hit two stones together until the rhythm grew. The women began to dance except for Mariam who sat and watched the celebration.

Titi left the dancing women and walked to Mariam. They watched the jubilation of the women together.

“And, that is our folly,” Mariam said, pointing to the women.

“What is?”

“We know how to dance our sorrow away. We fail to paint reality as it is. We are too cautious.”

“Will a little telling not help us?”

“The telling has stayed with us for over a hundred years.”

“How do we tell the right one?”

“By looking inwards and not by relying on the White Witch.”

Surprised, Titi asked, “why?”

“Has the White Witch experienced our pain?”

“No.”

“Then how can she know our pain?”

“Only she knows.”

Titi hissed and joined the singing group. Their music scared flying insects and introduced an air that led to shivering. Rigorous shaking of heads, seismic stomping of feet and convulsive jerking accompanied the song. They went round and round in circles, singing.

Whoever goes to the market knows what to expect,

Whoever buys something from the market knows ghosts;

Whoever comes from the market knows new stories,

Whoever returns from the market dreams of new beginnings.

We drink from poisons of never returning to the market

Tell our stories before the White Witch arrives.

We would. We Should.

An ululating sound erupted. It changed the shape of the moon into a crescent. The cloud smiled on the earth and moved around slowly, studying their madness. The stomping also woke earthworms from their sleep and sent rabbits to burrow new homes.

They stopped dancing.

It was story time.

Zainab who had danced like a trained choreographer decided to start. She warned the women not to judge but listen. The tall woman broke into a new song:

We see with new eyes

We listen with new ears

Drink water with new mouths

For those who don't have it can't have it.

Tell us. Tell us.

The women chanted, "Tell us! Tell us!" and Zainab stood before them, clearing her throat four times before starting.

STORIES

Zainab's Story

They say, in my village, the woman whose hair was braided by the Queen of the night needs fear no man. My hair was braided by the Queen of the night, yes. So therefore, I had no fear. But fear came later.

Once upon a time, in the village of Gasau, I was born into the house of riches and madness. My father was very, very rich. He schooled in one of the best schools in the United States of America. When you attend that school, as I was told, all your foolishness disappeared.

My father was a hard worker. He never allowed sleep to come to his eyes. He was a diligent man. He never engaged in frivolous activities. He was concerned only with his business. Always. He was a government worker and his duty was to ensure his society never lacked basic amenities. All contracts in his care were meticulously achieved. He never collected bribes and did not tolerate lazy people. That's how good he was. He was loved by many and hated by few.

His determination was inspired by his upbringing as a child. You see, my father was an Almajiri. He begged to eat, sleep and to put clothes on his back. His childhood revolved around street corners and house entrances. On one of his many wanderings, he found an expensive wristwatch owned by a rich man, which he returned. The rich man, a government official, upon seeing his watch, made a promise to give my father something no one in the country would ever give him: education.

My father told his Mallam at the Quran School who told him that the gods of the lands have just listened to his prayers and advised him to keep praying because politicians were full of unfulfilled promises. So my father prayed and fasted for almost thirty days. On a rainy day, a letter found its way to their accommodation on Gada Biyu Street. The government man kept his promise and true to his word, he asked my father to choose any school he wanted anywhere in the world. My father cried for two days straight, I was told. It was said that they thought his tears would drown the Quran School.

Two days later, my father replied to the government official by saying that he would go to any school offered. My father was sent abroad, shekena, just like that.

When my father got there he found it hard to adapt to the new world. Sometimes, it was said, he would cry for *suya*, *kenke*, and other foods. He would manage the McDonald's quarter pounder with cheese. While sleeping he would wake up with a fit screaming that he wanted to return home.

Once, he wrote to the government man and said he wanted to return home but received a stinging reply. After that, he stayed in school without complaining. I was not told what the government man told him but he never penned another letter. Father graduated with his scores taller than the university building and flew home immediately as was expected from him.

His excellent performance in school landed him a good job and three wives. Success attracts various things. The three wives were gifts from the government and my mother was among them.

My mother grew up in a small village called Gummi. She wanted to become a politician. But her place in future, her father told her, was to cook for her husband and produce children. She obeyed and followed my father home. My father, the educated man, believed that every woman should obey her husband regardless and to keep quiet when the man of the house speaks.

“Can you cut the family story and tell us what happened to you.”

Okay. This leads to where I came from. For you must not forget that the present was introduced by the past. This interference only makes me forget the thread that led to this present time. I would narrate the story as my dead mother told it. She told me that when she got into the house, her new husband treated her well until she started delivering female children only which father saw as wrong. Male children were wanted in the house my father would say. So for every time my mother was pregnant with a female child she was told to remove them. I don't really know how they were removed but I know my mother gave birth to me.

To save me, mother took me while still in the womb, to her father's house. She lied to my father that her parents were sick and she needed to go and take care of them. She feared that if I were a girl she would have to remove me. She delivered me at her father's house and returned to my father's house. My grandfather became my new father. I didn't suck any breast milk and maybe that's why I am like this. Look at my body. If my mother were around, only if she were around, would I be like this?

Anyway, my grandparents trained me. My grandfather was a cleaner in the government building and my grandmother was a hawker in Gummi market. She sold oranges, pineapples and other fruits. At the age of six, I started going to the market with grandmother.

In the market, one day, one woman told me that I would go through a huge pain that would make me cry forever. Grandmother was so angry that she poured coconut water on the woman. She then told me that I should not listen to the woman. She also informed me that not all human beings in the market are humans. So I threw away the thoughts.

Years went by and when I was a teenager, my grandparents managed to put me in school. That's where I started reading. I read books that opened my eyes. *Purple Hibiscus* and *Things Fall Apart*. My interest in African literature increased. I read more and widely. Reading opened my mind so much that it introduced me to powerful women around the world. I must add that I started teaching my grandparents how to add money and how to speak to foreign customers.

Then I met two friends who liked to read too and we became very close. None of us wanted to marry any man. Marriage never allowed a woman to be herself and so we made a vow never to be any man's tool. Our plan worked for a while. One night, my father came home with a sad face and told me he would like to tell me something in the middle of the night.

When midnight arrived with its darkness and when night birds were making love, my grandfather came to the room and told me that his boss told him something. I was excited that my grandfather was talking to his boss. Because how can a cleaner in the government building talk to the boss? To do that meant you are climbing up. I

had heard the good man, my father's boss, loved to help people. But then he told me what his boss had said to him and everything inside me fell to pieces.

My mother never came to see me. I needed her help but she was not there. But I have never seen her. Not even a picture of how she looks. My grandparents would not even speak of her.

Do you want to know what grandfather told me? Do you want to know?

Old man wanted me young. Hmmm ha.

Old man wanted me young. Hmmm ha.

"Hmmm ha."

Young woman wanted no man

"Hmmm ha, wanted no man."

The women wanted no men

"Hmmm ha, wanted no men"

Men wanted more men

"Hmmm ha, wanted more men."

Father told father he could marry

"Hmmm ha."

He told me that the man, his boss, wanted to have me as a wife. After he told me that he would make sure I finished all my education before any man could take me away from him. I reminded him about his promises. He simply said when a man speaks the woman listens.

Whispers crawled around. They studied Zainab's teary face.

How could my grandfather sell me for money? My grandmother said she would not sit under the roof and watch him sell me. Grandfather calmed down. He didn't talk to me about it again. But it remained a poison in my head.

That's how I married the man.

Aaaah!

Mariam gave a long hiss that almost disrupted Zainab's story.

Yes o. Let's not forget that I represent the country. Let's not forget that my story is like this place on which I stand.

Continue, Zainab.

That's how I married him. The man. I became married early. I wasn't ready for marriage but I found myself in it. I wasn't ready for marriage and I found myself having a baby. I wasn't ready for the pain of labour but I found myself in pain. That's my story.

Zainab bowed and walked back to her space.

Silence mixed with breeze raked Gusau. The woman drank the story, waited for a while then looked around for another narrator. They looked for the one who had disrupted the flow of Zainab's story.

Everyone turned to Mariam. She returned the stare. A dangerous smile crept across her pimpled face and projected an utter disregard for formality. Memory appeared in her mind.

Mariam's Memory

Mariam was in the clinic. She could see her legs splayed. Sweat rushed down her cheeks as her stomach twitched and throbbed. She heard the whispers of the nurse

telling her that these kinds of things happened. She smelt the sands of the past and remembered how the dusty wind of the hospital's street made her cough.

It had happened at about two o' clock in the afternoon, when the muezzin made the call for prayer in Gusau. She entered the clinic and sat at the reception. Pointing to the entrance of a room, the nurse called her name. She walked in. Painkillers, injections, computer screens stared at her. The rusted box, rattled with rusty cranial perforator, bloodied embryotomy forceps, cranioclast, tire-tete, decapitators, and stained speculum—these were her welcome to the theatre of hope, to the stadium of untold stories.

The doctor, a well-dressed man in shiny coat and a neatly shaved beard, led her to the stage.

“Here, this way.” he said.

The recliner chair gathered her with its sanitized embrace. The clean sheets on top of the chair whispered *shhh, shhh*. She climbed and jumped off. Anikulapokuti's voice was in the background.

“Lady na master, call am for dance, she go dance lady dance.”

“No. No. No.”

Mariam rushed to the door. Then stopped. The “exit” sign on the door caught her eyes and made her sob. She wanted to be a politician, a professor, a “somebody.” For her to attain her dream there has to be a proper exit. It was this thought that stayed with her as the recliner's chair creaked in its re-invitation as the nurse motioned Mariam to return to it.

From the door, she scanned the room again. The strong smell of sanitizers stung her nostrils. The nurses, in their parched uniforms, smiled. The light from the open windows showed her the faded white walls of the hospital. Her eyes caught the

governor's picture on the wall. The hot urine that rushed down her legs distracted her. Immediately, one of the nurses drew out a mop stick from the back of the recliner, walked to the pool of pee and swabbed the floor. The nurse looked at Mariam, their eyes clashing before she continued her cleaning. After one minute exactly, the nurse stopped, walked to the chair and replaced the mop stick.

The news about her baby being out of place troubled her and more troubling was the solution proffered: a surgery and a removal of her baby. Just some weeks ago, she had announced to her husband, family and friends that she was pregnant. With joy, family and friends had stormed her house. A little party had been thrown. Jollof rice and chicken, goat and ram pepper soup, fried rice and fish, pounded yam and egusi soup had been served to guests. Star, Guinness, Tusk, Maltina, Coke and Fanta were made available for guests to wash down the food. Men had praised her husband for shooting right and women had gathered around her to give pregnancy tips. Mariam had asked the Imam to pray for her baby's protection when the party ended. It was a long prayer.

As days went by, she had begun to spit around. That's how she had got the name: the spitting dragon and, invariably, carried a ceramic spittoon around town. She had wished for two things: that her spitting stopped and that her nausea morphed into strength. Nothing changed; the journey did.

The ultra sound result revealed that the baby could not be. Doctor Omale broke the news to her without compassion. Mariam looked at him, she wanted explanations, but the doctor fiddled with his phone. The doctor remained silent and called for his note board. A quick knock on the door displaced Mariam's anger. The door opened to reveal a tiny nurse who brought in the medical note. Doctor Omale scribbled away on it.

“Doctor?”

“The position of the baby is very bad,” Doctor Omale paused, looked at Mariam. He bit the cover of his Bic biro before continuing. “This is a similar case with the woman we had some weeks ago. You see the fertilised egg is growing in your fallopian tube and not in your uterus. Now, that’s dangerous. If untreated, the tube may rupture. To save your life, we have to remove the foetus. It’s a pure coincidence and not your fault.”

“Hmmm, what will I tell people? Allah,” Mariam looked at the ceiling, “You can see what you are doing to me? Is there no way out?”

“The only way out, like I said before, is removal of the foetus. Think about it. But you don’t have much time.”

“Think about what, doctor?” Mariam said as her face contorted into an ugly form. “Think about what?”

“Think about everything.”

“I want my baby.”

“I’m sorry. If you had come for earlier check-up perhaps this would have been corrected.”

Mariam studied the faces of the women looking at her askance. She decided not to share her ordeal.

Again, her mind created a collage of memories—they flowed in like stormy waters—the gentle sting from the needle that provided the anaesthesia, the sunken look from her husband’s face and the determined look of the doctor as he prescribed antibiotics to her. An attempt to arrange the events in her memory seemed like fixing a disorganized puzzle, it was too hard to handle. She snapped out of the past.

Laughter erupted as the women watched Mariam. They pointed at her, murmuring, clapping hands and hissing. Two women mimicked her.

“She broke the line of the story,” Tope announced. “Now she cannot say a word. Idiot!”

Mariam looked flummoxed. Deep down, she wanted to tell the story because she lived it and it haunted her. But, the story escaped from her lips quietly but remained in her memory bank. Her inability to tell her tale unsettled her and increased her heartbeat. She placed her hands on her chest with her head bowed.

The lead singer of the women walked to Mariam and patted her back, touched her stomach, and ruffled her hair.

“It’s ok.”

Embarrassment sat on the back of Mariam’s neck. She felt the humiliation pressing her head down, strangling her emotions and twisting her innards. Mariam concluded that she would never tell her story as the other women’s loud whispers tickled her ears.

The lead singer leapt from the ground, staggered to the front in crazy fashion, clapping her hands, stood straight, then began a series of leg movement. Holding her right hip, she moved her right leg to the front and back; and the left leg to the front and back.

When the day gets old

Another new child sings brightness

When darkness and light marry

What kind of child do they bring to us?

Should we wait for the child?

Should we dance away in the weather and forget that ugliness is coming?

This is the last dance

The dance is of telling

For we know we must sing a new song.

The women responded, *Sing the story. Sing, sing, sing your story.*

The old woman stopped her movements abruptly. A new breeze crept in like an unwanted visitor while she gathered her breath. The women remained focused on her. Another story was coming, they thought.

But time died here.

The Old Woman's Story

“Gatanan Gatanan Ku?”

“Ta zo mu ji ta.”

“Story, story!”

“Story.”

I want to tell you a story how the tortoise cracked his back. Once upon a time, there lived a very greedy tortoise that lived in the biggest house in the animal Kingdom. All loved the tortoise, a very sensible creature.

Famine visited the land one time and no one knew the cause. Dogs started eating themselves; lioness began eating their cubs, mother hens eating her chicks. The lion, King of the animal Kingdom, sent his emissaries to search for solutions. The oracle informed the servants that one of the animals had to return all the hoarded food. They told the lion what the oracle said. He was greatly angered.

There was a search for this animal hoarding all the food. A penalty was in store for him for his crime: death. The rat was sent on the journey because of its ability to smell food and go through closed doors.

In his quest, the rat saw that in the giraffe's house, necks were growing longer and longer as they stretched in search of food flowing in the air. In the hippopotamus' house, there was a drought, nothing available. The rat went around the whole village but he forgot the tortoise.

The rat went back to lion and made his report. Rat said no one hoarded food. The lion walked around and told the snake, one of the ministers in the animal Kingdom, to go ahead again and ask the oracle what can be done. The snake went and came back with a shocking report: the rat had not visited the tortoise. The lion, after hearing the news, kicked the rat and instructed the rat to visit the tortoise's house.

When rat snuck into the tortoise's house, to his surprise, found the tortoise eating a whole chicken.

“Tortoise, tortoise, when did all this food come into your house?”

The tortoise did not respond. Instead, he cut the lap of the chicken and threw it to the rat. The rat gobbled it all up, unable to eat again. Satisfied, the rat told the tortoise about his mission. The tortoise promised the rat to give him half of everything in the house. The rat refused and headed out. But the tortoise followed the rat, singing.

The rat that knew how to go into every animal's house

Should understand that it is just a mouse

It is the rat that made the stealing happen

If it were not the rat there would be no feeding

Come and eat, when you see what to eat

Don't worry about the other person just make sure you eat

Come into my house and eat.

Come into my house and eat:

Where egos don't matter.

The rat agreed to get half of everything.

“What is the essence of this story?”

The essence of the story is coming soon.

“Then tell us your story.”

As I was saying, the tortoise told the rat to tell the lion that he, the tortoise, knew how to get the food. The tortoise was invited to the palace immediately. The lion gave tortoise two of its prized chains as a sign of respect for having such important information. The tortoise informed the lion that he, the tortoise, had to go into the clouds to bring the food to earth. Tortoise requested for two mighty birds that could carry the amount of food the village needed. Lion, roaring with excitement, called the vultures to help tortoise achieve this positive feat.

When the vultures entered tortoise's house, they dived into the food placed in the middle of the room. Hunger made them lose focus. The tortoise watched and laughed. The vultures ate to their fill. He gave them three kegs of palm wine, which they also drank. The tortoise offered them another round of food and drink. He told the birds that the food needed to be taken to their nest for safekeeping.

Vultures agreed but they wanted to know what they would get. The tortoise said the food would be in their house forever and ever and hunger would be a thing of the past. The vultures smiled. The tortoise called his wife and told her it was time to leave. Lady tortoise initially refused to move into the vulture's house but after the tortoise whispered the plans, she followed. The vultures busied themselves with more eating. After that, they embarked on fulfilling the tortoise's wish. One vulture carried tortoise and his wife on its back while the other carried the whole food.

The vultures dropped the tortoise in their nest and asked what reports they should give to the King. The tortoise told them to tell the lion that they found the reason for the famine. Tortoise gave the vultures six bags of rice to deliver to the King.

"Should the lion," vultures asked the tortoise, "decide to follow us to the place where we got these bags of rice, what do we do?"

"Bring the King here," the tortoise replied.

The vultures were shocked. But the tortoise commanded them to deliver the food quickly or else more deaths might occur and that was what they did.

The lion lay on the ground, yawning and rolling sideways when he saw the vultures carrying bags of rice. The lion roared, rubbed his mane and asked them how they got the rice.

"The tortoise," the vultures replied. "The Tortoise!"

"Where is he?"

The vultures kept quiet and wanted to fly away after dropping the bags of rice. The lion charged at the vultures and almost ripped one of the vulture's head off. And then...

“So, how did the tortoise get the back? Tell us! Why is this woman telling us nonsense?”

I’m trying to tell you, Tope. Let the story flow. Tope, stop! Why are you being...?

Tope screamed, pushing the old woman away from where she told the story. The old woman pushed Tope back. A little drama unfolded as Tope pushed the woman again sending her sprawling to the ground. The old woman crawled back to her seat, crying and cursing the contemporary looking lady who pushed her.

“That’s how they are! That’s how they are! The new never want to hear how it’s narrated. That’s how we narrated stories, drawing from different traditional techniques...”

“Shut up. Who cares?” Tope hissed. *“Let me tell all of you a real story.”*

Tope’s Story

Mine started with stupid love. Sheybe we are the story of our nation?

Yes o!

I thought loving a man would make me happy, shi-o, big lie. Love doesn’t exist, abeg. Love has shown me shege and love is blind because it has not been to the ophthalmologist.

“Please go straight to the story o.”

Alright. Alright. We are all sloths.

“You are the sloth.”

You would not understand. Mary, the woman sitting next to you, would understand. Look at her good beauty. Do you see that beauty spot on her face and such a wonderful smile that could make a chameleon reveal its full cabinet of colours? I was like her once. So, I wanted to be a good woman to this wonderful man I met some time ago. Anything he asked of me, I did. When he was penniless, I gave him part of my school fees. What didn't I do? I cook, I clean and I even took care of the other part, you sha know what I am talking about.

It all started at university when I noticed this man staring at me. He approached me, as in, without thinking; he said he wanted to be my man. That love made me stupid. That's what happens in love at first sight...you idiots! Listen!

"Enough of the love story."

OK! OK!

"Thank you, o"

We started going out, sha. We dated for a while and started making love. The man, did I mention, has a bad right leg. He couldn't walk properly and found it hard to do many things but when it came to making love, ha, leave matter.

After several years of seeing this man, I got pregnant. He told me he was not ready to be a father. That his career and my career would suffer and that we would both live in poverty. Me, I was still at university sef and did not know what life would be after the baby comes. So we decided to terminate the child. No regrets at all.

"That is not a new story. Is that all?"

“Please if you don’t have anything to say again, just step aside and let other people with good stories come out and tell us something better.”

Idiots! Listen jere. That’s why I get angry with the old. No understanding of how it’s done. That’s why I get mad at the society; we won’t work to change anything. That’s how my mum and dad left me because of bad roads when they were travelling. I remember, I was just seven when they left and it so happened that my uncle just decided to use that opportunity to maltreat me. How am I supposed to be normal? It’s better you all take me as I am. Please, allow me continue my story.

I got pregnant again and this time he said he was ready. I guess I was too. We went to one hospital at Ikoyi, Lagos. You should have seen the hospital. Rude nurses. Mad doctors. They treated me the way prisoners were treated at Kirikiri prisons: gave me spoilt food, bad water and put my bed close to the toilet such that I could see everyone going for a shit. All the pictures are on my BB. Thursday night I was supposed to give birth to my lovely girl when the doctors diagnosed me of high blood pressure. They told me I couldn’t give birth on that day. I was sweating. I was like me, BP, God forbid. I bled sha. I was also losing my thoughts. The baby was killing me. The pain nko, very unpleasant.

“Here’s a towel. Stop crying, sister.”

Is there time here? I thought we are here forever.

Anyway, I pleaded with the doctor to make me and make my daughter live. I prayed like I’ve never prayed before. Come and see fasting and praying; Holy Ghost cabashing, hmmm. I even attempted to fast; I would have been the first pregnant

woman fasting. At exactly 5:15am, I could not take the pain again. The open ceiling in the hospital witnessed my ordeal. I cried until the doctor came.

The doctor said I had to be induced to save us. I called my baby's daddy and he told me that whatever would save the child is fine. Ok o, I was sha induced. Hours later, labour started. I'm telling you, what my eyes saw, my friends, o ga. The pain was something I would never wish on my enemy. It is something I would never do again. Cut long story short, my baby could not be placed in my hands. It was a premature baby. It had to be placed in an incubator. The baby's eyes were closed. I looked at the painful joy that was my child. She was wired up with drips and what not. Ugly. God forbid it for any of you here.

Let's remember that this country is like our babies but in different format: she might dead and sometimes, unready.

After one day my baby died. This is my story.

Tope left the story telling spot. A sudden noise followed, fingers poked the air, mouths were opened and eyes tried to tell her to say the story properly, to give it closure.

"Are we allowed to ask questions?" a woman asked.

"Yes."

"Can Tope tell us how her baby died?"

Silence.

It was then that Mary walked to the front and another silence wafted onto the open air. She didn't introduce herself. She simply started the story.

Mary's Story

Ladies, I love to have sex. I hate contraception. I have had ten abortions.

I...I...

“So? Is it a bad thing?” Someone threw the question in the air.

The listening women answered in unison: “No.”

I still feel a huge sense of loss and feel I did the wrong thing but I had to do what I had to do. I only hope my acts don't affect me in the future when I'm ready to have children.

“Tell us the story. Like our country, you can't tell when you're doing wrong. All you have to do is act and find out whether you're wrong.”

First one, ha, it happened in Ogun State University where I found this boy who introduced me to a lot of things from alcohol to sex. No. It started when I was eight years old. No, when I was six. Sorry, it started when I saw our house help watching adult movies where people did the thing for a very long time. It fascinated me. I loved what I saw on television that day.

Fast forward. At that university, I fell in love immediately with one boy. I wanted to try many things with him and he was willing to explore too. We would go out to clubs, get drunk, come home and do a lot of silly stuffs. Every kind of sexual thing you could imagine. It was fun. Mad fun.

Meanwhile, my parents were deacons at our church and were hard-core disciplinarians. They heard, I don't know how, but they heard about my ways and plucked me out of that university like a bad leaf. They were disappointed.

“Ha! Even the fathers of this nation are missionaries. Now, I understand where you’re coming from.”

Don’t put us to shame, Mary, they would say.

I felt bad. I promised never to put my family in shame.

I was brought back to Lagos and attended the University of Lagos. I tried to control my desires but they were stronger than me. I was just nineteen. Then I met this guy, Biodun. I fell in love again. I cursed the day I met this man. I was willing to become a Muslim because of him. My sister, a student at the same university, found out that I was dating another man again and reported to my mum immediately. My mum went crazy. Can’t you hold yourself till you’re married? All those kind of questions, sha. I was not ready to let Biodun go and he too wasn’t letting me go. We loved each other.

We met secretly. We met in hotels. I visited him in his school and in his house. Sometimes, when my parents were not around he would come to my house and we would practise all the things I learned as a girl on those adult movies. Life was good.

Then, I was again transferred to a Christian university. The school had so many rules. Boys were not allowed to have girlfriends, girls were not allowed to use phones and other things. But, I still saw Biodun. We always found a way.

One day, I started vomiting in class and my teacher advised me to return to my hostel. The vomiting lasted for three days. I went home. Little chores became very hard for me to achieve. I could not do anything for long. After taking paracetamols for one week with no respite, I decided to visit the clinic. Some tests were run and I got my results. I was pregnant. I didn’t believe what I heard. I called my friend Bimbo and she prescribed eight malaria tablets. It sounded like suicide. First of all, I was

really scared but when I thought of the shame I was about to bring to my family, I did it.

I began noticing some changes, mainly that I wasn't vomiting again. Then two days later, the vomiting and more headaches and bleeding started. Scared, I called Bimbo to report my experience and she told me to come to Ogun state and promised to take me to an expert who handled such issues.

I met the doctor and a scan was performed. I could see the dark image of my baby on screen. I was shown the head, the toes and the placenta. I loved my baby. I was sixteen weeks pregnant. I loved my baby but I didn't want shame. I didn't want to disgrace my mother and father. I didn't want to be expelled from my university. I didn't want to ruin my life. I hated myself. So, I opted for the only available option. I was put to sleep and it was there that a baby first spoke to me that I would have many other babies and I would always kill them.

“So many developments in the country, yet, we know how to abort them. I can relate. So many babies and she doesn't know how to appreciate them because the infrastructures are not there to make it work. Continue, please.”

When I woke up, I felt empty. My child was placed before me. Doctor said they had to make sure that every part of the body was intact. As I watched the nurse carry the parts away in a pool of blood I felt hollow at the waste of life. I could clean the mess off me, but couldn't wash away the guilt from my mind. I cried. I cried non-stop for three days. I prayed to God for forgiveness.

“A praying nation; now you are making sense.”

After the experience, I vowed never to get pregnant again. For one good year, I abstained from sex or anything related to it. I was happy or so I thought. But then I

met Biodun by chance and I slipped. Soon, it happened again: I was pregnant once more.

This time, I tried the alcohol concoction route and it worked. I drank, in one big gulp: a bottle of Chelsea gin mixed with lime and a lot of salt. I bled for one week straight and the pregnancy was gone. What mattered most was not to put my career on hold. I thought to myself I must have been cursed for me to find myself in that situation again.

Sometime later, I introduced my best friend to Biodun. And my lover, with his very kind eyes and an endearing heart, ended up making love to my best friend. It made news.

I was mad. I lost it from then.

When I finished university, I started searching for jobs. It was hard. One door opened and that was to be an intern in one company at Ikeja, Lagos. I started immediately and immediately the boss started chasing me. For good two weeks he showered me with too many gifts. He offered me a cup of tea, one day, which I drank. Next thing, he started stroking my hair slowly, he touched my eyelashes and I tried to stop him but he kept on and before I could say any other thing he forced himself on me. In and out he went in me. I got pregnant. That self-hate crept inside me.

“Rape!”

I told him about the result of our engagement. He looked at me with an eye of a condemner, eyes piercing me like a knife and he put a wad of cash on the table and told me to sort myself out. I am not a bitch! I took the money and threw it on his face. How can I have a bastard child and a baby that happened by coincidence? I had to do what I had to do. I couldn't just...

“You can cry. Take your time. We like your story.”

I left that work. I started my National Youth Service Corps. I said my prayers and told the Lord that I would never ever fall in love again, that I will never kill another baby. When I got there, my friend took me around the whole place and told me what was expected from each member of the NYSC corps. They told us that we were to serve our country regardless of what we were going through and anyone found pregnant would be thrown out. I was happy on hearing this. At least, I would use this time to focus on my life.

On one of our walks, I met an extremely handsome boy called Femi. We started to talk. He bought two bottles of Fanta for my friend and me. It was cold and was needed for the kind of weather in this hot part of the north. He didn't say much and we did not exchange details.

I went back to Lagos after a couple of days in that camp. I met another guy who told me that my past was my past and he would trust and love me regardless of what I have been through in my life. On the first day we met, we made love. He expressed his love through many things: he introduced me to his family and took me to places I have never been before. I thought that would be the final bus stop for me. So, I thought.

One night, Femi popped the question: can I kiss you? He kissed me and from then we started, what I called a marathon of lovemaking. I left my Lagos boyfriend for Femi. He enjoyed me so much that he left his girlfriend too. After five days of heated sex I got pregnant. After some weeks, we did the scan and found out I had twins in me. I decided I was going to keep the babies. I thought I would be able to look after them, but then my career dreams started to creep back. Femi, through all

this, was very supportive. After so many weeks of thinking it over, we decided to let them go. The children in me started sending me messages through other children. Ah, you don't know anything. When I walked into the church I would see a baby pointing at me and crying as if my very presence would kill him or her. I told Femi about it but he said I should not worry; it was just my thoughts messing with me.

By now my belly started shooting out and I was eager to remove the babies. I went back to the student doctor who gave me a pill and told me to meet an experienced doctor who would tell me about the pessary solution which he said was the best. I found myself at the blue house the next day. As I walked in, I could sense hidden eyes staring at me from the walls and silent cries emanating from the ground. Femi wanted to walk into the theatre with me but the doctor refused. Femi stayed outside.

Doctor washed his hands and asked me at the same time why I was doing this. I can't remember what I said. All I can remember was that I removed the babies and the Christian music playing in the background. I wish God would come down and save me truly. When I came out, I hated life. I looked at Femi, he tried to touch me but I pushed him away.

I am not like this. I am not like this...

“Continue the story. Even if you're crying. The country is like this woman's stomach, it has been through a lot.”

I...I felt massive pains in my stomach for the next two days. I called the doctor and he told me to come back. He scanned my stomach and found out one of the legs of the babies didn't come out and they needed to perform one more

procedure. I asked if there was no other way for it to be done and he said there was none.

“No more stories from this woman. She is making it up.”

Another woman replied: *“No, she isn’t. Look around you and you can find this story. It’s raw and palpable.”*

That is Tope over there. She is my friend. She can attest to what I am saying. I don’t want you to believe me because I can’t believe myself too. I will continue my story now, whether you believe me or not. So, that was that for that town. We carried on the relationship and Femi made sure the incident never repeated itself again. He was good with me and he said he would never ever let us divide. I was safe. And then...what is that? Look over there!

The roaring sound of a boat distracted the women. Rivers splashing salt into the air and whirling wind blew Mary’s headscarf. The boat from Scotland was coming. Happy, the women began to re-arrange their sitting position and re-touch their faces.

“What is that?”

“The White Witch?”

“Mary, please take a seat while we see if that’s the boat we have been waiting for.”

Tope stood up, rushed to the front of the women and with her hands around her waist she began:

“Why should Mary stop her story? Why?”

“The White Witch.”

Tope continued:

“I don’t get it. So, because the White Witch stopped the killing of twins so many years ago in Nigeria, you now think she would come and rescue us from maternal mortality again. What’s wrong with our hands and heads?”

Tope shook her head before returning to her position. Mary, too, returned to her seat still wiping the tears from her face with the back of her hands. She sat down on the floor and began to think of the twins and their threats.

The brown ship with poles holding the flag of Scotland stopped at a reasonable position very close to the shore where the women gathered. The women saw some men staring, looking through binoculars and pointing. The women waved and jumped; screamed and moved until they got tired.

White Witch was the past: she brought good and bad news. She saved the people from their savagery and gave them confusion at the same time. Her kind of gift always took away something as well. The concoction she dropped wherever she went left a mixture of extremes.

Their leader, the old woman, raised her right leg and got into a dance position. But it seemed the words to the song had escaped her. She scratched her head and looked into the distance. Other women watched her as she displayed her animated move. Like a gas waiting to be released, this song burst out of her mouth.

Today na today we go know

Today na today you go talk who go save us

Today na the day we go come together

Today na today when dem go teach us how to.

Abi I lie?

The women replied: *You know lie. Truth na him full your mouth.*

The echo of the song reached the men on the boat. The fishes, crabs, oysters and other sea animals placed the lyrics of the song on the *SS Ethiopia*. Laughter and curiosity from the boat collided with the rhythm around. Captain Smith caught some words laden in the songs but could not make a sense of it.

“Ony yin understands whit they're saying?” he asked his crew.

There was no reply.

The White Witch stepped onto the upper deck like an angel. Her graceful steps rhymed with the rhythm of the women's music. The captain and the crewmember made way as she walked in while they pointed to sea of bodies waiting on shore.

“Wha ur thay, Mrs?” asked the captain.

The White Witch looked on without saying a word.

The White Witch was about five foot and a few inches tall. Her frail body was noticeable under her crinoline. She sat on one of the chairs available on the calm sea and inhaled the cool air. The music stopped. From the distance, she looked at the women who appeared like silhouettes. The White Witch spread her hands and the winds whispered greetings in *ohhhs and ahhhs* as if welcoming her to Gasau, Nigeria.

Before now, in Scotland, her own village people considered her mad when she accepted this mission. People, who came to this place, she had been warned, never lived to tell their tale or when they did, it was in sickness. One family who had visited

Gasau told her that they caught dengue and told her how the place was a god-forbidden place.

Aberdeen was a prosperous and cosmopolitan city, partly due to North Sea oil, and characterized by its grand and ornate architecture. Most buildings were constructed out of granite quarried in and around the city, and as a result, Aberdeen was often referred to as The Granite City. It was also known for its many outstanding parks, gardens and floral displays throughout the city, as well as its long, sandy beach. Dressing in kilts during ceremonies was one of their trademarks and their traditional greeting on the street was not different from that of Gasau's people. When you saw someone on the road walking, greeting was important which involved asking about the individual's families and wellbeing. The food, however, was different. While in Gasau, fura de nunu with kose was for morning food; breakfast in Aberdeen was baked beans, pork, baked pig's blood and toasted bread. Every café around town served this delicacy.

Aberdeen raised the White Witch. Her parents were strong Catholics and this belief was gifted to their child. She was known for her strange work ethics in Baxter Brothers' Mill—she worked daily from the dawn of the morning till the rising of the stars. While growing she became deeply religious, which propelled her to become a missionary.

The voice of her gods was clear. Reach the peoples across the shore and the news of the death of David Livingstone, one of the staunch preachers of missionary help, stirred the land and created a great wave of missionary enthusiasm. The call for workers for Africa thrilled many a heart into action. One of these was the White Witch. She offered her services to the Foreign Mission Board, was accepted and brought to Edinburgh for special training.

She learnt about this people. First, she went to Ethiopia then later travelled to West Africa where she began her real mission. She vowed to be a part of the developmental story of these people. Her history started with this conviction.

The White Witch, in her research, stumbled on a devilish book *Heart of Darkness* that was given to her by her friend to discourage her. Instead it inspired her. Her story filtered across Scotland with the cold air. Her ability to settle disputes preceded her. Naturally, she attracted people with her juju of love. It was even rumoured that she communicated with unseen spirits and the ability to speak to the unreality of this world itself. She spoke to nature and it obeyed.

On their voyage to Africa, she was given a special room and the ship's captain and his crewmen stayed away from her. When the first storm visited the *SS Ethiopia* and several attempts to avert the storm had failed, the captain ran to the White Witch for help. She stood up and walked into the middle of the bubbling ship. She raised her hands towards the dark clouds veined with lightning and the whole crew watched awestruck as the waters obeyed with serenity. From then onwards, they had journeyed smoothly.

THE SEEDS

Seeds frolicked in the space created by the gathering women. This almost space is: the women's thoughts, dreams and hopes and life between life and death. The king of Seeds maintained this space.

The king of Seeds was aware of the mortal threat of jumping into dreams and thoughts of the women. The mere idea of existing, even if temporarily, in this space made him lachrymal. Among the most valued visions when he climbs into this space is the thrill of humans' inconsistency—the way they managed their time seemed incomprehensible to him.

He had spent the slow hours watching his journey cut short with astonishment, it always convinced him that he had a role to change the status of things.

Perhaps, his supernatural existence, he felt, gave him an imperative position to make this possible. He is happy that the seeds rolling into this space listened to him, at least. For every seed that came in, he courted them and inflicted curiosity in them to pursue vengeance because of love.

The King of Seeds was the first one here and arrived with one eye. His vision had been divided by the lack of compassion by his royal family. He was about to bask in that memory when another five hundred seeds distracted him with their entry.

He watched them enter. They were a complex mix. From the colour of their skin and shape of their bodies, the King of Seeds concluded that they came in from that continent.

“Abeg,” said one of the Seeds, “na the place be this?”

“Yes.”

“No.” Another Seed replied.

“Which one be which?”

“It’s here.”

The king of Seeds watched them as their exchange got heated. From the corner of his eyes, he saw a Seed with no hands getting hammered by another Seed with full hands; and, from the corner of his right hand he saw other seeds holding each other’s neck, as if they wanted to strangle each other. Pandemonium broke out.

Bringing out his peace stick, King of Seeds stepped into the commotion throwing his hand recklessly, hitting the heads, backs and chests of many Seeds. The chaos stopped.

“No!” The King of Seeds started. “No. Not in this place.”

The new set of Seeds looked at the King of Seeds with trepidation. They, in unison, touched the place where they have been whipped; some winced while others allowed tears flow from their faces. One of the Seeds attempted to speak but, the peace stick reached his upper lip and he went quiet.

“No. Our mission is to change history. To change journeys.” King of Seeds preached.

A flash coursed through the King of Seeds’ mind: a sight of men trying to cut his journey. Again, the space came to him but his servant distracted him.

“Should I take them on the tour now, your highness?”

“Do I need to remind you about that?”

“No.”

The Seed bowed and exited with the five hundred seeds.

The king of Seeds studied the Seeds and pondered to stop the entry of more seeds. He relaxed, looked around the space and decided that the best step was to invite the women to the court.

The Seeds gathered in this space every day, every night, every afternoon, every minute and every hour talking to the people who exported them. Some of the women learnt how to shrink this space. In a bid to delete the spatial world, they expanded it.

The Seeds visited in various forms. One of them visited through a new born child delivered by one woman. The child cried every day for one week. The woman took the crying child to the Mother Matron, Mallama Ashante down the Tudun Wada road whose trade in business was silencing of babies. This child defied Mallama Ashante’s abilities and embarrassed her skills as it kept crying and wailing.

A sacrificial offering should be made to the King of the space and must be done in a location where three paths met, was Mallama Ashante’s solution. These things should be offered: a white pigeon, seven bags of soldier ants and a pregnant owl. After this offering, the baby stopped its crying.

Another woman ran out of her house screaming. Some said she was mad and others said she was happy. The community came together, bundled the woman and took her to Mallama Ashante. After assessing the victim, Mallama Ashante told the husband of the “mad” woman that, for his wife’s screaming to end the tongue of a

one-eyed alligator was required. The husband, who was also a hunter, agreed. The next day, he took his gun, cutlass and spear and embarked on the journey. He never returned. His wife's madness increased exponentially.

The Seeds were very unpredictable. They paid no respect to time. The more the victims thought they understood them the more they got confused. They were formless by nature, which added to their beauty, and they possessed the ability to change to house pets and wild birds.

Mallama Ashante was the only woman who knew how to communicate with the Seeds. Once, she visited their space and asked how they could be pacified. They spoke to her with strange voices.

“Too much interference is dangerous,” they warned.

She told them to reassess their positions. They waved away her pleas.

While the Mother Matron slept, they dragged her into the space. Mother Matron saw the white grounds and loved it. What caught her attention most were the white skies, its white was so bright that it looked a million fluorescents placed in a small room. They floated while she walked. Nothing else existed. Mother Matron was still in deep sleep while she asked her questions: what about the politics of your exit, eh? How are you handling that? The children laughed in unison. It echoed across the length and breadth of this world.

The King spoke on behalf of the other children, “it's turn by turn, and everyone involved would get their own share. Lessons come in different ways.”

Mallama Ashante changed her position and continued to listen. The words flowed in like waters from a stream. She gulped from their narratives. She cut with another question: can you show me what happened? She also told the King, who was

an attentive listener, that things like this happened and it was not strange to see humans change their colours. The woman explained with the chameleon's story.

In the village of lizards, the wall gecko was known to be the most docile of all reptiles. One day, the wall gecko found the agama lizard, his best friend, sleeping with his sister. It shocked and devastated the wall gecko.

The child of this illicit sex arrived and its strange skin scared every reptile. The child was banned and it returned after eight months of wandering in the forest. The King summoned the lizard to the palace and attempted, immediately, to strangle the illegal child. It changed its colours and the King stopped while other lizards gasped. It changed into other colours from green to red. They brought every reptile in the Kingdom and it changed to all the colours presented. The peacock was invited too to test the ability of the banned lizard and it changed to all the colours of the peacock. Humans, it claimed, taught it how to change colours. The King decided to name it the chameleon: the only reptile with a strange habit.

“Why was it very easy for humans to paint colours of existence with what they thought was right?” The King asked these questions silently while the other Seeds watched on. “Why is there a blurry kind of reality?”

Mother Matron chewed air and shooed away the morning mosquitoes. “Can you show me why you are the way you are?”

The Seeds chanted: KINGIBE! Kingibe! KINGIBE!

“I would tell you why,” the King said.

He came into this space first and knew how to show past events. The other Seeds urged Mallama Ashante to listen and ask no questions, for questions angered

their King. The silence was scary; Mother Matron tried to wake up but all efforts failed.

She smelled their experiences and it filled her room through the burning mosquito coil. Next, she heard a clearing of throat and a loud coughing which was followed by wild guffaws. She gleaned some part of what was about to be told, readjusted her position by facing the ceilings and spreading her arms in full stretch across the bed.

The King took her to a clinic. The clinic was in the middle of a busy town. Mother Matron saw cars speeding down roads, men and woman rushing into tall buildings, everything was done with haste. The picture of the world was presented in monochrome. The woman looked at the King as he moved around town gallantly in his royal robes. Where are you taking me? Mother Matron asked out of fear. Remember, said the King, no questions allowed.

On their way, they saw deformed humans and, they saw war and peace. Everywhere seemed like a collage constructed by the hands of an amateur artist. The brush strokes of white and black flowers flashed into their vision, the white of rose flowers tickled their irises and the cacophony of the happenings boomed in their ears as they moved on. Everything was linked. The boy showed her a building.

She studied the building. The house has gold plated pillars and the floor was made of pure diamonds. When they walked in, the Mother Matron discovered that the birds in the building spoke human languages.

“What are you humans looking for?” the birds asked.

The King of the space spoke in proud, orotund voice. They talked for a while. Mother Matron tried to get up as her fear grew tall but the other Seeds held her down. After what seemed like a very long talk, the birds flew away.

They waited in memory's space.

The King and Mallama Ashante stared at each other. Moments passed. There was no air. She choked and coughed as memory's air crept into present reality.

The bird reappeared and ushered them into the building.

The King fetched some water from a basin located at the entrance of the building then washed his face and his neck. He murmured some words. He took the Mother Matron's hand and walked gallantly.

The silver lining on the ceiling gave away bright blinding lights, which disturbed Mallama Ashante in her sleep.

She found herself on a long aisle and on the walls, was pictures of Kings, Queens and Princes.

Finally, they got to a room. The King fell to his knees and wailed right in front of the door. He cried so hard that a pond of salty water emerged from the ground.

"Open the door," he commanded Mallama Ashante.

Mother Matron shook her head indicating that she would not obey the King's order. Deep furrows swelled on the King's forehead as he repeated his command.

This time, Mallama Ashante opened the door. Echoes of screams, mixed with a touch of pain and fight rushed at her. The force of these emotions moved her about two steps backward.

"Please," she asked the King, "why are we here?"

"Sit, please, sit," said the King.

Mother Matron looked around and the images of blurry boxes flashed before her eyes. She slid onto the ground like someone tired from hawking Zamfara's harsh sun.

The King began his story:

Some years ago, my mother was born into this Kingdom. Her father had dozens of male children but they were not useful to the development of the community. He also had princesses and my mother was one of them. When he talked, everyone listened and anyone who disregarded his commandments was lashed with spikey ropes or thrown into the den of mad dogs. From his children, he required Kingly behaviours and any form of irresponsibility irritated him. When one of his sons was caught gambling, the King ostracised him from the palace and sent him to the forests, where he lived like birds and was forgotten. Her father treated his wives well. He provided for them. His queens were showered with gifts from gold to diamonds and anything they asked for.

Also, he had a mad appetite for sex; ten times a day, he made love to his queens. And with that same sexual energy, he ran his Kingdom. He took care of his daughters like his queens and believed that they held the secret to Kingdom success. By marrying his daughters off to princes of other lands, he gained political power and an insight into the scheme of things in the prince's palace, which gave him an upper hand amongst his peers.

Morning came with the sun's glowing shower in Gusau. Mallama Ashante tried to open her eyes but the storyteller closed them. She could not look at the time. She found herself attached to that spot on the ground, listening:

Never return to that place without asking for permission. Your attempts to escape my presence infuriate me! You came here and told me that you wanted to hear

my story, right! So listen! When the palace servants went on errands, my mother followed. In the market, people exchanged products for products and services for products and services for services.

“I’d like to ask a question please,” Mother Matron interrupted.

The King threw his sight on her like mothers do to disobedient children, studied her and waved his right hand, commanding her to speak.

“How can you know you’re telling the entire story as it happened?”

The King of Seeds bit his lip while he thought about her question:

When you are in this space, you can see history, present and the future.

“Can you explain further, Your Majesty?”

The King rubbed his chin for some seconds, then resumed:

The gods of our land gifted us with a certain type of power and freedom to know the unknown. Anyway, on these various trips to the market, my mother met this merchant. His stock of trade was selling good music and making good music. His singing was known throughout the length and breadth of the whole country. The charm of his voice caused lions to make love to snakes, made birds to dance and encouraged the lion to see the gazelle as a close friend. His singing cured diseases. There was none like him. People from far and wide trooped to listen to him.

The King began to pace around with his hands behind his back. He continued:

One particular morning, the princess heard the voice from afar and followed the tunes of the song. The servant had warned my mother not to listen to the poisonous rhythm sputtering from the musician’s mouth. My mother did not listen. The tunes serenaded the air, coloured the environs and casted a ceramic smile on every listener. Children, women and men stopped, listened for a while and dropped

money into his bowl then continued with their daily duties. Some sat down and talked all day about the man's talent.

The King of seeds paused, took a deep breath and continued:

The princess pierced the mesmerized crowd, making her way before the musician as the servant pursued her. The musician stopped and bowed his head in respect to the princess. Everyone who knew the princess was shocked. They knew the tunes have charmed the princess because it seemed she floated. Then the music stopped.

That little moment when he stopped the music, everyone dispersed and he was left with only the princess and the servant. Eyes studied them. Ears listened to the even unfolding before their very eyes. Women began to curse the clouds for exposing this abomination. For how can nature explain the communication between a princess and a musician who has not a coin to his name?

The musician began to sing again. This time the words grew hands that massaged and undressed the princess. Again, people gathered: market women and men left their stalls to listen to his magical tunes, one man lifted his little daughter shoulder high to see the singer and shoppers left their shopping.

The princess moved closer to the musician and started dancing and clapping and for a while wished she were in the man's mouth. She was snapped out of her reverie by the rude pulling of her servant. By now, words began to hop around like a loose nylon pushed around by the breeze.

Word reached her father. One of the servants who had been hiding in the crowd had reported my mum. He told her how the musician mesmerised her with sweet words and how she almost pulled her clothes to make love in public to the

musician. As a matter of fact, he said he saw the hands of the music and he himself had to fight it not to be influenced.

The king banged his royal chair with his fist, readjusted his crown after he heard about the public display of his daughter. Shame crawled onto his face and cut him deep. He commanded that the princess, my mother, be locked indoors as punishment.

For days, the princess was disturbed because of the new order. When the princess slept, she heard the musician's sweet voice penetrating her existence. She woke up every morning wishing she were locked in his arms. Every time a servant came to visit the princess, she asked if they've managed to hear any new song by the musician and if they replied with a yes, she forced them to reiterate every word in the song.

Her dreams increased. And, on another night, she had dreamt that the musician sang to her till she turned into a rose flower. The inability to listen to the musician almost drove her mad and what's worse; her servants couldn't render the same sounds with the same sound.

Then she decided to compose a note:

I have been told never to meet with you again. And my heart from that day has known no peace. It would do me some good if you could come to an oak tree near the palace so I could hear you sing.

“And then?” Mother Matron asked.

The king allowed a gentle breeze flow pass. He studied its purity and continued:

No reply. The princess waited and waited and waited for a reply but it didn't come. She'd look at the oak tree from her room with the high hopes that the musician would certainly reveal himself but it never happened. She wondered if her servants delivered the letter. On one afternoon, she heard a man whistling and she immediately rushed to the window to check if it was the musician but there was nobody there.

After about five days of no reply, no music, one of her servants finally revealed to her that she couldn't deliver the letter. She heard from other servants that the king's guard had arrested the musician.

When my mother heard about the incarceration, she asked her servants to make a visitation to the musician possible. Her favourite servant, the one who had taken her to the market square, orchestrated her visit.

The servants placed the local herbs that could make any human sleep and shit at the same time into the guards' food on a Thursday evening. All of the guards placed in front of the musician's prison shat and slept at the same time.

This is when the servants brought her out to see the musician. On the first day, it was like a walk into paradise where nothing could alter dreams. She spent the whole day with her lover. The visitation increased and it made the princess' face shine brighter than the morning sun, she also glowed at night.

All this stopped when one of the servants forgot to put the normal dose of herbs in the servants' food. On this particular day, the guards regained their consciousness quite early.

The guards, first of all, heard noises from the cell and misconstrued it as the singing voice of a caged man. They left it as that. The sweet sounds turned into low

moaning and other times, a very high moan. One of the guards decided to check what was happening. When he opened the cell door, he couldn't believe what he saw and left without saying a word. He told the other guards on duty about his discovery.

The King heard the news and was perturbed. For days, he strategized on what to do. He finally commanded the guards to execute the musician and that a close eye be kept on the princess. A servant revealed the death of the musician to the princess. Emptiness posted a message into her heart and she broke down in tears. She pulled strands of her hair out and talked to no one in the palace. She spoke in nods and shaking of her head.

The king stopped his movements.

Gasau's sunlight rays bounced on every house, sending its shining gifts into each house and dispatching humid packets of air unto every being. Daily morning activities resumed: selling and hawking, children going to school, cars wheezing by, bike men picking up and dropping passengers and food merchants shouting out their delicacies for sale. The Mother Matron was still held hostage in sleep. She moved and snored. Her curtains circumvented the rude intrusion of the sun's long arm.

The king watched her for a while, smiled before he continued his story:

The princess, after three months, noticed that there was a load in her. There was a heart beating in her body. She ate little and vomited more and this was unusual. She told the palace nurse who informed her that she was pregnant. The princess refused to believe this. Then, one day, the princess threw up in the middle of the palace in the presence of the King's guests.

The King asked with trembling lips: how can she be pregnant? He sent for the best physician in the town to confirm the news he heard. The physician arrived, did

his checks and confirmed the pregnancy. After a long silence, the King gestured by slicing his throat with his forefinger. The doctor got the message.

The princess screamed but the doctor injected her neck and she fell into a slumber immediately. While the princess slept, the doctor removed the being in her. And that was the *birth* of The King of Seeds.

The King paused.

After about what seemed like a minute, he continued:

The princess woke up and found out that she felt empty and not as heavy as before. One dark night, the princess tied a rope around her neck and tied the rope's end to a chandelier, in the middle of the palace, the same place she had vomited and took her life.

The eyes of The King of Seeds overflowed with tears and Mother Matron cried too.

The King managed to spit these words:

That was how we began. How our journey started. We could have changed it. We fought but we did not win but our old powerlessness turned into our new strength. Our tears were their laughter and our dying was their living.

Mallama Ashante attempted to rise from her sleep but was held down by secret hands.

I will lead you back to where the journey commenced.

The King of Seeds and Mallama Ashante travelled back. The void was filled with various elements. Colourful eyes, open mouths, brain matter, broken limbs and intestines were a few things they saw. The guard bird shed tears when he saw the King and the Mother Matron. The road became narrow and short. They got to the

Seeds' land safely and found other Seed discussing. They interrupted them with their sudden appearance.

The other Seeds hailed their King for his bravery. The Mother Matron, politely, asked the King if she could wake up now.

Not yet. You have seen what I went through. I could have been. I could have known what it means to drink from the waters of earth's stream and I could have known how bees gathered nectars from flowers. I could have also studied how the wind spoke to trees.

The woman's face morphed into a shape of an old almond.

The King continued:

When you get to the river you know what to tell them. This is the first phase. My comrades will show you how to exit. But you must sing for them.

Mallama Ashante shook her head in protest first of all but after moments of pestering by the other Seeds, she burst into these lyrics:

For they know not what they do

For they live in the times as fools

For they know not what to do

For they exist not as fools

For they know not what they do

For they exist only as fools

Mother Matron opened her eyes and noticed that the day was far spent. She jumped out of her bed and with her wrapper properly tightened around her waist,

managed to rush out of her room. Her next-door neighbour covered her mouth in disbelief when she saw Mother Matron heading towards the bathroom. For market women sold most in the wee hours of the morning and before the sun rose.

The Mother Matron paid no attention to the rumours pouring out from keyholes and the watching eyes chastising her. She heard her name chorused in every room. What mattered most, at this time, were the people who held her peace at ransom and who knew her every move, the small activities of her mere neighbours meant nothing.

After her short shower, she dressed up and immediately, stormed out of her compound. She boarded an okada from Gasau to the river. It was a thirty-minute ride. As they journeyed, her mind travelled to strange spaces. Meanwhile, the okada man dodged some potholes on the road and almost hit a truck backing out of an industrial building. The okada man's protests punctured her thoughts for some seconds and it returned to ambience of the Seeds' court. A quiet place pregnant with violence and anger; love and hate, and death and life and characterised with tall paradoxes.

Her mind swerved to other issues in her life. She wished, among many things, that she had the power to turn events of her past into glorious ones. Then again, past was the past, so she allowed the memory to flow away like waters into a gutter and turned her mind to the mission at hand. The instructions were simple: to inform the women about the visitation of the Seeds and cases that needed answers. The King came to her mind and promised to protect her throughout her assignment.

The power of going and coming and the power to make things exist or not exist, and the power to reshape reality into something special—these were a few powers that the Mother Matron knew The King of Seeds possessed. As she swam in

the rivers of her reverie, the bike man finally came to a halt, pointed her destination to her and zoomed off without saying a word.

Were she in the market, she would have made a lot of money by this time. Women from all over town came to her store to buy goods like Milo, herbal medicines, love portions, paints and other things. First, the message must be delivered before she resumed her real business.

She wished for peace between the country in her dream and the country before her very own eyes. Making peace, she thought, was much harder than making war. An accord between these worlds could present an example to other warring nations, she concluded.

The smell of the women's story greeted her. She, Mallama Ashante, the only experienced Mother Matron in Gasau, knew the myths wafting from the gathering women. Broken romances, husbands marrying new wives, love transforming into monsters, deaths during births and births during deaths were events she witnessed in her years of working as a local matron. Even the cloud's face held the story; it maintained an unusual darkness. She stood, stared and managed to move one leg after the other.

She saw the women waving jubilantly at a distant ship. Her mind raised two questions: who was on the ship? Who were the women expecting? Why were they waiting for the guest on the ship?

Her movement seemed like a marathon; the finish line of the event seemed far away. She felt thirsty as well. As she got near the river, the happening became clearer. She heard bits and pieces of spoken words: "What is happening there?" "Is she hooked there?" "Is she coming?" "Is she scared?" "Would she ever come?" "Why is she doing this to us?" Questions. Questions. Questions!

Her next step brought her finally into the midst of the waiting women. From where she stood, she heard the stubborn lashing of waters on shore, the honking of the distant ship and the euphoric cheers of the women. A deep, bold voice spoke with the Mother Matron's mouth: sit down all of you! The women, surprised and disconcerted, turned to the face that bestowed this instruction. They returned to their seats like little children instructed on how to cross a busy road.

They knew the Mother Matron and, her personality preceded her. During the time when education was for men only, she was one of the few brave women who sought for knowledge across the sea. She studied nursing and paid her fees by doing menial jobs in one of the cold cities of Europe. On her return to Gasau, no hospital would employ her but she started her own private practise and another legend that built her reputation, was when she delivered herself of a baby in Tundun Wada Market.

The delivery happened on a Saturday night when she was about to close her shop, when the sun ran away from the activities of the day and when birds retired to their nests and when the ground gained temporary freedom from busy foots.

Mother Matron's water broke; she felt herself leaking and thought for a second that she pissed on herself. Mama Dunkwu, her fellow colleague in the market, heard her scream for help. Mother Matron lay flat on the floor, spat and screamed again. A small kick upset her stomach, which made her hold her face

Mama Dunkwu tried to lift her but failed after a couple of trials. She watched as the Mother Matron writhed in pain like a snake, rubbing the ground hard and breathing heavily.

After the water leaked out, she felt her stomach whirling like a troublesome sea and the baby moved and moved then tried to come out.

“The baby wants to come out here,” the Mother Matron announced.

Mama Dunkwu retied her wrapper and her headgear, wiped sweat from her face and held her head and waist simultaneously. The Mother Matron managed to pull her pants and spread her legs under the full glare of the night’s light.

We do not choose where to be born. Mama Dunkwu ran into the dark. Mallama Ashante looked at the white moonlight and the shy stars that watched her. She saw unicorns and flying horses with golden feathers as the baby kicked the walls of her stomach. Fleas and night flies disturbed her. Everything became blurry. Like a floating balloon, she saw the pains tilting before her eyes. She took a deep breath and pushed. Veins almost leaped out of her neck. Push. Push. Push. Push. Breathe. Deep breathe. Breathe. Tears formed in her eyes. Internal heat weakened her. She felt thirsty at first, and later, desired to eat boiled corn and roasted pears.

The baby reared its head. Blood dripped from the baby’s head and staining the earth. Push! The word came out of Mother Matron’s mouth. In between her thighs, the evening flies gathered while she shooed them away, and pushed. Push. The baby revealed its full head plus shoulders and the Mother Matron managed to place her hand on the baby. Another push brought the baby out. Mallama Ashante picked the bloodied baby and placed it gently on her chest.

“Mama is here; mama is here,” she said as she heaved a sigh of relief while the baby released a loud cry that pierced the silent night. Mama is here. Smearred with blood, exhausted from pushing and struck with joy, she rubbed her baby tenderly. Gasau market welcomed a baby; the tables, the closed shops, the poles that held the market together witnessed the event. The jubilation was silent.

Mama Dunkwu returned with a team of medical personnel. They arrived in a Mercedes Benz; the doctor, a thin man about six foot and five inches tall with a nurse

jumped out of the car both holding flash lights while Mama Dunkwu followed behind. They saw Mother Matron with baby in her hand, weak and with closed eyes. As they approached, she screamed in fear. The moonlight revealed Mama Dunkwu's face and she kept quiet. The nurse shouted like a Fulani griot when she saw the baby in the Mother Matron's hand and the doctor rushed to collect the baby from the Mother Matron. When the doctor picked the baby from the Mother Matron then the nurse carried out some checks. Mother Matron pushed the placenta out.

“We need to rush you to the hospital,” the doctor informed Mallama Ashante. She nodded in response.

Mother Matron, Mama Dunkwu, the nurse, doctor and the baby made their way to the car. Mercedes Benz's accelerator was shown no mercy; they arrived at Gasau Medical Centre in good time. At the front of the clinic, Mother Matron touched her baby but noticed the numbness, she tapped the baby but there was no movement, what she thought was asleep was...she looked at the doctor. The fading light revealed the doctor's face as he turned and immediately made efforts to resuscitate the baby—mouth-to-mouth, lifting and tapping the back— but nothing worked. The doctor bowed his head. The rest of the placenta fell out of Mallama Ashante.

Memory of Mother Matron's role re-played in the heads of the waiting women. Zainab remembered vividly how Mother Matron ensured that her pregnancy went on “smoothly.” Tope hated the Mother Matron because she was not there to advise her during pregnancy. But, Tope had no job, no home, no family members and no friends, which served as a happy excuse to forget about the loss of her baby and her experience instilled this belief in her: child delivery was a gamble. Mary loved the

Mother Matron because she never judged Mary's actions and always welcomed her with open arms anytime she fell into the traps of unwanted pregnancies.

The Mother Matron dug into the experiences of the other women. The clear air and whispering sea with the waiting ship added to the new story about to be told. They settled down. Mother Matron saw the mother of The King of Seeds. Her surprise grew tall.

Silence.

Mother Matron cleared her throat and when she turned to the right, she saw the mother of the abandoned twins. Nature relaxed. Waters flowed with the rhythm of the happenings and another silence added colour to the environs. Mother Matron brought out a kolanut from her wrapper and greeted the gods with it by breaking it into four parts; she put three parts on the ground, put one in her mouth, and chewed slowly.

She finally started her story:

I am going to take you on a journey. The King of the entire children gave me a message to deliver. Then the King came into her mouth and took over. Her voice changed. No one commented. Mother Matron's body changed, she sweated and her throat throbbed like a croaking toad, and she felt things moving in her body. The King took me to a palace. Follow me on this journey.

A certain King banned her daughter from marriage. She disobeyed and married a poor musician.

"I don't understand," a protest emanated from one of the women.

All stories are not to be understood but followed. Cast your eyes to a land located in the past. The woman who put us in this predicament is here.

"Point the woman out now and let us deal with her."

Only those who have journeyed to the land of the court can see her. Pointing her out would lead to nothing as she is here for the White Witch's help. They took me to place with gold walls and silver ceilings, where it all started. When the princess broke her father's heart, she was never heard of and was banished from the land.

"So what really happened?"

The King removed the baby from the princess's body because he could not bear the shame of having a daughter who was pregnant before wedding. The woman murmured.

"What happened to the King?" another woman asked

The King of the palace lost his throne. The King of Seeds followed the King of palace wherever he went and showed the King of palace pictures of his past. During meetings and gatherings, the King of the palace developed a pathetic habit of laughing at anything. It worried the ministers and soldiers. The King of palace was reported to the oracle.

The oracle found out that the banished daughter's baby was the cause. The King of Seeds lived in King of palace's head. Oracle gave instructions: kill two pigeons and put the blood at the edge of the fifth room. The ministers followed the information but it never worked.

The King of Seeds controlled and tormented the King of palace. Everything the King of palace did made no sense: from ordering the hike of gas to the killing of journalists. Sometimes, he walked naked in the palace. Until one day, he removed a gun from his drawer and put a bullet in his head. The King of Seeds would be coming soon, my sweeties.

"Like they've not already started," a woman yelled.

The King of Seeds showed me the pains of his mother, this woman in our midst. I would have loved for the woman to tell her own part of the story; I would have loved it because our people believe that many roads lead to the market.

“Can’t you plead with her?”

I can try. I can try. I speak to you, there!

“You are pointing at an empty space. Are you mad?”

You don’t have to look at me with that kind of eyes. I was talking to the being by your side. The woman whom I am referring to knows herself and she would speak when the time is right. There is going to be a hearing headed by the Kings of Seeds.

As Mother Matron paused to catch her breath, these words came out of her mouth uncontrollably:

For you do not know what you do o’ fools

Fools foolishly following flowing foolishness

Mothers maKing mad marriage mar

Girls giving gifts to the gall

Stories told always stay

For we are here.

The Mother Matron was lost in thoughts and so were the women. When she finally spoke, the women listened attentively. The King mentioned that the baby born in the market place was in their midst. Mother Matron staggered. I didn’t see the baby. Everything is stagnant; you see only what I want you to see. The Mother Matron heaved a sigh of relief and raised her hands to the women. It is time for me to take my leave.

“Please, tell them that we are not afraid. Tell them that we await the court proceedings.”

The Mother Matron looked at the woman who spoke. It was Tope.

“When you see my child,” Tope said, “tell her that I miss her and I wish that she could come to my dream and speak to me. Could you tell her that she’s a coward? Could you tell her that I do not miss her?”

Mary stood up, cried and smiled at the same time but immediately, sat down without saying a word. Mary was dangerously endowed with strange characteristics. She looked like someone who would never hurt a fly. A smile that could charm even the most dangerous of men and a heart that could embrace a million people at the same time.

The Mother Matron looked at the ship. It remained stagnant. She pondered on the White Witch’s powers, whether the woman could communicate with unborn children and if they understood her language. The Mother Matron walked to the shore and fell to her knees. She closed her eyes and squeezed her arms as if the sea held the answers to her questions.

The ship jerked forward or so it seemed because the other women fell to their knees too except for Tope who remained standing, playing with the pimples on her face. Their action attracted the seamen and the White Witch on board. They waved at the women and the women waved back with excitement. The wait had been on for years. They waited. They saw. They continued waiting.

The Mother Matron spent another couple of minutes staring at the ship. The sea breeze cooled her burning heart. When she stood up, the women did the same. With bowed head, she walked slowly out of their midst. They watched her without uttering any other word.

The King of Seeds led Mother Matron some years back in Gasau—the past where Mary’s seeds, Mariam’s seeds had the privilege to be expelled. Smiling, the King of Seeds put Mallama Ashante on a commercial bike, which took her to an unpaved road in Tudun Wada. The air smelled of brown pools and black gutters like burnt fetid fat. The bike man arrived in front of a blue house. The blue of the blue-house was no longer blue—washed and faded, obsolete and forgotten—on first sight. The whites on the window were dark brown and some windows were shattered.

She could not tell how the bike man knew this place or why she was here. She paid the bike man and before she walked into the blue house, she noticed the disappearance of the bike man. Chickens moved around the street, pecking hard on the ground, looking for food buried in the soil. She stood in front of the blue house pondering and wondering what this meant.

She tried to step away but she was urged by The King of Seeds not to make a move. The voice in her head was clear. She noticed that rustiness held the gate and reckless push could send it to the ground.

Suddenly, she saw new lights—two of them—right in front of her. She could not tell the distance between the gate and the entrance, but felt her legs walking on the ground beneath her. She found herself in what seemed like the reception. Blood, methylated spirit, tissues, and cotton wools, pens and papers presented odours to her. Everything smelled like a burnt cockroach. Also, there were watching eyes of waiting women.

The diagram of a woman’s stomach was two inches above her eye level. Especially the labels: pelvis, vagina, etc. and under it, a message: “it is safer now than later.” She closed her eyes as if the picture irritated her sight. Then, the loud ticking of

the clock, a rushing of feet, floating of chirping birds followed by a wail pierced her heart. She opened her eyes and the image remained.

RECEPTION was written boldly above a tall desk. The floor showed signs of recent walking in and out and was smeared with a rainbow of colours. She saw a pair of hands reaching for her neck and switched to the face of the King. Scared, Mother Matron ducked her head like a soldier in a war. She burst through the reception door into another room where another set of women gathered. One of the women stood up and blocked her.

“Lai lai, that kind trick no fit work for here.”

“Which kind trick?”

“I don dey here since. You know fit just enter go see Dr. Godwin. We don dey queue since.”

“I no come here come see doctor for anything. Na doctor need see me.”

“Werin this woman dey talk?”

With their heavy faces, two women stepped forward to join the woman who confronted Mother Matron. They pointed to the waiting room. Mother Matron shouted out: “Godwin! Godwin! Goddy!” The fattest of the woman, whose black skin was similar to charcoal, pushed the Mother Matron to the ground. As she was about to make another move on Mother Matron when the doctor of the blue house emerged with a white mask over his face, gloves in hand and a manual vacuum aspiration in his left hand.”

“If you don’t stop now, na una go suffer am.”

The doctor’s instruction drove the women to their seats. There was no protest whatsoever.

The Mother Matron watched the doctor with half opened eyes. She could see his dirty scrubs.

“Goddy?”

“Mother Matron.”

“Hmmm.”

“What brings you here unannounced?”

“Goddy. They brought me here.”

“Who?”

“They.”

“Who are they?”

“Them.”

“Who are they?”

“Your office, now!” the matron screamed.

‘Dr. Godwin’ was badly sewn into the top corner right of his overall by a bad tailor. He smelled of sweat. The room became musty.

“Obviously, you can tell that I am busy.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’m sorry matron but you’ll have to wait.”

Dr. Godwin turned his back on Mother Matron. Some small voices spoke to Mother Matron. The words were not clear but she followed the instructions. As Dr. Godwin took two steps, Mother Matron hit the back of his neck. Blood rushed from his head to his feet, which unsettled his steps and made his head hit the doorframe. The *whuuu* sound by the women followed. In Gusau, a woman dared not hit a man, none in history had done this.

On seeing this, the charcoal looking woman who had challenged the Mother Matron quickly posted a tone of apology. “Please forgive me, madam.”

Dr. Godwin was on the ground for another thirty seconds, rubbed the back of his neck and winced. He was in between tears and agony. He got up slowly, held the Mother Matron’s right hand and pulled her to one side then whispered into her ears. Gesticulating and vibrating as he spoke while the Mother Matron nodded and nodded. The eyes watched.

The Mother Matron, after listening to the doctor, removed her right hand from the doctor’s grip and whispered into his ears for close to fifty seconds. The doctor shook his head. The Mother Matron stopped whispering then walked to the reception.

Mother Matron sat down and turned to the woman on her right and pointed to her.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

A baby interrupted by stretching his hands towards the Mother Matron. He loves you and they would ensure you remain happy, you and your baby. Surprised, the woman kept quiet.

“The other twin, his brother” the Mother Matron said to the woman, “says hello.”

“What is it?” the woman asked.

“I have a message for you.”

“This woman na witch,” the woman gazed at the other women as she made that statement.

“I no be witch. Them send me to tell you.”

A young woman wearing Ankara and a red dress got up, looked around and walked out of the building.

“Who send you, ehn?”

“Nah him brother,” Mother Matron pointed to the giggling baby

“Ehn!” every woman in the room chorused.

Some of the women held their breasts and others covered their ears so that the poisons of that statement would not sip in. The baby stretched his hands; he wanted to be in the hands of the Mother Matron while his mother stopped him.

“You’ve been through a lot and they say thank you.”

Mariam, the woman with the child, paid attention to Mother Matron and passed her baby.

“These horses on your wrapper, where are they galloping to?”

“Nowhere.”

“Why are they galloping?”

“Exercise.”

“Why?”

“For strength.”

“I don’t understand.”

“To gain and maintain strength, there has to be consistent galloping.”

A thought flashed in Mariam’s mind: she wanted to know how much the woman knew. Mariam’s baby was quiet for a moment. Mariam looked around the room and studied the faces that watched them; the faces wore a look of surprise that questioned everything going on.

The Mother Matron held the baby until it slipped into sleep. She looked at the baby’s face as it slept; searching for a resemblance to any of the Seeds she had seen

some hours ago. Memory failed her. A woman, wearing a dull green gown and cheap jewellery on her ears, stood up, moved close to the Mother Matron and Mariam then spat twice and left the blue house.

Mother Matron and Mariam laughed at her as if they collectively knew about her worry. Afterwards, everything went silent. Even eyes were silent.

“Tell me what they told you.”

“Mariam.”

Mariam put her head back and clapped twice in disbelief. Mother Matron’s mention of her name dazzled her.

“You even know my name.”

“All good people have a name.”

“I’m not good.”

“They say you are. They say thank you.”

“Tell me what they told you.”

The Mother Matron took a deep breath. She didn’t have the story, as The King of Seeds has not dropped it in her. She opened her mouth and something, which she did not approve, tumbled out:

“You are the one who would...”

Doctor Godwin’s voice interrupted her words. She passed the baby to his mother; the baby adjusted, stretched and yawned. Mother Matron took twelve big steps and was right in front of the doctor’s door and she tore the door apart and stepped into the office. There was a single bed in the middle of the office and a light bulb placed on it.

She picked out a cloud of dust in the middle of the yellow ray of light from the bulb and imagined if it could talk or show events. She walked past the bed. The

handlebars have been squeezed out of their natural looks. Marks of struggle, marks of pains and marks of strength and of weakness, shown through the hands, were visible to her eyes. Walking to the desk made her feel like she was heading to the burial of a close relative.

In the face of the doctor, horror bounced around like spasms and she wished she could grab it and throw it away. Sweat dripped senselessly from Dr. Godwin's face. The Mother Matron stopped just in the middle of the room. From that point, a strong smell of blood, urine and iron tickled her nostrils. She stared at the brown table on which Dr. Godwin gave papers of consent to women to sign: the scratching of pen scribbling on paper—signing—signing exits.

Dr. Godwin was a man of mercy, a man who knew how to help the helpless whose ears knew cries, whose yes or no could make or mar an individual's life, whose hands knew how to handle "saving" machines. He was an irascible man of the people. In his sleep, he could help you stop your pains. His praises played around Gasau for a while till it went up into the clouds like a balloon and was burst by the criticisms of many husbands, society and law enforcement that saw him as a threat. Their criticism sent him to the ground. Head in mud: stained, shamed, helpless, he could not walk around again. He started from the bottom and never aimed to reach that fame again. His work fed him and his family and that was what mattered most. His life was a cocktail of two extremes: legal illegality and illegal legality.

"Sit down, please," he requested Mother Matron.

From the right of the room, a woman walked out, waved to the doctor and the Mother Matron and left in a hurry. The woman stumbled on the chair and stood up immediately then stormed out of the room. The doctor smiled.

“That always happens,” he said in the middle of his smile, “stumbling and getting up.”

The Mother Matron looked on.

“What brings you here, Mother Matron? Long time.”

“There is fire on the mountain.”

“There has always been fire on the mountain, mother.”

“The children who left this room have sent me to you.”

“I see. So they have sent you too?”

“What do you mean?”

“I see them.”

“How do you mean?”

She shook her legs and rubbed her arms together at the same time. The doctor’s table was filled with documents and consent forms. Calm as she was, a wild animal moved in her body pushing her thoughts to carry out another assault on the Dr. Godwin.

She had been in this place a couple of months ago and she knew how she held the woman who she accompanied. It was hell. Blood sucked out from a woman’s innards and poured into a rusty bucket that maintained a permanent position under the bed, in the middle of the room, caused her inside to retch. The worst memory was when she returned with the same woman because some parts of the baby were still inside her.

Here she was again in the same room where the bucket of ghosts received guests daily and present with the doctor who was responsible for filling the bucket. She slammed the table and aimed for the doctor’s jugular. The doctor, in defence, moved back and blocked the hand from reaching him. Mother Matron missed her

target. Doctor redressed himself, rubbed his chin and with an air of arrogance said the following words:

“It is best for you to sit and let me tell you the story of life.”

Mother Matron sat down and calmed herself. An angry wave of voice filled her. Regret, hatred and revenge bubbled in her mind.

The doctor watched her like a hunter who knew when a wild snake was about spit venom. He rolled his chair backward in trepidation.

“What have I done to deserve this kind of charge, eh?” The doctor asked.

Documents scattered in air, from the Mother Matron’s first attempt at choking the doctor, dropped on the table and back to their normal positions. The doctor quickly checked if they were in the right tray then faced the Mother Matron again.

“They want you to quit your job.”

“Let me tell you my story.”

“I don’t have all day.”

“For me to tell you the story, I have to allow you listen to the story of others.”

“Others? Where?”

“Just outside, here.”

“Then let’s do it.”

The doctor stood up and put on a white coat. The coat carried colours and stank dangerously of methylated spirits and other disinfectants. Business has been cut short, Doctor Godwin thought, by the rude intrusion of the Mother Matron.

“I would have to disperse those women outside.”

“Do whatever you want to do. But do it fast.”

The doctor walked carefully towards the door and while he walked, he kept turning back to ensure that the Mother Matron was not behind him. While looking

forward and backward, he stumbled on the bed and slammed his face on the bed where he carried out his own art. He fingered his nostril, presented the finger before his own eyes and a flash of redness relaxed on it. He wiped it on his coat.

He arrived at the door safely, opened it and put his head through and announced with a deep but sad voice:

“We are closed. Come back next time.”

“Na god go punish you,” a voice from the waiting room replied, “because you wan fuck now, you go come forget say we dey here dey wait since. Na god go help you. Nonsense.”

The slapping of slippers on the ground, hisses of dismay and the collective murmuring of disappointed women filled the place. One woman stayed behind.

Doctor Godwin walked around to ensure the women left. Chairs were empty and the pictures of Gasau’s government officials on the wall watched him. Doctor Godwin still heard protests of some women from a distance; he tiptoed into the reception area where he saw Mariam with her baby. He said nothing to her. Mariam busied herself with breastfeeding her baby.

The doctor returned into his office and found that Mother Matron had removed one of her galloping horse wrappers and tied it around her breasts. She sat on the table, watched as the doctor opened a drawer by the door, brought out a bunch of keys that he tossed up into the air and caught it with athletic precision.

“Let’s go.” The doctor informed the Mother Matron.

The Mother Matron, like a soldier, jumped on her feet and followed the doctor. She watched as he opened a backdoor by the side of the table that led to another door. The other door was white and presented its full brightness to the eyes of the doctor and the Mother Matron.

The doctor opened the door. From where the Mother Matron stood, she heard murmurs, laughter and deep voices. She coughed and allowed questions run through her mind: what's this place? Will you help me?

The Mother Matron increased her pace to catch up with the doctor. She stumbled forth unto the gathering of men. All of them sitting like the women she had encountered earlier and she could not believe her eyes when she noticed the calibre of men present.

As Mother Matron walked towards the gathering men, they gave her a standing ovation. They clapped until she reached their front, followed by the doctor. The men, all dressed in white kaftans, shook hands, pointed to her then clapped again.

The doctor, however, broke their excitement with his opening speech. "She said they sent her here. I don't know what she wants us to do. As if to say, we have not been facing our own dilemma. One for all?"

"All for one!" They all replied.

"You all know her. I know you all know her. You all know her, that woman who can go to any length to make sure that a life is saved. Now, she is a messenger. Ehn, she said they would not let her be. I would like to ask you whether you would like to tell her your stories."

"Never," a man with tribal marks that looked like the whiskers of a cat voiced

"It is not a problem if you don't want to talk, Abacha." The doctor looked into the crowd searching for a face willing to narrate his story. "Kai, Yerima, would you like to tell her your story? Let's start from there. So that we can all leave this place. For days we have been stuck here and we've been looking, thinking and considering ways to leave this place. It's not a mere thing to see these men of power gathered

here. What would you tell the ancestors when all the elder statesmen of a clan are gathered under a particular tree?”

Five owls perched on an Iroko tree facing the men. A black pot and a bowl filled with kolanut and water were placed in front of the men. Mother Matron watched as they all struggled to decide the first storyteller.

Finally, Yerima was called out; the man with the longest beard in town. He had an insatiable appetite to feed his hungry loins. Young girls avoided him; they made a song about him.

Only if you can save your long thing

Save it and save us from the sting

This and many others we sing

Yerima, the one who pays for us before we are born

Save us from this thorn.

Yerima loved young girls and lured the poor fathers of these girls to release their daughters' hand in marriage to him. Yerima, the richest farmer in Gasau, fathered many dead Seeds. A degenerate gambler was Yerima, an alcohol addict and a lover of cheap prostitutes.

“Yerima, we are still waiting for you to come and tell us your story.”

Yerima moved with swag similar to American rap artists like Puff Daddy. Or was it P.diddy? Diddy or what-is-his-name? The bad boy CEO who sang that song Yerima loved so much *I Need A Girl To Die By*. He got to the front of the sitting men and cleared his throat. Just as he was about to start his story, the men shouted:

“Kolanut! Water! Kolanut! Water!”

Mother Matron watched as Yerima dipped his hand into the pot, brought out a wet kolanut then raised it up. He moved it around for everyone to see before he ate it. As he chewed the kolanut, a crumbling sound echoed and bounced around the ground. Yerima spat a blob of grinded kolanut from his mouth before starting his story.

It was not my fault. Walahi. Not my fault. It started when I was a small boy. It started when I started following my father to the farm. He was a very handsome man and all the women in the village wanted to be with him, they saw him as a trophy to be won. Even the young girls in the village wanted to be with him. Walahi, it was not my fault, father taught me, walahi. Did I say he liked women or women liked him? Forget about that, he was a very wise man. And because he was rich, he knew how to pamper women. Yes! Walahi! And my mother was part of them and she appreciated the way my father took care of her.

“This Yerima has lost his senses. He comes here and bores us with story about his father. What is this nonsense?”

I don't come here to tell you nonsense. A tree does not start to grow from the leaves, walahi. A tree must grow from the roots.

The doctor put his hands in the air to calm the boiling nerves of the gathering men because they have a notorious attitude of shutting stories down. Before the Mother Matron came into their midst, someone had stoned Abacha on his face for talking too long, it had landed on his lip and he lost his front tooth. He kept quiet and paid attention to his swollen lips.

Yerima continued his story.

My father told me for me to be successful I have to go and learn the white man's ways. He saved money and sold his house in order to pay for my university education in the west. When I got there, I found out that the white man didn't honour monogamy because they kept side girls and they did not like polygamy, our own style of marriage. Listen, I've been to parties where married people are allowed to sleep with other married people, walahi.

“This man is mad. Another story! If he can't tell us how the children visited him then he should step down.”

Come and tell your story! Please step forward. Doctor, walahi, I can't go on. What's all this, eh? Talk to them unless I won't continue. It's getting too much, this interference.

Four out of the five owls on the tree flew away and the flapping of their wings sounded like lightning and thunders. The last owl flew and landed in front of the gathered men, near the Mother Matron's leg who ran to a safe position and the men screamed in fright while the doctor maintained his calm.

“When the story stops,” said the doctor, “these birds will hunt us, I've warned you before.”

“Are there birds on the other side of this story?”

“Ask the woman.”

The Mother Matron shook her head in response with her eyes fixated on the night bird. Its brown talons, bright yellow eyes and faded yellow alula were loud characteristics that fascinated Mother Matron.

The doctor mumbled a couple of words to dissuade the bird. “This is my story.”

Those words sent the owl back to the Iroko tree; it flew to the same branch and continued its watch.

“Kola! Kola!” the gathering men addressed the doctor.

You all know my story, the doctor replied.

“We want to hear it again.”

The doctor looked unto the Mother Matron in askance. She waved her hand.

“Ha, you are not allowed to say your story here. You are supposed to listen. Besides, if a woman tells her story here, we’d all die. Mallama Ashante, do you want a seat? Ok. No problems. Abu-Bakr Abdusalam, come and tell us your story. You are known for doing things in short terms.”

Abu-Bakr obeyed like a good child who didn’t want to offend his parents. His hat protected his face from the sun’s harsh light and as he strolled to the front, he put his hands behind his back. First, he went to the pot, took a kolanut, showed it to the people and put it in his mouth and chewed. He began.

I do from back only. From back is the sweetest. One day, my thing mistakenly slid to the front and it was very sweet. So I continued. Days after, I continued and the next thing I knew, she called me and told me that she was pregnant.

“*Who?*”

Ah, Genevieve. This was the same person that told me my thing was too big, the same person who fell in love with the kokomaster while we were dating, then how can I be the father of the child? But because I am a good man and because I love babies, I told her that I’d take full responsibility as the father of the baby.

“*What happened?*”

She spread the news after I warned her not to inform anyone about our secret relationship and the pregnancy. Anyways, I supported her and I was always there when needed but she kept telling people about the coming of the baby. True to God, I don't know what happened. If you see blood! If you see blood! It was too much that it frightened the doctor. What caused it is still in research. They said there was a mould on the clinic's ceiling that gave Genevieve a fever and the simple sickness killed the baby.

Since then, these useless children developed the habit of travelling into my head. They would take me to some place and beat the hell out of me. I told Genevieve about my dreams but she told me to leave my Nollywood nightmares for weak minds and she stopped talking to me. I don't know what to do or where I went wrong. I might have to force her to talk to me. I can't allow these children trouble me alone. Haba!

"How do they do it that?"

Do what?

"Get into your head."

Ah, I don't know o! Everywhere I went; they followed me. In meetings, I behave like a baby; I scream and crawl on tables. Just last week a journalist asked me how I would move the country forward and I said as long as the leaders keep stealing, the country would move forward. The journalists scribbled away as I spoke and mocked me.

I didn't want to say that kind of thing but my mouth lost control. I talked for good one hour even after the journalists left. One day, I went to the club with some fine ladies and promised myself I was going to have one glass of drink only. Hmmm, after the first glass, I began to order more glasses and drank until I got drunk then I

took my clothes off. I went naked and people ran away from me. Next day, sunlight struck me in the middle of the head and I woke up. The club's security guard told me I was shouting, falling and swearing. If not for my connections, I would have been banned from the club. I want to kill these children! I have tried but I failed. What is the way out doctor?

“How did you try killing them?”

I stopped them from entering my thoughts and pretended that I was happy daily. It didn't work. The more I tried, the more they exposed my weaknesses. The other day I visited University of Massachusetts, America to give a talk on “Global Business and the 21st Century Issues” and there they were, the useless children. They entered my mouth. Imagine the things I said that day. I said Nigeria would never be free from imperialist schemes and Nigeria would have another military head of state soon. I would never say these things even at gunpoint. After that, I came to the doctor. This can't continue!

“Can we ask the man questions now?”

The doctor took two steps forward and three steps backward with folded hands. Before the doctor responded to their question, their hands pierced the air, faces marked with queries pressed their looks forward and their hearts boiled with curiosity.

“You there,” pointed the doctor, “what's your question?”

“Are the children still coming?”

“Yes. They would be here forever. The onus is on us to pacify them or kill them.”

“How can you pacify or kill what you don't see.”

“That's my dilemma. Is that not why we are here?”

Silence.

Mother Matron asked, “what have you done to ensure the Seeds don’t come again? A new way of doing things can stop them?”

“I cannot answer that kind of question,” Abu-Bakr said as he began walking to his seat. “I have said my own story and that’s that.”

The doctor clapped and the gathering men joined him in his praise exercise. They clapped for good thirty seconds while the Mother Matron watched in silence. We hunger for more, a voice in Mother Matron spoke. Don’t stand there and do nothing. I am not here to beg anyone to narrate his story but everyone must tell his story.

Soft murmurs bounced from lips to ears. The wind pirouetted around the trees and bowed to the Iroko trees, which shed colourful leaves on the men’s laps. The four owls returned silently.

Mother Matron moved to the front where other the storytellers spoke from, she looked at the gathered men but they talked loudly and some hissed when they noticed she stood before them. Like a tout intoxicated with a mix of marijuana and some cups of paraga, she slammed her message on the men.

“Look here, these jokes must stop! Now!”

“What do you want with us, woman?”

Gusau is empty! The city is divided into two! I think we all know the cause! Their second coming would be worse than any other coming! All this laughing and arguing won’t stop them. Your stories might be your saving grace.

“Chai, walahi, I never hear any woman wey speak fire like this. Abacha, na your turn to tell the story now.”

Abacha, the man with the cat whiskers, buried his head in between his laps. Seconds ticked. Heads turned to him. The owls hooted.

Doctor screamed, “Abacha! Get over here!”

Abacha stood up slowly and marched across the sea of legs on his way to the front. His tribal marks put a permanently sad look on his face and made his smile appear like a frown.

Abacha took the kolanut from the pot, put it in the air and ensured that everyone saw him before putting it in his mouth. He scanned the crowd with his shy eyes and bit his lips before starting.

I love *frostitutes*. Shege! Show me a Hausa man that doesn't. As a matter of *pact*, that's what would kill me. Oh, yes, I love children. Shege! I love them too much. I have seven sons and three daughters! Look, I don't know why I should be under their surveillance. I don't know why they targeted me. The other day, one of them came to me and told me what I loved most would kill me. Imagine! I wondered what my crime was. I really don't understand why I am here. Why am I here? This type of thing made me kill people when I was alive.

“How do you mean?”

I take no nonsense. I have sent my spirit to fight them but...I am not scared of them and neither am I scared of losing my life.

“Ehn?”

He replied with a shrug of the shoulder.

I am frustrated, doctor, I am. I don't want to be in the court of Seeds.

Abacha ended his speech, fell to the ground and wept. The doctor went to Abacha, held his left ear, knelt and whispered into it. Abacha vibrated and increased his weeping. He hugged the doctor then cried on his shoulders and stopped weeping abruptly. Abacha raised his head and a standing ovation followed. He got up, dusted his knee and trudged, with his head bowed, to his seat.

Mother Matron watched the drama unfold. The ovation amused her. This man? She shook her head. She particularly remembered how this man killed a famous female journalist who spoke up for hungry and dying children. This Abacha who killed an Ogoni man because he prevented international companies from exterminating his community. This man murdered university students at various locations. True to his story, he loved prostitutes, Mother Matron thought. One newspaper's report stated that, one of the prostitutes gave him six Viagra pills that he drank at once, his phallus stood for straight twelve hours and for those hours he fucked them. The prostitutes from India applied brave sex tricks and entertained him with their rugged waists. By 4:30am, Abacha retired to his bed and two hours later, he collapsed but his tool never went down. Till today, people referred to him as the man whose rising centre would never fall.

The King of the Space spoke to the Mother Matron, "impatience has engulfed our head and our waiting has burst. We want to visit with full force."

"Forgive them." Mother Matron replied.

The doctor watched from a safe distance and allowed a moment's breath before announcing the next raconteur: Babangida.

Babangida's byname was Maradonna. He knew how to negotiate his way out of any situation and most importantly, knew how to talk the venom out of snakes. He was a degenerate gambler and brought this habit to the issues of life. His tongue's

capabilities were similar to the skills of the wonderful Argentine footballer that scored against England in 1986 with the Hand of God. How can a man's tongue be compared to football skills? He stepped forward and declared that one of the kids had written to him and he was here to read the letter. Eyes were attentive and ears remained watchful.

Maradonna, the man from Minna, revealed his gap-tooth and his golden molars. He brought out his golden glasses while the men and the Mother Matron watched. Like a man struck with mild madness, he ran to the bowl filled with kolanuts, picked one, showed it to the crowd and put it in his mouth. He chewed differently. He smiled and chewed then chewed and smiled then brought out the letter. Woo-woo-woo, the owls' staccato rhythm ricocheted around as Babaginda prepared to read the letter. He cleared his throat before he starting:

Former father,

May you live long! Long enough to witness the son you created. Long enough to notice that you are a good and bad father. Ina son ki baba! Letter comes from me. Yes. You remember me?

No need to remember. So make I tell you now, na so we go dey communicate. You dey Facebook? If you dey make you add me. I dey twitter. If not, make you dey call. No dull.

Sincerely,

From anywhere

Pikin.

"Did you respond?"

How person go reply to letter wey no get address? See this man. Letters full everywhere. Even when I moved into Aso Rock, they still managed to send their messages. In my nightmares, they call me the man of letters because they send me letters. Fellow brothers but we have to address this embarrassment.

“Has this man said anything relevant? This is all prose. Give poetry. Short and straight to the point.”

I like to dribble. I like children. Yes, I have plenty. I have not done anything. Like Abacha, I stay on my own and they come to me. When I try to sleep they wake me up and when I try to stay awake they bring sleep to me. If only I know what I did. I have set up different charities to pacify them, for where, eh nor work! It is becoming unbecoming, and my dear brothers, I put it to you that if we don't do anything now, they would destroy us. Doctor! Doctor! Doctor! How many times have I called you?

“Three times.”

They say you know how to heal people. Prove it. It is becoming too much. I have said my own, if this help doesn't come on time, eh...wahala go start. Our unity would be broken. Kai, before I forget, this same children set my wife up some years ago, they were the ones who put some drugs in her bag that made some people call her and my family drug dealers. As...

The doctor cut him off abruptly. “We've heard you, Babaginda. We've heard you. Please, go back to your seat. Our last speaker is bubbling with words. The words have choked him so much that if he doesn't spit them out, he might explode.”

Babaginda returned to his seat.

“It is coming,” the King of Seeds told the Mother Matron. “It is coming. I can smell it coming.”

“It’s coming, it is coming!” the Mother Matron screamed as she ran in circles.

The men looked at the Mother Matron as she tried to control her loose mouth by holding her lips and stop her cyclical runs by walking slowly. A loud humming escaped from the side of her lip and the movement continued in varying speeds. She put her hands in her mouth and held her tongue and she jumped on the floor to halt the movement. Eyes asked questions and ears watched the incident. The struggle continued. Words dropped intermittently from her mouth. She heard the King of Seed’s laughter and the fearful giggling of other Seeds.

“Before I go: a ti mo ohun ti a ti wa ni n ɕe. O ti wa ni nbọ. I repeat: anyị maara na ihe anyị na-eme. ọ na-abjia. Yes, we know what we doing. It is coming. Tell them mun san abin da muke yi. Shi zai dawo.”

And with that, the King of Seeds left Mother Matron. Her tongue settled and her legs calmed.

“Wow! Wow! Wonders shall never cease! Back to the matter at hand! Let us, abeg, welcome, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu, the hero of our times. Clapping is needed. This man loves fame.”

The men stood up and followed the doctor’s admonition.

Odumegwu wore a different kind of clothing. His was customised khaki clothes, neatly starched and ironed. Every corner of his shirt revealed a meticulous attention to ironing and his trousers’ gators were as sharp as razor. He shook the ground as he trooped to the front. Green, yellow and red leaves shivered to their fall, splashing the air with their colours, as this man presented himself. His uncombed hair and unshaven beards made him look like a hungry lion. Odumegwu was born angry.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

He reached the front and tried to talk straight without following the ritual.

“Kolanuts? Bah!” he hissed. “Propagating the despicable power of these kolanuts cloaks the real narrative. The union of men is held by unique factors. This is a lesson for humanity. Following rituals that have been set by some mistaken human or mistaken gods is to engage in injudiciousness. In that light, I refuse to masticate this kolanut or to taste the collective cancer placed in this pot by dipping hands.”

An owl flew down from the tree. Very close to Odumegwu.

“Kolanuts! Kolanuts! This man has killed us.”

“The so-called kolanut would not touch my mouth. No. I disagree to anything that is forced. I disregard common beliefs. No. I wouldn’t go against my personal philosophy. No. I hold the belief that all men have the right to believe what is right!”

“What’s wrong with this one?”

“Leave him alone. Grammar teacher.”

Odumegwu did not notice the presence of the bird by his side. He continued his speech. His attention was drawn when the owl pecked his black shiny shoes.

“Kolanut! Before the other birds fly down, please Mr. Werin-be-your-name, eat kolanut.”

Odumegwu kicked the owl with his right leg, which sent the owl into the middle of the gathered men. They dispersed temporarily and watched, with surprise, how the bird flew back to Odumegwu’s leg and how two owls descended from the tree and landed on his head. The owls on his head pecked his face and scratched his head while the third bit his right leg. Odumegwu struggled to free himself but the birds overpowered him.

“Kolanut! Eat the kolanut!”

He staggered to the pot of kolanuts blindly and when he dipped his hand into the pot, the birds returned to the tree.

“See this kind wahala wey this man put himself for. Instead make he go to business as we they do am, see wetin come happen to am.”

“Na so the people from their side dey do. Na them dey do I too sabi.”

Odumegwu’s face was filled with contours, blood spots and missing strands of hair both on his head and beard. The birds gave him a surgical look Dr. Godwin could not achieve. His chin and cheeks were swollen while feathers of struggle dangled in his beard and stayed on his unshaved head. His shirt was turned into a rag. Scratching his head, ashamed and feeling defeated, Odumegwu attempted to walk away when everyone including Mother Matron warned him.

“They are coming again!”

He chewed the kolanut and swallowed. His face twisted to a discoloration of black and red. But he started.

I am a rich man. Born to a rich father. I schooled somewhere in England. I was a very brilliant student. I read everything on politics. While I was reading, something caught me.

“Story, please.”

I can see that we have an impatient lot here, Doctor. I will do things at my own pace. I cannot stand the fact that some toadies here are trying to control me. That’s an abomination.

“The birds are watching.”

Let them watch. As I was saying before Obasanjo rudely interrupted me.

“How did I interrupt you? When did I interrupt you?”

You know what you did. After my study at the Queen’s land, I returned home and what do I see? I see that my people have been relegated to the lowest ladder of the society. People shat on them and treated them like water closets. They were killed.

Maimed. Decimated. And I decided that those act must be pooh-poohed. And in order to stop that, I decided to form an army to fight the people oppressing my people. History taught me how to do it. I gave my people weapons and got their support and dedication.

“How did that affect anything? How did the children come to you?”

I am going to get to the destination of the story.

“Oga, abeg, stop wasting our time. We don tey for here.”

This culture of interrupting the speaker while he is speaking is rather embarrassing. Can't I take my time to explicate the atrocities cast on us by this malicious milieu we've created? Why does anyone think he has to shatter my words into pieces by jumping into my mouth?

Laughter dropped from the men's mouth then rolled on the floor to meet Ojukwu who joined them. His loud guffaws ignited a loud flapping of the owls' wing. An immediate silence killed their elated mood.

“Oya, continue, abeg o! Before them come ground. But, make you try knack the main point.”

Ok. So it happened that the people at the helm of affairs banned all aid coming from the Red Cross. I was forced to contact the United Nations to mediate a cease-fire. I would not have kowtowed if...

“Oyinbo ti po ju oga, ema kpa wa.”

...If the children were treated, if women and men who looked up to me got adequate medical care. Shut up! You know it, Obasanjo. You know we were destined for greatness. But, you and your Hausa friend did not allow me to succeed. Here in heaven, I will get you.

“Alakori, what are you saying to me? I have said it before! This man is not well.”

“Ojukwu, please, conclude. Tell us how the children have come to you.”

Very well, doctor. Everywhere I go, these children of red, black and green stalk me. They said I killed their children, they said I killed their grandfather and grandmother. They said, I, Odum-egwu aka Marcus Garvey of Nigeria killed his own brother. How? I don't know. They attack me. Everywhere in the newspapers, on the Internet, and they tell me that I am wicked. Even their unborn children know about me and before they come to earth they abuse me. This ignoble act must stop. They should allow me rest in enjoyable peace. I made history. Let them make their own history. Let them allow me rest. The Doc! The Doc! Please tell them to allow me rest. I cannot take it anymore. It is too much. I fought for them. I used my life, I mean, my life to fight on their behalf.

Ojukwu buried his face in his palm, exposed the fresh bald space incorporated by the owls on his head, blood spots dotted it, the contours—in various shapes—added to the beautiful ugliness he presented to his audience. After a while of sniffing, shedding unseen waters from his eyes and blowing his nose into his hand, he melted into the midst of the men. Nobody noticed him again.

The doctor appeared in their front and dished out a hot pensive look to the men. He scratched his forehead hard as if that act can bring out words from his mouth then he scratched his jaw until words began to spill from his mouth.

“Well, well, well, my people, you have seen what they have to say. You have heard them. What can I say? The story speaks for itself. Mother Matron I think you can see what your children are doing to men who have made history? I think you can

see how not to pay back your elders? Don't or can't these children obey the call of their father's land by allowing sleeping old men lie? What do you have to say Mother Matron?"

The Mother Matron kept quiet. She looked at the men then smiled and they all smiled back. From where she stood, the shape of the smiling men turned into a giant snake and she saw it swallow eggs and spit out bones, she heard it hiss. Trepidation caught her knees. Whether the image was in her head, she could not tell. But, she saw the pink fat tongue, the glistening, slippery skin presented its black colour to her eyes and also, she saw the eggs jumping from the ground into the mouth of the serpent and witnessed as the brittle bones littered on the heads of the smiling men. She closed her eyes and opened it again then their smile turned into a leopard with no spot, chasing her. She screamed and tried to run but she remained on the same spot. Her shoulders felt like there were six bags of cement on them and legs felt like two bags of rice have been attached to them. She stood still.

"What is going on, doctor?" Abu-Bakr spoke, "Walahi, I don dey fear. Abi them don come here?"

Mother Matron is going through her own ordeal my people. She is the only one who can tell us what exactly she wants to hear and what exactly those lost minds want. We can only continue to bear the embarrassment they gift to us. Abi no be so?

"Na so!"

Like a bird released from its cage, Mother Matron flew away from their midst. She did not feel her legs on the ground. Her movement was fast and even when she tried to control her movement by stopping abruptly, she was pushed a little bit further by secret hands. The watching men opened their mouths as if they had been trained to do that as they watched. The Mother Matron's wrapper fell to the ground showing

another piece of faded brown clothing. She didn't turn back. She kept moving and disappeared into the atmosphere that was Gasau.

"Everybody is crazy fa," Abacha's voice ricocheted around, "but doctor, you have not told us your story? This kind wayo no good. Haba docki-ta? Tell us."

The doctor drank in the temporary event of running Mother Matron and then proceeded to the front of the men. He studied them as they protested that he had not told them his own story. His eyes focused, his memory shattered and the explanation of the present situation seemed to have sat on his lips as they shook dangerously.

"Dokta they fear to tell us how the children they deal with am," Atiku spoke up and faced the other men, "how can we come and meet someone who is not experienced?"

"Who tell this one say the doctor no get experience for the matter?" Obasanjo's voice cut in.

Suddenly, a high pitch of protest emanated from the gathering men.

"Doctor! Doctor! Doctor!"

The heart to narrate his story was there. The Seeds have tormented his life. They have made him lose everything he loved the most. They have poisoned his children and made his wife leave. The Seeds have made him lose his license. He remembered how one time he wanted to save a woman from dying by telling her Seed in her was would kill her and the only option was for the Seed to be killed, the woman wailed and called him a wizard. Then after some days, the woman died. The husband of the woman stormed into the doctor's office and claimed that the doctor had been the cause of his wife's death. Machete in hand and with anger sitting on his right hand he tried to strike the doctor but he missed his prey, fell to the ground and broke his hand. It was sheer luck that Doctor Godwin escaped that death. But the number of

Seeds that visited his dream that night made him wonder why they had come to him in multitudes.

They came when he was trying to make love to his beautiful wife, Lovette. It was doctor's ritual to come back from work, help his children with their school assignments, clean the house and proceed to the room where his wife would be waiting. He was always eager to meet Lovette.

On this day, however, something he had not imagined happened to him. When he attempted to make sweet love to her, his tool failed him. He couldn't understand what was happening. The wife stroked it for a long period of time and nothing happened. When he laid his back on his white satin sheets it was then that a loud voice streamed into his head.

“We own your body.”

He thought the voice was from the neighbour's house but was not sure. He stood up to look outside the window only to find some goats digging the earth for food. He studied them for a while. The way the goats played amazed him, they played like they were fighting, head to head they would hit each other, bleating and bleating.

The voice came again, “We own your body.”

He turned to ask his wife whether she said anything. Lovette looked at him with a set of eyes that told tales of disappointment. He saw the look and felt disappointed with himself that he even asked that type of question. For almost two minutes he stood there contemplating what had happened and then his animal stood again and for that split second he rushed to his wife and before he jumped on her the same thing repeated itself: it slumbered.

That was the beginning of his ordeal. That was how they gained space into his house. This happened consistently for straight seven days and Lovette began to

suspect that the husband was cheating on her. Lovette employed private investigators to find out if the husband was having an affair with other women. Mr. Ima, The private investigator, fat on the face but lean on the body provided her with evidence of his hourly movement by bringing pictures of the doctor's daily move. From all indications, the doctor was all about his business.

Ultimately, Lovette told her mother, the prayer warrior from one of the churches in Gasau. Her mother told her that she should not worry that she would pray and fast for thirty days and speak-in-tongues within those periods. After thirty days of doing this she came to the conclusion that something was wrong with the doctor and the Holy Ghost revealed to her that there were some forces from the land of the dead that were controlling the doctor. The only advice that the mother gave to Lovette was to leave immediately before the evil spirits contaminated her and her children.

On one Saturday without saying any word, Lovette left the doctor. He came back from work and found that she had left with his children. He ransacked the house as if his family was a piece of toothpick hiding somewhere in the house and more annoying was the fact that he didn't know where and when Lovette with his children moved. He called her on her mobile phone but his efforts were to no avail. He drove to the mother's house and found out that the mother too had left town. He took to drinking.

Through all this, the voice kept whispering, "we own you."

Even worse was when on a Monday morning, the director of the Gasau Medical Centre, barged into his office holding some papers under his armpit saying that the Doctor should pack his things and leave. The government, the director claimed, charged him for carrying out illegal abortions and increasing the number of maternal mortality cases in the state.

“How do you mean?” he had asked the director.

The director laughed loudly revealing his set of white teeth and flinging the papers on the table for the doctor to see. Doctor Godwin studied the papers that were put before his eyes for a while and his eyes lit up as he studied every page. He kept screaming “My God!”

The director had looked at him and said, “I don’t talk anymore before, your professionalism is not ordinary. You see as God works. Please, at your own convenient time, make you pack your things and leave the hospital.”

Doctor Godwin did not say any word. Things got worse when he got to his house: he found a letter from the Ministry of Health stating that his medical license had been revoked because of “his questionable acts and character.” He took the letter and headed straight to the ministry’s building complex located on Tundun Wada road.

The minister, luckily, was in the office. He welcomed Doctor Godwin by hugging him and then later showing him a seat which Doctor Godwin sat on. The minister offered him a glass of water and then returned to his seat.

“Ehn, why are you here?”

“You and I know that this is wrong,” Doctor Godwin said waving the letter “Very wrong.”

“What is that you are holding?”

“A letter stating that my license has been revoked.”

“Talk true! Lakuli!” the minister’s voice ran around the room like a cockroach running away from danger. “Make I see.”

Doctor Godwin threw the letter to the minister who grabbed the letter and studied it for a while. The minister raised his head and looked at the doctor.

“Chei, na my signature they there. Why this government be like this?”

Doctor Godwin did not know what to say. He sipped the water that was placed before him slowly. That was not the answer he wanted to hear. He wanted an explanation.

“What’s going on?”

The minister stood up from his seat. He went to the shelves and studied the title of the books staring at him. He dusted his white shirt and went back to his seat. For a while, he watched Doctor Godwin and adjusted the collar of his shirt.

“What do you want me to tell you? Everything that you need to know is in the letter.”

“This is preposterous.”

“I’ll tell you the meaning of preposterous. You went to help the wrong child.”

“Which child? Which child?”

“You have gone to operate the wrong child.”

“This is not enough explanation. I need to know why my license is revoked?”

“You see, Doctor Godwin, you treated the wrong person.”

“Minister, damn it!”

“Look, all your shouting would not help you here. If you are looking for whom to pour your senseless anger on then I’d suggest you leave my office now. I am not really in the mood for all this kind of nonsense. I think you hear me so. See the door!”

“I’m not leaving this place till you give me a good reason.”

“We respect that Mr. Godwin...”

“Doctor...”

“Na you come sabi...”

“I’m not leaving this place. What’s the meaning of all this? I have given my life to this ministry and I think I deserve some answers.”

“Answers no dey for you, my dear friend. This time all I can say is for you to move on and find your bearing. There are many other things you can do. For example, you can open a Chemist shop and I promise I can fund you, as I know that you are a really hard worker. I can help you make your dream come true.”

“Absolute crap, minister,” said Doctor Godwin as he hits the glass of water to the floor, “absolutely unbelievable.”

“Ehn, wetin be your name for there?”

“Sah!” a voice from the corridors flowed into the minister’s office.

“One mad man they for here. Call security for me abeg!”

Doctor Godwin stood up, jumped on the table and grabbed the minister’s shirt. He squeezed the man’s chest so hard that he almost pulled the skin off.

“Yeparipa! Ye! Ye!”

The door to the minister’s office swung open and two hefty soldiers holding assault rifles in their hand stormed in and used the butt of their guns on the back of Doctor Godwin. He released his tight grip on the minister’s body and was thrown outside the office. He could hear from the minister’s office some instructions:

“Never ever allow that man to step into this premises again, he doesn’t work here again! Una dey hear me so?”

It was then that he realised that he had come to the end of the road as a gynaecologist.

He lived on the benefits and bonuses that were sent to him by the ministry. He developed a new habit, which was going to every bar in town and telling anybody about his ordeal with the Ministry of Health.

“Look,” he would always start with that word. “Look at how the people of this country treat their best brain. Look at how they have turned my life into something shameful. Look at how they have messed with my career. What is my crime? Look at what I do; I help people to make sure that they are saved and to make sure that they deliver their babies well. Look at how they now treat me. Even when they know that there were not enough facilities in the hospital they still expected me to do good work. And all the while this was what I did without complaining. I made sure I did my job. Look, this is what I get for been a faithful and patriotic citizen of this country. Look, if I did like my mate that are scattered around Saudi Arabia, Dubai and the Americas I would have made a lot of money. But look, I said to myself that no, no, I want to help my people and this is how they treat me. What message are they sending to the rest of the children? Look at how everything went.”

That’s how the doctor ended up getting the name LOOK.

Every bar he went into, there was always a gathering crowd willing to listen to his laments. His biggest fans were located in the Officers’ Mess near Gidan Derin. Every night he went there. The Officers’ Mess was the spot where military personnel were allowed to drink to stupor, listen to loud music and flirt with different women in town. Doctor Godwin added to the entertainment. He bought a megaphone and carried it everywhere he went. Laughter and claps welcomed him anytime he walked into the Mess. After drinking two bottles of big stout, Doctor Godwin would start his story and as usual would start with the word “look.” As days went by, he ran out of money and went broke.

He wandered from house to house, begging for food like an almajiri. For six days straight, he went on like this, feeding off handouts. The voice would say, once in

a while: “We own you.” And, sometimes the voice would turn to a warning, “You are going to court.”

In the market place, as people busied themselves with selling wares and attending to customers, Doctor Godwin came with his mega phone and stood at the entrance of Tudun Wada market to tell his story. “Look at what they have done to me.” On this particular day, a woman screamed such that her voice scared the rusty roofs of market sheds. Every individual in the market place ran to where the scream came from and doctor dropped his megaphone and also joined the crowd in pursuit of that scary voice. A woman had fainted on the floor and was bleeding. Women and men gathered, children who had been sent to hawk sweet sugar cane, locally made groundnut sweets and ori gathered around the woman, whispering, hissing and cussing.

“Give way to the doctor.” shouted Doctor Godwin.

The people parted like the biblical red sea to allow him. Doctor Godwin bent over and laid his hands on the woman to check her pulse. He examined her body by rubbing her legs and checking her temperature by putting his hand on her head.

“Ha,” he started, “this woman needs to be taken to the hospital immediately. She is still alive but she needs to be checked and if not, this market would witness the death of someone.”

A fat woman, with dangerous tribal marks on her face emerged from the watching crowd, readjusted her wrapper then asked, “How you take know fa?”

Doctor Godwin looked at the woman, surprised first of all at the woman’s deep voice and second that anyone in the market place would question his expertise.

“Look,” he started while everyone burst into laughter, “because I be doctor.”

The woman looked around before replying and joining in the temporary laughter that pierced the incident “Okay, why we dey wait na. Make we help the woman go hospital.”

Immediately, the woman made that announcement, some men who had been looking at the incident lifted the woman from the ground and put her high in the air then took her away. The fat woman then asked Doctor Godwin to follow her as the crowd dispersed.

Amidst the stalls demarcated by hastily looking bricks, the muddied grounds of the market and the battling voices of customers and sellers, the fat woman swung her hips slowly. She walked like the whole market was placed on her back and Doctor Godwin watched as everyone greeted the woman.

Occasionally, she would ask a meat seller, “When you go pay your contribution?” And a reply would follow: “On Friday, I go send my boy to you.” Of which the woman would reply, “If I know see am by Friday you go know say me and you go enter the same trouser be that.” Then she would carry on walking. She would play with children on their mother’s lap and carry on walking as if she had no worry in life.

The doctor followed without saying a word while carrying his megaphone. They reached an open space located at the rear end of the market place and in front of it stood two men whose muscles stood firm on their bodies and they greeted “mama, na you we dey live for.” The woman, in slow movement, raised her hands up in response and one of the men drew out a bench on which the woman sat on. Doctor Godwin watched all the drama and envied the woman’s power. For a split second, he wished he could be the owner of this kind of power and he enjoyed the way everyone

respected her here. There was a sexiness that he loved in the respect she commanded.

It turned him on. He fell in love with her immediately.

With her deep, guttural voice, she started, “You be doctor shey?”

Doctor Godwin nodded in response.

“Which kind doctor you be?”

“I am a gynaecologist.”

“Which one be that one again, abeg speak English wey I understand.”

“I dey look after women wey get belle and na me they tell them how them go born.”

“Ok. Ok. Na people like you dey kill all those women for our different hospitals abi. I don hear about una matter.”

“Me. I no dey kill. I dey help.”

“Why you come dey streets? If you be doctor why e come be say na for road you dey practise your own matter? Abi you be doctor for mouth?”

The men standing guard giggled and Doctor Godwin watched their faces turn into pure rock as they laughed. It made it look like they were about to pass hard excreta. Their faces looked like masks made in the dark by an artist whose sole aim is to scare his audience.

“Why una dey laugh,” the woman turned to the men, “abi una don see doctor wey dey practise for street?”

“No ma. At all.”

“Wetin come be your story so?”

“Ah,” began Doctor Godwin “my story long well. I be doctor for ministry for town. I don’t know what happened but them just say make I no come work again.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that, walahi, just like that.”

“That no good o.”

“Na so the country be. People like us them no like us. People like us wey dey help people them no see say we they help the country. Na the ones wey dey kill the country na him them like.”

“So wetin be your plan like this?”

“I nor get plan. I just dey protest they make people they see say wetin government do me no good.”

The woman looked into the market square that presented its chaotic colours, the going and coming of customers, the multiple sheds, and the streets designed by litter. The empty pure water sachet, the peels of oranges lying around, the torn newspapers which has served as plates for buns and puff-puff seller floated in the air while the loud blaring of Indian music added voice to the scheme of things. The woman breathed deeply like someone satisfied at her work and delicately stroked the strand of hair positioned under her chin then she struggled to place her right leg over the left leg. Every attempt to cross her leg failed.

“What if we start our own clinic?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“They be you be doctor. You sabi to treat woman, you know how to make them born.”

“Yes. I have been doing it for the past how many years now.”

“Listen to me well, I know like to dey hear all this grammar wey you dey blow for my ear.”

“I sabi well.”

“I get money. Na me get this market. For thirty years, na me they control am.”

“Impressive.”

“Yes. Me sef impressive.”

“Make we form our own clinic. But na only woman you go dey treat. You know say for this country, people no to too send the matter of woman. Na only man, man, man matter them they look.”

“That one need many things, madam. We need to get license to do this kind job. We need make ministry approve am. We no fit just open clinic like that.”

The men laughed again and this time the woman joined the men in laughing. Doctor Godwin felt bad for making that kind of pronouncement. He wished, above all things, that he didn't say anything and that he thought properly before he spoke. The laughter made him feel uncomfortable. The woman's laughter moved her seat and when she stopped laughing the muscled men stopped too. The sun in the skies made the air humid, and sent flies to look for shades to cool their wings; some flies made it to where the four of them deliberated on the matter at hand. Doctor Godwin watched as the men sent them away.

“If one fly touch me for here,” the woman voiced, “una don die be that.”

“Lai, lai,” said one of the men as he swiped the air with the rag he was holding.

“Doctor, wetin be your name sef?”

“Godwin.”

“Godwin, make you think for the matter. As you no get work and as he be like say you don dey mad, he better make you take this one start your sef up.”

It was true. Doctor Godwin thought that he was going mad. And that everything he knew about gynaecology was leaving him. He wanted, very much, to practise medicine till he died. That was his gift. He had no other skill and here was an

opportunity presented to him by a stranger and how could he turn it down. Also, he knew that it was hard to practise without a licence. And here, under the unfriendly embrace of the day's sun an opportunity presented itself. An opportunity to do what he enjoyed.

“Make I go think about this matter. Tomorrow I go come give you answer about wetin I feel.”

The woman stood up from the seat and cleared her throat. Doctor Godwin noticed as she struggled to stand up.

“Tomorrow no dey this matter. I want answer now. If you go now, make you no come back to this place again.”

The woman made some sounds of “hmmm” and “oomph” as she stretched and loud cracks of her bone pierced Doctor Godwin's ear. The guards kept chasing the flies away with their dirty clothes.

“What about space? What about equipment? What about all the things wey we need for the clinic? No be small thing for man to manage this kind of business.”

“All that one na small matter. Make you no worry yourself with that. I get house everywhere and for the equipment make you bring list of everything wey you want and I go make sure say everything dey available. And all the money wey we go dey make you go take thirty per cent and me myself, I go take seventy per cent.”

Doctor Godwin still standing on the same spot as if held by glue, dropped his megaphone on the floor to relieve himself of the weight, scratched his head and chased two to three flies trying to enter into his ears. He stepped backward and stretched.

“What have I got to lose? No problems. When you want make I bring list of everything wey we need for the place?”

“Make you bring am today for evening for here.”

Doctor Godwin departed. As he headed into the middle of the market, he felt dirty and unclean. His body itched him, he felt like having a shower. He felt like shaving his beards. Market women and men busied themselves by shouting out their wares, in one shop he saw a man frying acara and attending to a customer at the same time. There was happiness on the face of these ordinary traders that he envied. That same happiness began to climb unto his mind. He felt new. Happiness floated in the midst of the chaotic market activities. Dr. Godwin crossed over to the bookstore to get a pen and a paper.

“Na you wey save that woman? You know say she dey alive?” The bookstore owner asked.

“I nor know o. How you take hear?”

“Na wetin everybody for market dey talk.”

“That’s good.”

The man walked closer to him and whispered into his ears.

“Really?” He asked in shock.

“Yes, walahi.”

Doctor Godwin proceeded to scribble the things he needed with the Bic biro and paper the bookstore owner provided. For a moment, he wrote crazily and studied what he wrote. Everything was good.

“Make you keep the pen. You go need am.”

“Thank you.”

Doctor Godwin ran to meet the woman, his new boss, but saw a long queue. Men and women passed money to the fat woman, which she passed to one of her

guards who counted and recorded the payee. Dr. Godwin's love for the woman rose again as he studied her. As he turned to leave, he heard the woman's voice:

"Doctor, make you bring the thing."

Doctor Godwin found himself in front of queue and passed the paper. The woman opened it immediately, studied it for a while and nodded then nodded again.

"Tomorrow make you come collect the money," the woman said, looking at the people before her. "Tomorrow, we go start hospital for this Gasau and this hospital na only women he go dey treat. No man fit go the hospital. This hospital na for the treatment of women and for the avoiding of all the bad things wey dey happen to we women for this part of town."

There was applause from the people gathered here and the fat woman shooed Doctor Godwin away. That was how he started the clinic that would save lives and bring about bad dreams.

How could he tell the men such a story? He pondered on the possibilities and knew their impatience. If he proceeded to tell them what and how it happened they would lose their respect for him. Instead, he broke into a song.

Old roger has walked the town

The town has walked on old roger

Old roger knows no town

Walked on old roger this town

The crown on old roger from another town

"Which one be this?" a voice cut him short.

“If you no fit tell us story, make you tell us how we go fit tackle these pickins them wey dey disturb us. I think you hear us so?”

“I hear una,” the doctor replied.

The birds screamed in a way that scared the men. They thought that their impatience was another story to the birds. When Abacha tried to step to the front again, the screaming increased then doctor raised his hands to stop him. Others didn't notice Abacha's attempt to come to the front. That's how things were in this part.

PART 2

Preamble

Una don hear the tori na. Wetin una think? Shey the doctor dey craze? Abi the children for yonder don do too much? Abi una think say the Mother Matron don dey craze. E no come be like say the matter go settle? Tori come dey become worse. Nobody know wetin go come happen to the women wey dey wait for white woman from another side. Them still they there. In short, make we follow go find them for where them dey. Make we no tey they nack another story for here. No time!

The breeze presented the Mother Matron. They didn't notice her when she appeared in their midst. She appeared, it seemed in their front, blocking their view, blurring their reality. Mother Matron's face was covered in dust and water, smelling of the road. The quietness among the women only showed that they could not understand how she arrived.

“Stand here!” the Mother Matron mentioned.

The old woman obeyed.

“Who knows Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan here?”

Some hands went up.

“Is the story of the woman not similar to what happened to Zainab?”

“Do you know the story or not? I am not here to talk about comparisons. What is it that you don't understand about what I just said? I want someone to tell us the history of women that existed before us. It must be from the African perspective.”

Rocking boats greeted her words. The women shrieked as they heard the movement of the ship. Heads peered and eyes chased the location of the ship. The ship was still where it was and that gave them a certain solace. The sigh of relief was heavy and they returned to their sitting position.

“I say do you know Efunsetan? Queen Amina?”

“You are calling all the heroes from our past. What has that got to do with what we are going through?” Mariam asked. “What’s the relevance?”

The Mother Matron turned and looked at the ship that held the White Witch of Calabar. Distance could not let her tell what was going on in the ship. For the sake of explaining her case she would like to tell the women what was going on in the ship. The King of Seeds came into her and she started to speak with a deep voice. The pitch, this time around, was high and it shook the clouds above them because everywhere became dark.

“It is better for you to learn from the women who came before you, before you attend our courts, because the day of reckoning and pain would be bad. You better learn before you come. For we would be asking you why you did not do so many things. We would be asking you why is it that you left us when we needed you the most. You better, if you don’t know your history, say it now.”

Mariam, with trepidation, raised her hand into the sky.

“Yes,” started the Mother Matron, “kini dey?”

“I know the story.”

“Which one? Please, come to the front and tell us the story you know. Come and tell these good-for-nothing people stories. It is not about forming groups and NGOs. Let me tell you something it is more than that. You better wake up!”

Mariam leaped across the women who were seated on the ground while the sea breeze refreshed the air. It is better than any other one they had ever inhaled. They enjoyed it such that the sniffing sounds increased. The Mother Matron placed her hands on her waist and stood akimbo, watching, thinking and hoping that the story Mariam was about to say would be the right one. There have been many fabrications of the story and that was how history was, a string of different tales. Mariam began her tale.

I know all the strong women of our history.

“Please, just tell us their stories and stop wasting time.”

I only know of one and I would tell the story. I will just tell it as I can.

“Who is begging you to tell everything?”

I will tell you the story of the Madam Efusetan of Ibadan. At least her story is related to some of the things we are going through at the moment. It happened long, long time ago in a Yoruba land. Madam Efusetan, rich, proud and in control of the economic activities in Ibadan, had no worry. Every man in the clan respected her and, her voice it was said could make a grown man pee on himself.

“A woman?”

Yes, o. A woman. She controlled everything. She had about two thousand slaves who worked for her and they included men too. Ehn, this is what now happened as I can remember: Madam Efusetan now lost her only child. Her child died during child labour and this made the woman mad. You should have come to see what they said that she did. She took matters into her hand. She abused the gods. She started a war against the society and commanded her male soldiers to bring any credit defaulter to her and she would make sure they were whipped. The death of her inheritor pushed her to do something. They begged and begged her that she should not

allow the death of her daughter take her senses but she did not listen. She made sure cut a man's tongue before feeding him to wild animals in the forest, ha! Ha! It was said that on a day she beheaded thirty soldiers. The oriki of iyalode goes like this:

Efusetan, Aniwura, obirin meta,

Adekaya—o—ja!

Erujeje Tii Feru paleya

Efunsetan okan, Ibadan okan

Abaya-gbangba ti i p Olodumare lejo

Oba oke ko tere dahun,

Efunsetan gbera leya, oloba A lorun.

“Ehe, why are you telling us this kind of story? Ema gba mi?”

I was told to tell. As I was saying, she gathered her own slaves so that they could fight the chiefs at the palace. It was a bloody period.

“So, what is the essence of this nonsensical thing? How are the Seeds involved in this?”

Look at the time that Zainab was pregnant. What did the women in Gasau do? Nothing! They just gathered and argued and argued. Nothing happened. We all watched her as she lost blood and died. We watched as the baby's legs rotate and rotate. We saw as the fleas under the naked sun licked her thighs and what did we do, just shoo them away as if that would stop the pain she was going through.

“Were you there when Zainab died? This woman is a bloody liar.”

I was there, of course. Haba, Mother Matron didn't you see me there? Fatima, didn't you remember seeing me crying that we could not do anything. Ehn, didn't you

hear my cry. Even people in Lagos, who are about eight hundred and fifty-six kilometres from here, heard me when I was crying. Abi, you want me to tell you the story. That one I can tell you in clear details what happened and who made what happened. Although I did not see it with my koro-koro eyes I can sure tell you what happened.

“Oya, tell us what happened.”

In the morning, in the morning...

“In the morning!”

In the morning, Zainab screamed that the time for her child has come. The scream was so loud that china plates in some houses fell to the ground and broke. After the plates, Zainab’s sac broke. Pain came to her like those Yoruba egun-egun whipping children and then every woman in Gidan Derin ran to Mallam Koto’s house to check whether the ears were hearing the right thing. You don’t put hot coal in your mouth and ask the person next to you whether your tongue will get burnt; your mouth cannot ask that kind of question. Zainab cannot ask this kind of question that is why we made our way to Mallam Koto’s house. We knocked and knocked on the gate. The scream came near us. It was as if the scream was laughing at us as we attempted to force the heavy gates open. After several trials, we were able to get inside the compound and there, walahi, there on the ground, we saw Zainab holding the ground as if it was a cloth, crying and turning, shouting and cursing the air that was Gasau. She said God punish God! Walahi, you should have seen her, you should have seen her. It was not an easy thing. Hmmm! The sweat on her face could fill buckets. The fleas hovering in between her legs, it was not an easy thing. It was not an easy thing! Sweat on her head, the sunlight on her face. Zainab stretched her hands to us to help her. We rushed to her like angry soldiers and surrounded her. You should have seen

her! You should have seen her, you should have seen the blood in her eyes, you should have seen how pain sat on her body, and you should have seen how the monster sat on her neck. All she was saying was *hmmm, hmmm, heee, hooo!* It was too much for her. We pitied her. You should have seen how she was looking at us to see if we could remove the pain. She looked at all the women one by one. But we could not do anything. We could only look. Look. Just looking. And the senior wife, what is her name again o, took her GSM phone and called Mallam Koto to come and carry Zainab to the hospital. The woman dropped the phone, shook her head four times like her head was disturbing her neck then went to meet Zainab and cleaned the sweat. Everyone was watching the senior wife as if they wanted to jump into her mind to find out what she heard from the Mallam.

Na so the heads of the women come open. Their ears come be like say e wan swallow everything wey Mariam dey talk. Their heart dey beat no be small. The Zainab story na real thing wey happen o. the matter spread across the whole Zamfara wey be say almost everybody come dey look Mallam Koto like say na crase man. But make we hear how Mariam talk am.

Mallam Koto said that the woman hospital was filled with male doctors only and he would not be able to take Zainab to the hospital at that moment. That's what Fatima told the women. They told Zainab that her husband has instructed that she waited until evening where the female doctor would be around. And...and that's how Zainab stayed on the floor for the whole day waiting for Mallam Koto to come back and take his wife to the hospital. Just imagine what the women were doing? They waited. They waited and watched her in pain. They watched and waited in pain. If they had made any move, you know now, they would have been seen as outlaws. Nonsense. They couldn't use their initiative. Argument. This one say let's take her to

the clinic, another would say, what did the husband tell you, another would say that her hand is not in this kind of matter and that she want to be left alone. That's how they dribble and dribble with the girl's life. You should have seen the way they watched her. They just looked on and on. She b, if they had the power they would have taken her to the clinic. The women cleaned Zainab's face as she struggled between life and death. They tried to encourage her by telling her to hold on and she tried. Sometimes her eyes will open like this and sometimes it will close like that. The men around who heard the cry wanted to come inside but they were reminded of the Ba Shiga sign. They screamed their prayers over the wall. We heard them but Zainab could not cry again because the pain was too much. They watched as Zainab died. My people you wouldn't believe what happened when the husband returned. You wouldn't believe. If I say you should tell me when you think he came nko, what would you say?

"He never came?"

8p.m! That was when he came! Oya, now tell me that if the women have come together to do something would, Zainab die? Would she have suffered that kind of pain? After these stupid NGOs that we watch on NTA or those ones that all those politician's wife like to form would claim that they are giving us money and helping us to face this kind of wahala that happen every day, nothing ever happens. And that's a lie. They don't care about us. They just care about the money that they are going to get. You didn't hear of those women who would go and tell the government that they want to help all the women that are suffering from VVF and when the government approves the money they would go and chop the money. The most annoying one is those governor wives who form groups and charities and say they want to use the proceeds to feed children. And the entire group is in the name of politicking. You

never see them achieve anything. Everything is...This is what I don't get. The thing baffles me when I hear all this kind of thing and it is the same people that their husbands...That day I don't know where I was when the news came but I know when the news came. I was so bitter.

“Are you not one of the wives of Koto?”

Didn't you hear what happened? Didn't you hear? Mother Matron I have told my own side of the story. I have told you what I know and now I would return to my seat. I don't know what to say again. For anything that one says in this gathering they would not be able learn from the story. This gathering reminds me of everything we do wrong.

“Go and sit down jare.”

Na so Mother Matron stop the quarrel wey bin wan happen among the women. She don realise say them don dey vex. She come dey try reason how she go make sure say the matter still remain for where them put am. She come dey try find out how e be say, we get all this kind people wey dey stand up for their own matter and people of this time no dey fit do like that. But the koko of the matter be say, many women for town they form group make them wan take fight the bad bad things wey dey happen for the society. Group they wey dey fight circumcision, another one dey wey say them no want early marriage make e happen. Another group say e no want make vesicovaginal fistula dey happen again and all of these groups for Mother Matron mind no dey do anything, all of them na so so story dem sabi talk, no action. She sef come dey wonder many, many things. Na for inside this wonderment she dey when The King of Seeds come enter her body again. Mother Matron nor no when she come start to dey shake her body like say she get madness. The rest of the women, as them see Mother Matron they do like this come follow am they dance. Them shake their

body until Mother Matron stop. The dance reach about one minute. Mother Matron come ask them to tell another story of the strong woman for past wey them know. Na Fatima na him raise her hand now:

I know about Queen Amina of Zaria. My grandmother told me about her. They told me that she led Zaria to its ascendancy in Hausa land. That from the age of sixteen the woman showed strength and the signs that she was going to be a leader. At this age she was given the title of Magajiya, the overseer. She was given the title because she was caught as a little girl, many moons ago, holding a daga like a warrior. Yes, it was said that it was her mother, Queen Bakwa Turunkwu who inspired her. At the age of sixteen, she was put in charge of business for her mother and she was always doing things like buying of kolanuts and selling goods to the neighbours from the south with so much energy. When her mother died the throne was passed to her. At the aged of thirty-six she was in charge of the whole Kingdom and she became the leading warrior of the Zazzau Kingdom. She did not take any nonsense from anybody and she was always ready to make things work. She negotiated with traders from Mali, Timbuktu and Ashanti and they always gave her the best prices because they feared and respected her. She was an optimistic woman and she grew very prosperous towns, many of which are still in existence today. Ah! I was told of the walls that she created that protected her people from the invasion of the enemies. The walls were even named after her as ganuwar Amina. I am sure if she was afflicted with maternal issues she would have found a solution to the problem. I don't know why we are gathered here waiting. I think we should carry arms and go meet the people that make us go through this. Look at what history has told us and look at what we are doing. Is it not a shame that we should be caught in this?

“What the hell is this woman saying? Either you complete the story of the Queen or you bleeding take your seat.”

I also knew that from the Kwara State of Nupe, Bauchi, Kano and Katsina, she made the market change. She was the market woman’s dream. What she did in the whole of the place still make people shiver. No wonder now that everywhere is filled with her statue. Go to Kano and see her statue there, in Lagos her status is worshipped. People bow down when they see her. Go to Bauchi you would see her there. Nobody in the whole Nigeria, I mean the present women we have now can ever be worshipped like that. Are we going to make history like the women of the old? Or are we going to be forgotten? I say are we going to be phenomenal like the past?

Make una come see; Make una come see

See me see una; see me see change

Change me see?

Come see una, see me see change.

Na the song wey Mother Matron tander for ground for the women be that. They no understand which kind song be that. Fatima just bend her mouth small. Look everybody and return to her seat. Reply them no fit, because Mother Matron since she first arrive don dey behave like person wey don kolo. First of all she slap person, now na song she dey sing. Song wey nobody understand. The women just they look am like, the women just they think like say na all of them they think am together say, e be like say na the those children wey dey for yonder they make this woman be like this.

For far far, the boat wey the woman wey come from Aberdeen, Scotland still dey for the water dey coole. Nobody know wetin don happen to am. The engine don quench, the women nor know. The only person wey fit tell them wetin happen to the ship she sef come dey behave like say she no well. The women don dey here tey and as the matter they go now e be like them go stay here for another period wey tey o. the matter no be small thing. From Scotland to Nigeria, the problem wey dey for Nigeria na for yonder them wan find the way.

Make una come see; Make una come see

See me see una; see me see change

Change me see; una see come

Come see una, see me change.

Mother Matron throway the song for ground again. This time as she do so, na him Mariam stand up and immediately like brilliant student wey no answer to question wey teacher they ask, na him she say:

We see! We change.

Mother Matron run go the domot of the river and make sure and put her leg inside the water. As the thing cool am small she run come back come meet the women. The women just they look the woman. Them they talk small small, they hold their head, and they pinch each other as them dey look werin Mother Matron they display. The power of the children no be small, na so them come finish the matter. Them wait for another second and think whether Mother Matron go ask them make them talk another story of woman who come from before. Na sit down Mother Matron sit down. Nothing else. She just dey look the women and the women sef they

look am miro-miro. The women stand up and form one big circle round the Mother Matron and them begin to sing.

Who is in the garden?

A pretty fine woman

Can I come and see her

No! No! No!

Mother Matron just lie down for ground like animal wey hunter don shoot. She no fit even move. Na her head she put for hand. All her body dey pain am, she dey feel her bone dey shook-shook her skin and she dey feel say her skin wan commot for her body. The thing wey she dey see for up na so so darkness. The women still they play them riddle as them dey go round. Them still they shout, who is in the Garden?

After them see say Mother Matron no move at all and them find out say nothing wey dem do dey make am move from where she dey, them stop to sing. Them look each other for face and begin to whisper something for each other ear. Before, them know am them don dey hear sound from Mother Matron mouth like say four babies gather for her mouth dey play. The thing loud no be small because the thing sweep leaves from ground come carry am go middle of air.

The women stop the game and decide to join the Mother Matron for the matter wey she start. The matter of sleep-sleep!

THE SEEDS' COURT

Just like The King of Seeds planned it, they arrived. The King held his staff and gave a loud cry that ran across the present space and floated in the air as he watched Mother Matron lead the women to the Court of Seeds.

Around him, the other Seeds gathered and watched as the women came in. They watched as the troops of soldiers who expelled them into this space arrived. The hands that changed their destinies have been subpoenaed. The day has come for reconciliation.

Tension rose in the air. In the distance between the mothers and the Seeds, green memories, yellow tears, white cries and blue longings mingled. Love was gained and lost. Hatred was gone but a tinge remained.

Mother Matron walked faster than the rest of the women and went straight to the King of Seeds. The women watched the King pat the Mother Matron on the back. The rest of the women watched the events unfold in the space with jaws tightly closed and their eyes widely opened and even the pores of their skin swallowed the happenings.

The women tried to define the Kings' entourage. It was hard. This is what they saw: bodies with no skeleton and skeletons with no bodies; headless bodies; legless and headless bodies; the midriff of a human; heads only; legs only.

Mother Matron got to the location where the women were and instructed them to follow her. Mariam, the loudest, the boldest, who, before sleeping told the women about the story of the Efusetan of Ibadan was the first to fall to the ground. She held Mother Matron's hand and pointed to the Seeds.

“Please, wake me up. Please!”

Mother Matron kept moving. The energy that was drained in her was restored. She felt a new calm come into her as she was in the place and walking for her now was easy. She dragged Mariam on.

The other women looked at the spot where the children gathered and saw as they floated; the presence of peace made the women happy and the way the Seeds looked at them was attractive. The blue eyes, the golden legs, the silver hair kept the women moving forward. There was no trees, no green trees to add colour to the place. In the Seeds' court there was no street lights but everywhere looked bright, there was no paved roads there was no building, there was no rushing of humans, no other beings walked around, there was no river flowing, there were no flying birds, there were no tall scrapers. But everything looked beautiful. More beautiful was the serenity that rested on the faces of these judges of memories.

As the women edged forward, the full image of the King came to greet them. He was the only one, among the Seeds, who looked almost formed. He had one eye and the other one was squashed and he had one and half leg. Some liquid dripped from the bad eye and the good eye shone with wisdom and love.

The women had been to these spaces before but they had never seen everything this clear before. They were never able to tell the difference between the King and the ghost that disturbed them when they tried to sleep and this was the first time that the vision had become clear. Now, they understood why the children always visited the way they did.

The King of Seed waved for them to come on and he, like a man who had seen and heard many experiences told the women to keep coming. The King saw as Mother Matron smiled and how the women now, united, looked beautiful and strong.

The other Seeds, proud of their looks, stared at the women like soldiers showing off their battle scars.

“Welcome!” the King bellowed. “Welcome!”

The women did not reply. The walk took about a minute but it looked like it took forever. The women watched what they have produced in awe or what they have collaborated with the society to produce. They were in trance and whenever they looked at the Mother Matron for answers she just looked back and smiled. The women were beginning to understand why Mother Matron behaved the way she did, appreciating her more.

The Queen of Seeds was also by the King’s side. She wore a crown. She was the only one among the whole Seeds who looked complete. Full eyes, full breast, full hands, full legs and a river of hair floated by the side of the King. She looked in disgust at the Mother Matron and the other women.

The women got close enough to see, in full glare, the Seeds of tomorrow and the ugliness of yesterday. Collective ugliness of the Seeds and the collective beauty of what they represented made the women sit in unison on the space that was beneath them. They felt as if they sat on a magic carpet as they could see everything white beneath them. They watched on.

“People, People,” started one of the Seeds, “welcome to the Seeds’ court. We have waited for this all along and it has taken us about five decades to get you here. You are welcome to this place. As you can see for yourself, we have our King and our Queen. Our Queen is the eye of the King. And the King is the director of the events.”

The King turned to look at the Queen with pride and then looked at the Mother Matron whose head was looking downward as if, their eyes meeting would mean disaster. The King turned to look at the master of the ceremony and he continued.

The master of the ceremony was one of the legless Seeds. The head looked too big, too big that no legs in the world can hold it. He continued the announcement.

“From the city of Gasau to the city of Kigali, our fears and cries have come in unison. Our minds have come together and our heads have come together. We welcome you our mother of mothers, to this place you have put us in. Please, let it be known that anyone who attempts to open her eye in protest by returning to reality would go blind. This is how the event is going to go on: first, we the Seeds would tell you what happened to us and we would tell you where you went wrong and how you could have fixed the atrocities.”

The women looked at the Seed. There were no teeth in his mouth and they wondered how it was able to render its voice that high and how it was able raise the high pitch voice. They noticed also that the King remained smiling while the Queen just looked on. The King waved and another Seed emanated from his left hand side.

This Seed was the midriff that Mariam had seen before. No eyes. No legs. No head. But it knew how to talk.

“For a million years, I and I have been looking for a way to express myself to I. I have been watching I and I allow many things happen and I and I just don’t know how to do it. I and I cannot voice out. I and I voice out and it are go into the breeze. Look at what I and I has done to I. Look at it.”

The women didn’t move. They trembled. They felt the cold together. They began to feel things together. The pity showed on every woman’s face. They held their hands together.

The King laughed. He moved up and down until his other eye dangled out of the socket, like it was going to fall onto the ground. It was the Queen who held the eye and pushed it back where it had popped out. The King kept quiet.

The women continued to watch. The Mother Matron did not expect this new arrangement. The first time the King summoned her to the space, she did not see this multitude and most especially, she did not see the King's wife. She wanted to ask many questions: how it was possible for the King to control a lot of people and gather them in one space? Why didn't the King tell her about this woman who looked at her strangely.

"Ha, Mother Matron," the King started, "don't think too much. This one that is by my side, you know her too well. Come close and you would see what I mean."

The Mother Matron jumped from the space below immediately and rushed to the Queen. She could not feel her legs and could feel emptiness in the air. She moved closer to the Queen and flashes of memory came flowing. Night. Dark. Blood. She could not catch the full picture of the images that streamed into her head. She did not fully understand why the pictures came like a puzzle. She tried, in her head, to place them appropriately: blood. Tears. Sweat. It wouldn't work.

Eventually, she came close to the Queen. The fine black eyes of the Queen reminded her of herself.

"Who is this?" the Mother Matron asked as she pointed to the Queen.

"Please go back to your seat and let's focus on why we are here.

"Is this not why we are here?" The Mother Matron said as she pointed to the Queen, "is this not why we are here?"

The other Seeds, that is, those with eyes, looked at their King. The stress lines revealed shock and disbelief. The King licked a finger on his right hand and another finger on his right hand. The Seeds dispersed. Scared, they ran to the right hand side of the Queen. The King simply raised his hands and the wind rushed down, blowing

away women's head ties. The King commanded the women to put their heads in their hands. The women obeyed.

When the women raised their heads up the Mother Matron's top was removed. The wind stripped her clothes leaving behind her white bra. King moved closer around the women, inspecting them, and murmuring silent sentences. Then, he said:

"You don't come here from earth and talk to my wife like that. And to make matters worse, you know my Queen and you pretend like you don't know her!"

The King moved slowly to where he had descended. There was no staircase but he seemed to be looking at them from a higher position. What mattered most to the women at this time was for them to talk to the Seeds and get them to understand that everything that happened was not their fault and that they would like to make sure that everything works out fine. The women put their hands up in the air saying that this was something they would like for the Seeds to do.

The King explored their minds and listened to their silent cries. He only nodded in response and he watched Mother Matron closely as if he was trying to hear her think. But the Mother Matron was not thinking at all. At the moment she was trying to cover herself with her hands. She felt the penetrating pins of the cold biting her skin.

"Nobody!" stated the King, "Nobody, comes here to mess around!"

The women plus the Seeds trembled in response. They have never seen anything like it. Anger, in the form of a wind, swept through them and removed the clothes of the Mother Matron. Fatima woke up and she felt a hot slap land on her face. It felt like little spikes thrown onto her face. This was perhaps their fate and she, Fatima, screamed before falling back to sleep.

"I have said it before: nobody comes here to mess around."

The King pulled out a Seed from behind and rolled it to the front. It was just a head. No body. The women tried to run away but they could not move. With blood shot eyes, clean hair and a set of red lips the Seed stared at the women. It began to cry.

The King held his head as if he was about to tear his forehead away. “What now?” He screamed. “Is this not what you people asked for? You’ve seen them now and you are still running away?”

“This one. This one.” The Seed spoke. “Th—is on—e ne—ver do am”

“What do you mean?” The King asked.

“Pl—se, ple—ase, I woul—d li—ke som—body to te—ll my rea—son.”

“Where is parrot, the story teller? Come to the front now.”

A sleepy Seed emanated from the back of the King. It hopped to the front and smelled dangerously of methylated spirit. The smell made the women choke and cough. The Seeds turned its head to the King who raised his hands and the Seed began to speak in a way that sounded like music.

“I have known my own. I have known my own. This is not the people who made this thing happen to us. There are many things that made this thing happen to us. It has nothing to do with them. The main people who lead us to this place are by the river. The main thing that made this happen to us is the way the people think. The thinking, ha, if you want to know is what they brought to us. When we change our way of thinking then it is when you will now know that there are hidden forces controlling us. These are not the people that have made us like this. No!”

The King looked at the Queen with surprise then look behind to watch the Seed speaking from his behind and he could see that some of the Seeds were covering their ears so that they would not hear what the parrot was saying. His voice, it

seemed, was like spoilt kose that left the taste of bitter kola in one's mouth. As the parrot continued to speak the other Seeds would squeeze their ears tightly.

“What is this one saying” the King said as he turned to face the parrot, “What are you saying with your mouth? I have brought you here to help tell the story of one head and here you are playing judge.”

“No, o! I am not playing judge. I am just putting on the ground what head wanted me to say.”

“You have watched the people down there,” the King started “tell their own story. Why should your own be different? Is there no way you can tell the story following the rule that is known to all storytellers? The beginning, middle and the end?”

“Oh, great King. The guider of our night! The one that knows when it is right for us to sleep and when it is right for us to rise from our slumber. Now I know what you are talking about. I feared that if I took that route you would say that I'm copying what is not our way.”

“Listen to me, you scallywag,” the King interjected, “there is no right way and make sure that you don't give me all those your silly excuses. If you know the story of the head and the head is not willing to come to the front and tell his story why not just tell the people what you know and please, parrot, do come to the front so that the people can see you. In those days when we were in earth the right thing was for the performer to come before the people and speak. Get to the front now!”

And the parrot, whose voice had dominated the whole scene for some time stumbled to the front and into the space that existed between the women, Mother Matron and the King and the Queen. The parrot found his empty chest beating and of course, he questioned these new characteristics for he knew his heart was on earth.

Love immediately struck him as he saw the women gather in unity, as their eyes embraced him, he felt warm hands caressing his body and could feel the steely fingers of a woman tickling him. Then he heard the sounds of a man going to work, watched as the man left the house and saw the man come back home and picked him up and threw him into the skies. He liked the way he giggled and the man sweated and smelt of the sun. That smell made the love increase. Now, there was a little boy in the middle of the house where he found himself now and the little boy looked at him and pointed at him like an unwanted visitor and the little boy wailed and pointed to the door as if it was showing him to leave.

“Chai! Stop that!” the King screamed. “Stop it!”

“It was long time ago. Very long time ago. I was shot into somewhere that I could not see anything. The road was red. I was fully grown...”

“Are you talking about yourself, parrot? Or are you talking about Head?”

“Head’s story is a very straight to the point one, dear King. Is it that one that your royal ears want to hear? I thought you like hearing stories that would make you reason, that would make you adjust your royal cap. Anything you want King, I would do.”

“Ehn, tell us the Head story and after that you can tell us your story. It is true, you know what I like. You are a true and loyal Seed.”

The Seed closed its eyes and bowed to the King before proceeding to tell the story.

“Head was almost ready to come out. That was what he whispered into my ear one time we went for a walk in this court. He was ripe. He found himself in one place called Naija. When he got to Naija, he found out that the place that he was supposed

to come out from didn't have electricity and lacked instrument. When he was pushed out of the person he was supposed to come out from he got stuck."

"Chai!"

"Yes, my King. He got stuck. The man on the other side, I think he is that man we watch from here that is deliberating over those men at the tale of the river. He was the man who forced it even when people were warning him that it was a dangerous thing to do. Head said that he heard the people shouting that he could not do anything like that and Head said he heard when the man said that if he did not do it like that that he was going to travel to this place. Head said that he tried to make sure that he didn't fall into the trap of being trapped. He wanted above all things to come out safely. As the man downstairs, the man we can see forced Head's head out, only the head came out, that is, my King, he pulled only the head."

"Am I the only one here? You have to address everyone even our sweet guests here."

"Yes, our guests, Queen, King and the Seeds, that's how Head came to this place. It was a mistake and an attempt to save. The save was the kill and the kill was the save. Because, according to Head, if that did not happen the beautiful being that he was in would have died. So for that being to live he had to sacrifice his life and head said that he like it very much. That when people from this place now look at him they would know that he has sacrificed his life for the life of another person to remain. That alone is what keeps head going. That's what makes him shy. I was the only one he told and since then he has not told anyone this story. Yes, I'm proud to be the only hearer of the story. And as the only hearer of the story and the only one that has been vested to tell the story just the way it is. I am indeed honoured. I don't know how it was that the head trusted me too much to tell me the story. The King of Kings,

may you never walk in the way the Head has walked and may your high wife never have a reason to walk in the way the Head as walked too.”

The atmosphere gulped the tale. The inert nature that was the feature of the Seeds court wrapped the women. They watched as the parrot continued to talk and it seemed as the parrot swallowed more of the air, a strange kind of energy enveloped his throat.

Parrot was still talking. “Let me continue with my story.”

“Why are you so interested in telling us your story?”

“Because the women who represent the people are here. The people who made everything happened and the women who know what to do to make sure that it would never happen again are here. It is such pleasure to have such people in our midst. It would be bad of me not to tell my tale in the presence of our oshorongas.”

Fatima leapt up and wanted to speak to the parrot but when she tried her voice could not find words to say. Or, she spoke but the parrot could not hear her. There was a barrier between the women and the Seeds. Fatima pointed and poked the air but the King watched her, while the Seeds continued to giggle at her. It amazed them as they watched the women who were in court trying to defend themselves with silent voices. The Queen spat a generous quantity of yellow spit in the air and Fatima took her seat back.

The Mother Matron who had been the controller of the women was quiet throughout the proceeding and the King was always probing her mind. The King visited her mind over and over again only to find that it was empty and nothing was there. The King suspected that there must be a thought in the Mother Matron’s head and she wanted to know everything that was going on. The King was confused as to

how the Mother Matron's mind could be so empty in the midst of this kind of happening. The parrot was still talking.

“That's how it happened.”

“Parrot, have you finished your story?”

“Yes.”

The King turned to the women and was about to speak when the Queen jumped before him, blocking him from proceeding to the middle of the event. The Seeds trembled as they watched the Queen, the only complete Seed amongst their midst. The voice carried a tinge of bitterness and happiness. Even the King could not tell what led to this kind of mixture. But what the King knew was that this place has been able to help the Queen forgive. This place has been the place where humans called the moving-on-path. This place where you could throw away the past and still maintain a healthy outlook towards life. They watched the Queen as she took her baby steps to the middle. First of all she walked to the Mother Matron and looked into her face for good five seconds and was able to say some things that no one heard. The Mother Matron tried to hold the Queen but the Queen hit the hands.

“You,” the Queen started, “walahi. I don't blame you. No, I don't blame you. Is it not that I found my way to you. I was telling our King of life that I didn't want to come to this place. I told him. But because I talk too much and because they know that I am going to become a heroine and be the one that puts a stop to the things in that place, they changed the script on me. Ha, you can remember now? Walahi, can't you remember? That market place? Where is that Mama Dumkwu? Where is she? I can't believe she is not here? King, why didn't you gather all the women here?”

“My dear Queen, my only heart,” the King cooed. “My only thing that makes everything I do make sense. Please forgive me because I didn't want to fill the place

up with women who have annoyed you. These ones are the good ones that I found. These ones are the good ones who would not harm you.”

If there was a way for me to show you what I was going to do in that country I would have done it. But do you know Azaro from *The Famished Road*? He was my friend and he warned me about this kind of thing. He warned me about the web. He warned me about the uselessness of attempting to come to this place but I didn't listen. I didn't do anything.

“My King, I would like this woman to come out and tell me why she didn't do anything to make sure that I made my complete journey. I would like for this woman to come before these Seeds to tell why she didn't allow me continue my journey. I want for this woman to tell the story of her mind. What was she thinking? And I want it in full detail.”

The King's mien changed. Pity wrapped around every corner of his face. Mother Matron was moving to the front when the King summoned her back.

“Mother Matron, please stay where you are. Do not come near my Queen!”

The Mother Matron stopped in her tracks. She remembered the Queen. The Mother Matron stretched her hands towards the Queen and whispered for her to come close.

“Let me just touch you.”

The Mother Matron disrespected the King's command and rushed to the Queen. She caught air when she attempted to hold the queen. The King and the Queen, plus the Seeds laughed. Mother Matron was pushed back by a secret wave to her normal position. She and the other women could not feel their legs.

For the first time, Mother Matron noticed the umbilical cord on the Queen's body and how it was connected to her long hair. Her past was now her present.

The Queen watched the Mother Matron and felt like rushing to her, the Queen felt like holding the Mother Matron, she wanted to taste her milk. She wanted hear some stories. It was only the King at this time that could hear the Queen's cry. He moved to her and whispered into the Queen's ear. The King returned to his place where he had been standing.

"Mother Matron, I know you know that you know I would like you to tell me why you did not take drastic measures on that day to protect me from the evil in that night, in that market. I would like you to tell me something that would stop me from coming to that earth. Please tell me something," the Queen held her hair and was pulling it out gradually. But as she pulled the hair it kept growing longer. It seemed the harder she pulled the hair the longer it grew. "Answer me. Otherwise, you will all drown in my hair."

A Seed with fully formed body but with holes in his body jumped out of the back and said, "please, Queen see the woman of my own too. Ask her for me."

The Queen smacked the Seed back to where it had emanated from and the other Seeds rearranged themselves. "After this woman answers my question then you can come and interrupt me. For now I want to hear from my own. I'm not vexing, no."

"So why this attitude."

"I'm vexing that you allow the place, the hospital and all not have infrastructures."

"What could I have done?"

"You should have fought before then."

The Mother Matron looked at the white ground and the space that existed around her. Everywhere was white and then she turned to look at the women behind her before she managed to open her mouth.

“Look at all these women. They know me. Look at your King. He knows me. Ask the other Seeds behind you. They all know me. They know that I have tried. They know that I have fought many times for all of you to come to where we stay for a long period. But everything I do, doesn’t work out.”

The Queen was listening attentively like she was in a trance. Or like the words from the Mother Matron’s mouth was soothing her innards. She waved her hand as the story poured out of the Mother Matron.

“That night I know you know what happened. I know you could tell that I fought with all the forces that were trying to make sure that you did not come to earth the right way. You saw me when I was fighting. You saw what happened when we got to that place. You saw the nurses. You saw the doctor. There was no electricity.”

“Shut up! Excuses! Excuses!” the Queen lamented. “Can’t you come up with a solution?”

“We have come with many solutions and they don’t seem to be solutions. We have formed groups and we have met the people who are supposed to be in charge of the hospital and everything we have been doing have not been successful. We have even been waiting for the White Witch from yonder to tell us what to do but she has not arrived. Please give us time and we would find the answer to everything that you desire. The punishment you give to us is undeserved, walahi. It is something that you and the King must reconsider. And on another note the real people that you are supposed to tackle are gathered somewhere on earth. They are the ones that have

made your journeys short. They are the ones in charge. If you bring them here then you would find out that they are the real cause.”

“Don’t tell me nonsense. Don’t tell me nonsense.”

Mother Matron whispered a song.

“When the end makes no sense, we tend to find no sense in the present.

When the present makes no sense, we dig from the past with sense

When the past makes no sense, we look into the future looking for sense.”

The other Seeds replied with a loud, “hmmm, hmmm, hmmm.”

“Please allow the Seed that was disturbing me before to come out and talk to the person that it wanted to talk to. And as you have heard these women don’t want to take responsibility for everything that has been happening to us, rather they want to make excuses. Excuses, excuses, excuses. They don’t know their histories. What a colossal shame. I am so surprised that my own carrier would have the guts to tell me that she could have, you could have done what, eh? You could have done what. This is the kind of excuses that would make the nation not go forward.”

Enter the Seed with hole in his body. He floated to where the women gathered and went to straight to Mary. The women watched in awe as this red being, beautiful and ugly, shapeless and round, caressed Mary’s hair. Then they were more surprised when the child started making cornrows out of her hair.

“What are you doing?” bellowed the King, “can you start your story! We don’t have all day here.”

“I can call you mummy. Can’t I? I can fit to call you anything that I want?”

Mary looked at the mouth and saw the hole in the baby's mouth. From the mouth she could see the clouds and from the chest she could see the whole court. The baby looked like a net. Mary nodded.

"I know some of the reasons why you have done this to us. But don't you think that if this continues that we would be in magnitude here. Look at my brothers and sisters, they don't like it here or maybe they do. My sisters, the twins, they have been crying ever since they came here, they wanted to be just like you, they wanted to smile just like you, they wanted to walk just like you, they wanted to cook vegetable soup just the way you know how to cook it just like you but you told them that that would not be the case. What is the way out mummy? We still love you."

Mary could not hold it. Streams of tears rushed down her cheek. She stretched out her hands to hold the baby who was still making the cornrows but she could not touch anything. Holding her face, she asked the Mother Matron, "Can you make me touch him?"

"Mummy you made this happen. You brought this distance between us. You and the people around you thought it would be nice for you to make sure that we are not in your habitat. Mummy raise your head and see."

Mary raised her head and looked at the direction where the Seed pointed. She saw four eyes peering from behind the King. They were eyes that told the story of fear and love. The eyes looked innocent but filled with tears.

"Mummy those are my sisters. The ones that I told you that love to love you every time. They even pray for you most of the time. I cannot say no more. My mouth is tired of talking, for when I talk too much sometimes I feel that it is going to come out and fall on the ground. I want to be able to tell stories. Because of my telling that's why I have been able to live. Because we tell our stories that's why we've been

able to live. Thank you, mummy, for coming to this place. Thank you for making you way here. We do not hold any grudge against you. We hold a grudge against the society which you found yourself.”

The other women wept. It was too much to bear. The words from the holed Seed pierced their heart beyond description. It was as if a pestle was pounding their heart into a smooth paste. As the baby floated to the front, Mary stretched her hand in the bid to hold the baby but she caught air. The women held her as she vibrated in fresh tears. They didn’t know what to do. They were bewildered. They watched the King step forward and then they watched as the Queen pacified the Seeds gathered around them.

A Seed broke out these words, “King, King, make I come tell my own story?”

The King turned, looked at the Seed that spoke and replied, “ha! If you come to the front to tell your own story, we won’t leave this place. I’d suggest that you visit with your story as you normally do. I know that you would not leave your own people until they have settled you.”

The King looked at the women then walked closer to them.

“This is what happened,” he started. “Every day in this place. This is how I hear cries every day. It won’t stop. More are coming. Just yesterday two thousand and five hundred of them entered this place. And that has been the number for the past couple of months. When would this reduce Mother Matron? Please help us to help you. What can we do?”

The Mother Matron, tired, motionless, thirsty, and who had been looking at the Queen throughout the whole period now turned to the King, pointed straight to his chest, focused, eyes fixated on the attire of the King and proclaimed, “the men at the

river need physical deliverance. They need to be told about their role. And we need your help too.”

The King rubbed his chin in a contemplative manner, took four steps to his right hand side as he studied what the Mother Matron has just told him. He thought about the men and remembered that although his comrades had been visiting the men like they did the women, there have been little results. Reasons for the men’s obstinacy eluded him. Again, he took another four steps back to the spot where he was, focused on the women before him as if, on their faces, he could see answers to the questions the Mother Matron threw at him. The women’s face was wet with waters and this made the King satisfied. At least, their presence in the court yielded some result. They have been able to taste, if not fully, the existence of the beings they have created. The King now turned to the Queen and the other Seeds. The King threw his hands and shoulders in the air like he did not know how to go about the request of the Mother Matron.

She immediately started wiping the wet faces of the women. She murmured under her breath, “our own cannot catch us scared.” Mother Matron also noticed that the women were in a trance as they would not bulge or complain. The court judged; it needed no judge. Anyone who stepped into this space would feel the weight of judgement on his or her shoulder. The weight was too heavy. Mother Matron, above all things, wished that the Seeds had also invited the men into this place too; she wished also that the Seeds visited the men as they have done to the women; she wished too that the King overtook the mind of one of the men as he had done to her; she wished the doctor was here especially.

The King bent his head, his ear almost in the mouth of the Queen. The whispering sounds came out in smooth sibilance. Other Seeds rallied around, jumped

up, heads rolled around in a bid to hear the secrets being dished out by the almighty Queen.

Queen Wholely, as the Seeds called her, was the only Seed that came to this part of the town complete. It was rare to see a full one. She actually walked into this world with eyes open and all her limbs intact. Her entry sparked a little riot in the Seeds' world. Other Seeds questioned her existence as they rushed to touch her, to check if everything was indeed complete. To their wild amazement, it was. The respect grew from that day. They vowed to give the Queen the crown and the only one who could walk with the King in height and in reason.

Before the Queen came, the King enjoyed profound authoritarian disposition and could not be questioned by any of the incomplete Seeds. The King, when asked by any of the Seeds at that time, about anything only barked at the Seeds or called them "dumb" always. It is indeed surprising that when the Queen came they noticed how the King gave up his old ways. The Queen also brought with her, new ways of doing things. She never agreed with the King always, in fact, he often gave in to the Queen.

The King, after listening to what the Queen had to say, moved back to the centre of the place. Again, he took that important step: four to the left and four back to the beginning of where the step started. He looked at the women and by now the Mother Matron had stopped wiping the faces of the women. Now, he raised his unseen staff into the air and pronounced these words slowly.

"Our decision in this court is to send you women into the midst of the men and scatter their union. You would go into the market place and pluck the branches of the Cure tree in the middle of Gummy market. That cure branches should be used on the

men. One touch on their body and you would notice that they would not do what they've been doing before. The Queen here also..."

A paralysed Seed, rolled to the front, broke the flow of the King's speech, saying, "I've not been allowed to speak to her, her there."

The women looked at each and wondered whom the Seed was referring to. They could not talk as everything here began to draw energy from their body. They wanted to know how they could stop the children from coming here again. They knew the only way was for them to help the next generation of women giving birth. They knew they had a lot of things to tackle. But the long road to freedom is always red and they were ready to paint it like that.

The King shed a pitiful eye on the Seed that had rolled to the front, bent to the ground and picked it up and placed it carefully into the midst of the other Seeds. While the Seeds and the women watched the King perform this caring ceremony, the Queen focused her gaze on the Mother Matron.

"Hey," the Queen said, "before you continue my head of my bosom, please tell these women to appease us with a song."

"Ha, my Queen, they've done that before," replied the King.

"Are you questioning my requests, King?"

"Queen of my whole heart. I am not in any way questioning your request. I am just saying it just the way I think. Forgive my stubbornness or temporary foolishness."

Turning to the Mother Matron, the King waved her to come to the front.

The Mother Matron took four steps to meet with the King where he stood. She was thirsty and needed water to help her carry out, successfully, this mission that was set before her by the mother of this people. Words have started to fail her even before

they came out of her mouth. What and where would all this lead to? Mother Matron opened her mouth for the words to come out but they were not there.

The King turned to the Queen like he was explaining to her that the woman's out of breath and would soon collapse. He did this by demonstrating with his fingers what he meant but the Queen whistled with nonchalance.

“Mother Matron, I'm sorry but you have to sing that song so that all of you can wake up in peace. It has been a long stay here.”

From within, as her innards boiled with exhaustion and her head pounded with the weight of fatigue she managed to muster up some lines of a song.

If I knew what I know

Knowing what I know now

If you knew what they knew

They

You would know what I know means knowing none

None of what I know could help me change what they know

You,

Do you know what they know?

Do you know how to know what they know?

The women who listened intently to the Mother Matron's voice only shook their head in response. Shedding tears, holding their breath and in surprising unison, blowing their noses into their wrappers, they continued to shake their heads. The words from the Mother Matron carried such a weight that it shook the fibres of the

women's heart. As if struck by an omen, they all trembled at the same time and spoke in unison

“We don't know what they know.”

The King was on his knees. Head bowed, body stiff and in an effort not to reveal his weakness to the weak women, and he shook his body about four times. He stood up and looked unto the Queen and the Seeds. Some of the Seeds, he noticed, had run away from the gathering. The message from the Mother Matron's mouth unsettled them that they had to run into a place where they would not be seen.

The Queen stood up and pulled the hair that always grew anytime it left the head. She moved to where the King and the Mother Matron stood. Tears shone on her cheeks. She allowed it to flow freely.

“You are free to go. Just make sure that you go and pluck those branches. Make sure that you each hold it firmly. Make sure that you beat the cure into the men. May the owls that represent us in the midst of the men, protect you!”

The Mother Matron tried to meet the women and then realised she was standing in the presence of sleeping women. She held her head and watched as Fatima, Mariam and the rest of the women got to their feet. The sleep was a long one but it was not measured by time. They did not know if they have been there for days. They just knew that the weather and the cloud still maintained the same look.

“We shall all meet here again,” Mother Matron started “to discuss on how to undo the evil that has plagued our system.”

Nobody moved. Nobody responded.

The horns from the ship rent the air for some fleeting seconds. The sound struck a reminder that what had brought them to the river was the search for a

solution. The women looked into the distance as the Mother Matron continued to address them.

“Should we disperse now?”

Yawning, stretching and at the same, time focusing on the ship on the river, the women stared at the Mother Matron like a crazy being.

“Without the Cure tree,” she continued, “we would not be able to do anything. We would not be able to achieve anything. We would not be able to carry out the assignment.”

The women stood up, looked at the Mother Matron and moved forward and bowed.

Mariam spoke on their behalf. “When shall we meet here again? Why can’t we disperse from here?”

“I have to go and have a change of clothes,” responded the Mother Matron.

“We would wait for you here. The way we look doesn’t matter now.”

Mother Matron, who was almost naked and had lost strength, left the women and promised them that she would be back. The women sat down, allowed Mother Matron to disappear into the dark and formed a round circle.

In that circle, the women discussed on how they would get the longest branches that would reach the men in the most sacred places. How they would be able to flog the men and make sure that the whipping brought some senses into their heads like the Seeds have instructed.

Mariam, as always, was the first to criticise the Seeds’ ideas. Mariam stood up, removed the wrapper that was tied around her head and tied it around her waist, she bounced like an angry market woman who has been cheated by the taxman.

“I wish I could go back and see that King in that place.”

“What place,” interrupted Fatima, “what place?”

“The same place you and I just came from.”

“Is this one going mad?”

“Can’t you people remember what just happened to us?”

The women ignored Mariam’s tirade, forming the circle which Mariam already broke by jumping out of their midst. They continued in whispers until Mariam tried to join them back but they would not allow in. Mariam, furious at the women’s reaction left them and began to walk to the sea. As she walked closer to the ship that was still floating in the middle of the water, an owl from the clouds descended on her head.

Mariam screamed and the owl tried to peck her face but she defended and fought back.

“You better go back to the gathering,” a deep voice came.

Surprised, Mariam threw the wrapper around her waist into the air and she held her head. The distance between where she was and where the women were was about seven fits but her speed shortened it. She crashed into the women and sat down immediately. She joined heads and they planned on.

The Mother Matron arrived at her home safely. Her room, which maintained an unsullied look always looked strange. She walked to her bed and climbed it with the pace of a toddler. And immediately she fell to sleep. She could hear herself snore and she returned to the court.

The five owls jumped on the ground and the men tried to run away but the birds surrounded them, kept them in a hostage situation. When Obasanjo tried to outsmart them by jumping over one of them, the bird pecked his balls, which sent an electric of pain across his whole body. He fell to the ground holding his crotch. Everyone giggled.

“Doctor, the bird don burst my blokos.”

The doctor, like a hunter, turned around looking at the birds and hoping he could do something to make them return to the branch of the tree where they had descended from. He made some sounds but the owls remained put.

It has been very interesting to hear all of you talk.

“Who said that?” asked Odumegwu.

The men looked around but could not find who dropped the voice. It was amazing how the men began to tremble. The doctor brought a kolanut from his pockets and showed it the bird before he ate it. It didn't make any difference as the owls circled them.

“It has been interesting to watch you and hear your stories. Some of them are true and some are false. The mixture of truth and lies always give birth to situations like this.”

“Ema gba mi.”

“Shut up and listen.”

“Doctor!” Obasanjo screamed, “help me!”

The bird that had attacked Obasanjo earlier before jumped up and poked Obasanjo's head which sprang a little contour on his head immediately. Obasanjo held his head and cried for a while. All he could say was “There is God o!” he whined like a hooker from Sango Ota.

“If your mouth does not know how to stay shut then I will help you to shut the mouth. If your mouth does not respect the voice of the other then you will find something new happening to you.”

The silence that followed was perfect. Whispering air flowed around; leaping leaves slammed the ground and a footstep walking from fifty-mile distance became clear in the ambience created by the night birds.

“This is how this place must be until I finish what I am about to say. If anyone tries to speak, he would be pecked; if anyone tries to laugh, he would be pecked; if anyone tries to run, that’s the end of that person. If anyone tries to start a fight, we would give him fight. I think I am understood.”

The men were looking around looking for where the voice came from. They looked up and looked around. They looked at the sky and looked at the birds to see if their mouths were moving but nothing. They were just aware that the voice was deep and guarded by the owls.

“All I want to tell you that the time has come for all of you to witness the rewards of your gain. We would make all of you smart and make sure that you never do those things you did again. You are going to apologise when we introduce them to you. If you don’t say anything then something drastic is going to happen. What it is, I cannot say. But I am going to say this do fall to your knees when you start. The first assignment starts with every man looking into the bowl of calabash and looking at it for a while and falling to his knees and apologising. Just say no vex and you’ll be fine. The second assignment would flow down to meet you in the right time.”

Nobody said anything.

“The doctor is going to lead the team. You are going to go first to the bowl and you are going to look into and apologise.”

And, that was what the doctor did. He walked straight to the calabash and when he looked inside, he screamed and with trepidation, he screamed continuously.

“No vex, no vex, no vex, no vex!”

The other men followed and for every one of them that looked into the bowl of kolanut they began to shout: “No vex! No vex! No vex!”

The rhythm of the “no vex” blended in the air that the voice emanated again.

“It is time for you to hold each other and dance to your own tunes.”

Obedying the instruction, the men held each other and began to dance as they screamed into the air: “No vex! No vex! No vex!” The eyes of the owls changed to a sweet green colour and they returned to the branches of the tree where they had come from. The owls hooted and watched as the men moved around and around.

The doctor jumped into the middle of the men and then began what seem like a dance move from the oldies. He held his head and controlled it like he was a robot, then held his waist and shook it around in a rhythmic fashion while still saying, “No vex”.

As they continued this ceremony, a little boy came out from the calabash into their midst. Obasanjo was the first person to notice and he wanted to scream but the words, “no vex” was still stuck in his mouth. When the others saw the boy they pointed so that the doctor too could see what had appeared before their very own eyes. When the doctor saw the boy words failed him too as he continued to voice, “no vex, no vex”.

The boy, looking about three years of age, was soaked in white powder from head to toe. He wore a white wrapper and a red head tie. He walked slowly around the men who were looking at him but didn't have the power to say anything apart from

the words that jumped into their mouth from the calabash. When the boy saw Ojukwu, he tapped his head and when he saw Abacha he slapped him.

Barefooted, emaciated and attentive, the boy raised his hands up straight. He held it there for some time until the men stopped screaming no vex.

“Me, me, me,” the boy started, “na me me, me represent all the Seeds for the court. The punishment no be for all men. But those men wey be say, no for those man, no, those men that think they can just do anything and go away abi, na for them. Them go know say khaki no be leather. As I dey here so, I don dey three years for the doctor backyard, he send me away but I know fit go because this place don turn my house. No look my face or look the way I dey talk. Na so I be. Na so the doctor want make I be. I dey talk better to you abi I dey make nonsense talk?”

The men nodded in unison. Some of the men had their mouth over their mouths. People like Atiku and Yerima kept removing their caps and dusting it on their laps and also hitting their head.

“As I they talk, if you like make you fear, me I just come tell you make you expect wetin they come. That thing wey dey come na him go make you for no go the wrong place for yonder. You know how we dey do am for here be say when we talk say na werin make you do be this make you do because you know werin they happen to you.”

Another child, of about one year old crawled out of the calabash of kolanuts.

Obasanjo leapt from where he was and tried to head for the door but one of owls attacked him with the speed of thunder, struck him and he fell, face flat, on the ground. He returned back to his place.

“Oga, don’t run. If you run, you will continue to run for life. This is just a dialogue. We want to know how this is going to end before we allow the other phase of the thing to continue.”

“Ha, walahi, I never see this kind thing before,” retorted Abacha. “But you know say na the doctor go help us talk. Me I no dey for this kind thing.

The crawling baby did a circle around the men too then stood at the front with the three-year-old boy.

“Just make sure that you answer every question we ask. We don’t have much to ask. We just want to make sure that we reduce the visitors we get.”

“Ehn, why don’t you call the recent man of the country into this?” Obasanjo asked.

The walking boy said to him, “you are the one who placed him there. So I hold you responsible. And on that note, I would like to start with you. So what do you think about this whole story.”

“I think it is rubbish.”

“What is rubbish?”

“This whole nonsense makes no sense. How would you hold old elders, I mean elders responsible for this?”

“We are not holding anyone responsible; we just want to make sure that it doesn’t happen again. We have been, for the past fifty-two years, looking for a solution and there has been none. So this is the only way we thought would work for people like you to listen to us. This is the only thing that has been working for how many years. Is this even a thing to talk about? Why are you in the story then?”

“This story is shit. It is shit. Why would you even think of doing something like this? Who is going to read it? Who? You? The children? The adults? The clinic?

Nobody would hear or read this. I would make sure it doesn't enter my country. This thing would be banned. Ha, you didn't hear of Salman Rushdie and how his book was banned from the Muslim community. Ehn, this is how this one would be banned. We would make sure we use our political power to ban this piece of nonsense. Don't you know we have connections that you cannot dream of having? You this past!"

"We have not come here to fight. We have come here to correct what we think it wrong. Now you that you've been talking for a while you seem to be the only one with guts abi. Baby, please go and warn him."

The crawling baby went into the gathering men, climbed over the head of Abacha and from there was able to place a fantastic knock on Obasanjo's head. It felt like a hammer landing on his head. Immediately, he began to bleed. From his forehead blood splashed out like a burst pipe, the gushing sprayed other members of the sitting group. The baby studied it for a while before coming down from Abacha's head to return to his master.

The act birthed a silence that has never been heard among the men. Atiku, Ojukwu, Yerima, Abacha and others buried their heads in their palms shaking with giggles. The general and later democrat Obasanjo could never be disrespected like this. No!

They didn't believe what became of them. Their thinking was bound by senseless promises of what would be better. The men looked at the doctor to see if he had anything to make of this dangerous happening or if they could, from his face, gather solutions that would lead them out of this bleeding mess.

When the doctor noticed the eyes roughly manhandling him, he went to the babies and went on his knees, he wept with his two hands clasped tightly, he asked.

"Of what use would violence pay violence?"

Now, the crawling baby revealed his upper cream teeth and lower teeth. The whiteness shined so bright that it brightened the atmosphere for the while they were shown. But the canine looked like it knew the taste of kolanut. The baby looked at the doctor with furrows dancing deeply on his forehead then dropped his head, shook it and shook it.

The baby after a close study of the doctor's mien announced with a deep voice. "We are here like I said before to make you people pay for what you have put us through. You hold the back bone of the main events that have plagued us."

The doctor looked back at the elders who were quietly watching them exchange words. They could make from the doctor and the baby's expression that they've scarred the baby and they could tell from the way their heads moved that anything that could make them get away from here is still a long walk. A thousand miles to grace land which even the first seemed useless. They knew that many things caused the death of thousands of Seeds yearly but they did not know how they contributed to those things. The people to represent them as the ears, eyes and nose of the people only placed them in more mess.

When the people want someone to see the other world on their behalf, they acted swiftly; when, for example, the world thought that Nigeria was a crumbling giant, they stepped up and made sure everything worked out. After all, Obasanjo was the one who plucked the most brilliant woman from the World Bank to come and help the people learn how to deal with white debts. They achieved results. How do these kids have the useless gut to hold them bondage under the watchful eyes of five owls?

They really wanted out! The assignment can never be easy. After seeing the blood leak from Obasanjo's head, no one dared make a false move. It would be the end of any man to disrespect the ghosts of his past. The hands of many angry babies

gave the crawling baby the power to knock senses, albeit bloodily, into people's heads. The past crimes of these statesmen could be deduced from the faces of the children. How the doctor has poked them, cut them, dismembered them was something to be remembered. The baby that stood before them had secret scars that only showed when he was angry.

The walking baby, as if drawn by the silent breeze pirouetting around, walked to Ojukwu and looked at his beards then pulled it so hard that Ojukwu almost toppled over. Ojukwu wanted to show that he could bear it but, all of a sudden, he let out a scream:

“What have I done?”

The child looked at him straight in his bloodshot eyes and from there, he travelled to the sixties. War smelled in the air. Gunshots scraped the face of the earth and mortars drummed hard on the ground. Legs, hands, heads populated the space like flies. Blood replaced the stream. Grass became a delicacy for humans. Animals were too tired to feed. Tears replaced smiles. Betrayal in the top echelon sent a million babies on a journey through pain. To live and see tomorrow, families were put into camps. These camps always had to depend on international aid: rice, water, medicines etc. The eye then turned into a road.

Inside, the boy could see every detail of every child. Now, the tears of a girl of about three years old met his hand as he held tightly onto the face of Ojukwu. The child spoke into the eye. Ojukwu tried to wriggle his way out of the tight grip of the hand by shaking his head to the left and to the right but he received a dirty slap that kept him calm. The child spoke until the child from inside the eye began to speak back. It said it wanted some food.

The child in front of Ojukwu saw protruding belly, sucked-in eyeball, the bones hanging dangerously as if they would soon force themselves out of the skin made by boy release Ojukwu's face. Ojukwu rubbed the part of the face where the tight grip had squeezed his face and heaved a sigh of relief.

The boy instantly moved to his position and with a voice that sounded like the composed sounds of a professional flute player dropped a question, "Ojukwu. What shame you've brought to us."

"I don't understand what you mean!" Ojukwu replied with trepidation and his lips did not stop moving even after he finished speaking.

The boy, like an old man, placed his hands behind his back then spoke with military clarity: "under your watch," the child said as his eyes stared at the five owls perching on the tree, "millions of us left."

"Is that why you are here?"

Obasanjo's screaming and crying rented the air now. It filled the conversation between the baby and Ojukwu that they had to pause to listen to the pain of the general. They felt the cry walk into their bones through their ears; they drowned in the tears shed. They saw Obasanjo as he held his head, brought out fingers that revealed red. The general who had seen wars, the general who had generally wiped out a people in the town of Udi, who, generally put, had seen people cry due to his antics and doings as a General President, now found it easy to cry. All of a sudden, he saw the crawling baby coming towards him, the general kept quiet.

The atmosphere contained sniffs. The scent from the tree where the birds perched collapsed into the sniffing accompanied with a rhythm from the crawling baby; this led to a new smell that rushed into the nostrils of the men. And, because the leaves of the tree have dangerously fallen off, it didn't have that healthy smell of a

healing tree. It however held the legendary tale of being the oldest and wisest tree in the town.

The tree has been host to a lot of witches around town. In this tree, all the witches gather to plot who they were going to attack during the day. They only attacked those who they thought have offended humanity. The attack is usually done through accidents, mistakes in the house and slipping. It was said that a man who had killed his own baby for been a female child died after two days. Legend has it that the man, on his way to his farm, slipped and fell head front on his own axe. His chest landed on the sharpest part of the axe such that it went through his chest and came out of his back. As time went on, the tree, they said lost its powers because development came into the village. Gold miners from America and Britain started drilling gold beside it; road workers from Julius Berger would leave remnants of their chemicals near the tree and the green started leaving and the spirits left too never to return their again.

Now, it is brown. The brown nature of the bark and the caking feature were some signs that the tree has seen more stories than any eye has seen here. The ground now contained spots of Obasanjo's blood.

The focused boy who had found the girl through Ojukwu's eyes started speaking with a feminine voice, "You didn't know me in 1967, Ojukwu? You don't know me?"

Ojukwu, perturbed, surprised, mesmerised and turning his heads to look at the other men to check if they were listening to this boy and words to compose as a reply fled his lips. In the corridors of his brain, the distractions of loud sounds distorted his focus.

"Boom! Boom!"

“That’s a long time ago. What is obtainable now is different.”

“We know what we are talking about. It is very important, that in talking about now you have to look at yesterday.”

The men looked around as if a ghost has entered into their midst. They held their chest high to the heavens. As if they listened to the boy with all of their body. Nobody could respond to the boy’s saying. They, after some fleeting seconds, dropped their chest to its original position. They wondered how the child could go into history and return to the present.

Ojukwu raised his hand up. Poking the air several time to draw the child’s attention. When the child’s eye caught his hand, he signalled to Ojukwu with two raised hands, welcoming his comment. Ojukwu felt elated and refreshed at the reception he received from the baby.

“Seed them,” Ojukwu announced while pointing to the other men, “they caused it.”

The child turned at the “they” Ojukwu pointed at. Abacha, Obasanjo, Yerima, Atiku, the doctor, Babaginda.

The child moved to the droppings of Obasanjo’s blood and sat before it. He saw, inside the blood, the streets of Bayelsa where a boy playing with no shoes on his feet, roamed and walked around in circles. This boy would roam the streets and would return home with different colours and sizes of nail stuck under his leg and sometimes he went home with a swollen leg. It shocked everyone that this boy whose barefoot can roam the streets of Bayelsa without been infected. Because of his ability to escape germs even after his legs has been burst open by rusty irons, made people call him Goodluck. And, sometimes you could call him the shoeless boy, depending on what

he is doing at that particular hour. The shoeless boy now called Goodluck turned into a shocking news—a president.

The baby started moving around as if he was bitten by an insect.

“Where is my crawling baby?” he asked as he turned around like a mad masquerade.

The men now noticed that the crawling baby had disappeared. No one noticed when it left. Even the general who had suffered a critical bashing from the baby could not tell. The only memory of the crawling baby was when it pealed Obasanjo’s skull with its knuckles.

The men clasped their hands together as if they were about to start a prayer session to bring back the crawling baby. They watched as the baby began running in short bursts back and forth in frantic search. Hums from the men followed.

“Shut up! Shut up! You’ve done it again!”

Silence.

The boy, as if struck by an idea, stopped in the middle of his short walks. He headed straight to the bowl of kolanut, stared into it for a couple of seconds and when the baby raised his head he revealed a fresh, curved smile. He found himself in front of Babaginda a.k.a Maradona.

The child tapped the potbelly and it bubbled like hot jelly. Babaginda responded with a smile then revealed his gap tooth.

“Why do you like to dribble people?”

“Walahi, I don’t know, it’s just a skill.”

“You know, in 1993, if that election had gone through, if you had allowed that man ruled the country, we would have been somewhere now.”

“You see let me tell you, Walahi,” Babaginda started as he bit his fingers “Even when I decided to give him, it won’t work. There was nothing I could do. It was not my wish. I was controlled.”

The boy ruminated for a while about what Maradonna told him. The boy knew that when Maradonna told you that the sun was shining, you have to step out of the house to really check if it was shining and you also need to lock your house because you don’t know what Maradonna could do. The boy also saw another explosion in the eyes of Maradonna as he had seen in Ojukwu’s.

“I see in you some explosions.”

“Ha, walahi, the only explosion you can see in me is one. A deserved one and you can tell why I did it. Be honest, you can see it.”

The boy stepped forward, looked in Babginda’s eyes and saw Maradonna controlling the field of the country. He dished out referees and told them what to do. As the child continued its stare, he saw Maradonna tried to make way into the field to be the referee, player, football body and also the keeper at the post.

The picture the boy saw put him back. He covered his eyes.

“Your tomorrow is blinding. I cannot believe you’re still alive. I cannot.”

Babaginda laughed before he replied, “Haba, my friend, why do you think they call me Maradonna. It is not a simple name. I’ll be here forever and ever, say amin.”

Babangida who has been, all the while, very calculative about what he said. And the way he shook his legs espoused confidence. The mere fact that he made the baby smile made him happy.

The child waved and Babaginda held its hand for a while before letting go. The child rubbed his head and looked at the rest of the men. The baby, above all

things, wanted to look into a future and past that was almost perfect. Next, he walked to Yerima.

The baby approached Yerima with care. He knew that Yerima could marry any one below ten years of age. His body trembled as he got nearer to Yerima. He saw numerous stories on his face. The stories came to him in grotesque proportions. They came like arrows, cutting and slicing his face.

“So you,” the boy started, “you’re the greatest one of all. You increased our numbers. You said it was alright for a sixty year old man to marry a twelve year old girl.”

Yerima shook his head and his finger simultaneously.

“Are you trying to play moral judge here, my friend? Or you are trying to explore the reasons why I go for these girls from when they are born?”

“Ah, so you go for them from birth?”

Yerima smiled. Slowly, he rubbed his thick beard. Then he removed his cap from his head, looked under it then hit it about six times on his right thigh. He cleared his throat before he spoke, “hmmm!”

“I see that’s what makes me different. That’s what set me apart from the pack. I know what I want and I go for what I want.”

The child held his mouth and continued to stare as Yerima continued his speech with clean Queen’s English, “but I like to go in when they are fresh. When they don’t have the sense to think or when they don’t have the power to make decisions.”

“Foolishness. Foolishness.”

“I agree. It is,” Yerima replied.

The boy looked into his eyes and his yesterday was filled with scenes where he gathers young children, all female, playing with his genitals. You could see him having absolute fun and sipping from a very cold bottle of champagne. Then later he saw where a girl was imported from Egypt, she was only thirteen then saw the marriage, which was the talk of the town.

“That’s even a turn on for you ba?” The baby asked. “The fact that they are young. Do you know them?”

“I’m too busy to know them. I pay and they are mine. That’s all I care about.”

“What have you done to reduce the number of children coming to our land?”

“I have brought Sharia Law, shekena!”

“How does that do anything?”

“That is one religion thing that can help people behave themselves. People don’t steal again. Do you know that under sharia law, if you steal your hands would be cut off?”

“So why shouldn’t your phallus be cut off?”

“What is this one saying?” Yerima faced the men. “Please come and here what this baby is saying. Did it commit anything?”

The baby moved closer with raised hand ready to strike Yerima when he confessed, “I was only a baby when I founded that law.”

“If you were a child” the baby started, “why is it that you married more than six wives?”

“Oh my God, of what importance has that got to do with why we are here. Doctor come and save us from these Seeds’ tales. It is turning into another thing.”

The steps were not noticed. The hand was not seen. The move was unknown and unheard. Like laser lights focused on something, the smack on Yerima’s cheek, as

a matter of emphasis, was resounding. It was loud enough to unsettle the owls on the tree and loud enough to spark a general reaction of *oohs* and *ahhs* among the men. The village town crier who banged on his gong when maKing announcements could learn one or two lessons from this baby's smack—how to strike.

Yerima was on the ground holding both cheeks. He couldn't say anything further. The words have been banged out of his mouth or it seemed the words choked him. The baby's hand was in his pocket but his skin colour was changing as he watched Yerima.

“This is a military court,” someone intoned.

“Ko Ahkabar,” the doctor interrupted, “who is that talKing when the judges are maKing moves. We are truly sorry Your Excellency.”

Yerima stole a quick glance through the fingers placed on his eyes. He watched as the baby's colour changed. It went from bright yellow, to bright orange. The baby moved its head in small movements, followed the movement of his head with leg movements then followed with his back and turned into the shape of a turtle. It was as he formed this animalistic shape that he began to sing.

When the snake swallows a rat

Does the rat still ask if the snake is poisonous?

When a lion shares his kill with hunter

Does that make hunter friends with the lion?

The baby was shaKing as if overtaken by a streak of convulsion

When men killed babies through tricks in policy

When policy plus tricks equals politricks

Who is to blame?

May our road to clean history

Never be rough

Giants of Africa,

Giants of Africa,

Here you are

Giants of Africa I ask

Does the rat still ask if the snake is poisonous?

The song settled into their midst. It grew legs and walked calmly to sit just by Abacha. The doctor approached the baby with care.

“My elder, may your anger be pacified in due time. Whatever you have destined for us just let it be. We are ready for it.”

The baby listened and nodded his head like a village elder. He turned to Yerima then nodded again before he cast a sweeping sight on the rest of the men.

“Very well,” he began, “you have spoken well. You people have refused to appease us. You’ve refused to let the dog swallow the fat bone of patience. It is not I that would incorporate sense into you. Sense is coming. I can hear it coming in full force! Marching hard! BreaKing the ground!”

As he mentioned all these elements, they started happening. The ground-breaKing footsteps of the unseen people were heard somewhere coming nearer. Now, the men stretched out their hand and held it together. They pacified the knocked down amongst them. Abacha who had not being interviewed by the baby raised his right hand slightly and he drew the attention of the baby.

“What is it?” screamed the baby.

“Calm down, you wise one. It is just that you have not allowed me to tell my own story. Walahi, I don’t know why I am here.”

Before the baby could reply, he scratched his head. “I don’t speak to the dead.”

Abacha dropped his hand and bit the tip of his finger. No one among the men wanted to laugh even though they found the reply amusing. They bowed their head for a while as the stumping of vibrating feet increased.

After a while, when the doctor tried to check, he found that the baby was not there anymore.

“The baby has gone.”

Obasanjo leapt on the doctor and held his shirt.

“Ha,” he cried, “you have seen what they have done to me.”

With his side eye he could see one of the owls readjusting its position and he left the doctor.

“Koni da fun eyin people yi. You’ve brought me out here to embarrass me. How did I become a part of your nonsensical judgment? Did I implement the liars of your death? Did I say the hospitals shouldn’t be worKing? Don’t you know I have children? Can you do this to a European leader? Can you?”

The doctor and the other watched Obasanjo as he continued his rant. No one moved close to him. They watched as he allowed words fly out in heavy proportions. And they also noticed the owls on the tree, flapping their wings, ready to fly. When Obasanjo noticed the movement of the birds, he kept quiet.

The stamping of the feet got louder and moved closer. The ground rumbled. The tree, it seemed, began to dance and the men trembled. In response, and in unison

the men except Obasanjo held their hands together and they began to hit the ground so hard as a defence mechanism.

The women on the other hand waited for the Mother Matron to make her way down to where they were. They waited for good one hour in silence and did not say anything to each other. They just watched and studied the ship and the White Witch could not be seen. The power to sing or perform anything to keep them company was drained because of their journey. The atmosphere was boiling with silence yet heavy with action. The Mother Matron later joined them.

She stormed into their midst on a white horse. The galloping sound of the horse made klop-klop sounds of a warrior. Like Queen Amina she also raised a sword and spoke with a loud voice.

“Today! We gather here to go and correct what has been wrong in our society.”

The women readjusted their clothes. Some retied their wrapper; others removed the wrapper from their waist and placed around their neck. Others took mud from earth and smeared their face with it.

The Mother Matron studied their faces and knew that the time was ripe for them to go to the tree and get the cane that would give the men some sense. It was the time for them to go and save the generation before them so that they can come back and tell their children that their mothers have contributed to the development of the nation. It would be a dangerous risk, the Mother Matron thought for them to go to the men’s place and emerge as losers. And the Queen from the other side kept flashing in her mind telling her that she had a lot to do to please her. For that mere reason she had

been empowered. And in this empowerment that's how she got the white horse she brought down to the riverside.

After she left the women and went home to change her clothes, she came across a man riding the white horse gallantly on the street very close to the Officer's Mess and she had walked straight to the man then asked him to alight from the horse. The man looked at her and kept riding and on the second time, when the Mother Matron asked again, the man pissed on his body and jumped down from the horse. Her voice was filled with blue stones that made it sound like she had swallowed a toad. The man held his balls and ran away. She hopped on the horse and headed straight to the river.

“The time has come!”

“Yes!”

Her horse moved round and round and neighed until she began to ride away and the women followed her behind. The hissing sounds, the anger, the frustration, the energy was heavy here that for every step taken by the women it shook the ground.

And so, they went in search of the sense tree. They needed to hold a branch each as they have been instructed. And when they saw the sense tree, they are supposed to use one branch each. As instructed also, no one is supposed to beat a man more than six strokes. Any woman who did that could kill the man. Gallantly, they continued their search.

The story continues for there. Who know wetin go happen? Nobody no as the Mother Matron go come lead these women to freedom. What of the men? We nor

know whether them go escape this kind punishment wey them they under. Some people go say, yes, na him good for them, but make we think the matter well, well, before we start to pass judging eye. All these men, why he be say na only the ones wey don rule for the country. Why other ordinary men no they involved.

As the women they go so, as them they go, the Mother Matron just they think of the Queen wey her eye don see for the other side. Na now the matter come dey clear for her eye say that Queen na her pikin. That her pikin, wey e be say under the light for night, she fall for ground and deliver by herself. She come remember say na that same pikin make her popular for the village. She just wish say the baby dey here. She wish say she fit change time.

As them the women dey waka, them come see one tree. The tree green. The tree tall. The tree fine. For in front of the tree dem come see The King of Seeds for their. Them nor know say them go find the King for their. He just they look them as them they near am. Him, himself don know say them go make move that same day. As the Mother Matron they near am, King hold some branches of the cane and he come raise am up make them see. The Mother Matron na him first hold the cane.